

# diversions

## THE ARTS

# For the Love of Art



*Disabled Veteran* is among the works by Norman Rockwell at the National Museum of American Illustration.

ALTHOUGH IT WOULD BE A STRETCH to say it was a Rhode Island re-enactment of the Hatfields & McCoys, Laurence and Judy Cutler's struggle to open the National Museum of American Illustration on Newport's historic Bellevue Avenue—the spectacular row of summer “cottage” mansions once owned by the Astors, Belmonts, Vanderbilts and other icons of early 20th-century wealth—certainly seemed so at the time.

The protracted battle was waged on two fronts—by two members of Newport's local zoning board and by a handful of community residents who claimed a museum was not in keeping with the residential “character” of the avenue. But with the outpouring of support by individuals from The Na-

tional Arts Club, The Society of Illustrators, the National Gallery of Art, the Smithsonian Institution's Arthur M. Sackler Gallery and Freer Gallery of Art, the Rhode Island School of Design, the Newport City Council and Newport's mayor, the Cutlers finally earned their victory in court.

As the first national museum devoted exclusively to illustration art, the works of Maxfield Parrish, Norman Rockwell, Howard Pyle, Charles Dana Gibson, N.C. Wyeth and 75 other early 20th-century and contemporary illustrators are on exhibit. There are more than 2,000 original illustrations, 135 on permanent display that can be viewed at Vernon Court, an authentic adaptation of a 17th-century French chateau that is considered to be one of

the architectural masterpieces of the century.

These American imagists were artists from the period known as the “Golden Age of American Illustration” (1860-1965), creating paintings for reproduction in books, magazines, periodicals and posters. In their day, these artists and their creations were celebrities with the cachet of a modern-day Madonna or Brad Pitt. Whereas Rudolph Valentino received some 17,000 fan letters a month during the heyday of his career, J.C. Leyendecker’s “Arrow Collar Man” was deluged with more than 20,000 pieces of fan mail a month. These were the heroes whose images—before TV and the Internet—Americans loved.

According to Laurence and Judy Cutler—he the architect, she the art collector who started the collection—“Vernon Court embodies our careers and interests symbolically. It provides



the right setting in the right environment for a unique blending of classical architecture and The Golden Age of American Illustration—the frame for a most unique collection of American art.”

The museum officially opened on July 4, 2000, but for the moment, viewing the collection is by appointment only. Says Laurence Cutler, “To date, we have limited admission to serious enthusiasts of American illustration. This fall, we’ll open on a general admissions basis ... We’re currently planning our grand opening for mid-September.”

For more information, call 401-851-8949 or visit [www.americanillustration.org](http://www.americanillustration.org).  
— Richard Needham



Vernon Court, top, is considered to be a stunning example of a 17th-century French chateau, now housing more than 2,000 original illustrations, including Maxfield Parrish’s *Griselda*, above.