

Vernon Court's illustrative art speaks volumes

By **HEATHER MACWILLIAMS**

INSIDE the south loggia of Vernon Court, built in 1898, Laurence and Judy Cutler describe their home as a beaux arts adaptation of a 17th century chateau and enlighten about 30 attendees on the architecture of their home and its uncanny ability to frame their extensive art collection from the 'Golden Age of American Illustration' (1860-1960).

The National Museum of American Illustration, located at Vernon Court on the corner of Bellevue and Victoria Avenues in Newport, was founded by the Cutlers in 1998. They are proud to explain that it

features original paintings and drawings created by Norman Rockwell (America's famous illustrator), Maxfield Parrish (illustrator of the first half of 20th century), N.C. Wyeth (book illustrator), Howard Pyle (known as "Father of American illustration"), J.C. Leyendecker (illustrator of 322 Saturday Evening Post covers perhaps known best for "The Arrow Collar Man"), Howard Chandler Christy (creator of "The Christy Girl" and the American concept of feminine beauty which set the criteria for the Miss America Pageant), James Montgomery Flagg (creator of WWI Uncle Sam poster "I Want

You"), Charles Dana Gibson ("The Gibson Girl"), Jessie Wilcox Smith (distinguished children's book illustrator) and other imagists of art history that are framed perfectly throughout their home. The couple lives upstairs.

Vernon Court was designed by Carrère & Hastings, architects of the New York City Public Library, the U.S. Senate Office Building and the Henry Clay Frick mansion, which was modeled after Vernon Court. And Mr. Cutler, formerly an architect, loves to enrich his guests on its vast history.

The tour itself is intimate and personal with the Cutlers them-

selves leading you through the museum's great marble hall, ballroom, petite salon and rose garden loggia all adorned with vivid and rare artwork, representative of some of our country's cultural history.

The well-versed couple joke around but the focus never strays too far from the matter at hand. Mr. Cutler divulges to a willing audience that he and Mrs. Cutler grew up together. He gave her first art book and from then on she began collecting American illustration, recognizing its aesthetic quality and importance to history. Upon

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Photo: RICK KOCONIS

Displayed is J.C. Leyendecker's "Marching Brass Band." Beneath the painting sits its reproduction for "The Saturday Evening Post."

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Judy and Laurence Cutler converse with Elaine Lorillard of Newport who had gone on last Sunday's tour. Hanging in the background is Norman Rockwell's "Skating Race."

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finding neglected pieces inside art director's closets, Mrs. Cutler, while attending the University of Pennsylvania (a publishing hub), would restore and re-frame them. Now the couple has the largest collection of Rockwell's next to the Norman Rockwell museum itself. In fact, the Cutlers tell us that the newly opened museum already has had visits from Gibson girl descendants and Maxfield Parrish models.

The couple also tell us that the original paintings were eventually reproduced for books, magazines, and the like. During the turn-of-the-century, the printing process used a limited palate therefore the colors in the reproduced product (which are displayed in pedestals beneath many of the paintings) appear much duller than the original work. Some of the paintings even contain the magazine's logo.

As to the museum's corporate make-up, Mr. Cutler said that the couple has set up the museum to operate as a non-profit operation, approved by the Internal Revenue Service, and expect it to continue to operate for many years, even after their death. While the couple has children, they have decided not to leave the museum to them.

"We feel that our kids should make their own way in life," Mr. Cutler said.

The Cutlers say they are donors and haven't asked anybody for anything.

"We have had generous offerings, but thus far, we are a "ma and pa operation," said Cutler, laughing.

Mr. Cutler went on to say that the museum has a significant advisory board including trustees and a privy council made up of seven members which includes lawyers and consultants who advise on financial matters and review the budget — a budget which Mr. Cutler said they have exceeded dramatically, but he didn't seem too worried.

The members of the advisory board have a permanent term of

office. Laurence and Judy Cutler said that they make all of the financial decisions themselves.

Currently, the Cutlers are focusing their attention on creating a self-guided tour for guests, a museum shop and they are working on elements such as crowd control and where to put raincoats.

Taking a second seat to those elements is the Frederick Law Olmsted Park and the Louis I. Kahn memorial arch, which the Cutlers were to build after the passage of their museum use by the Newport Zoning Board of Review. And since the Cutlers have gained approval from the Newport Historic District Commission, all that is needed to get the park up and going is time and money, said Mr. Cutler, pointing out that his subcommittee advisory board will meet the third week in August to discuss the park's budget. What he says is now a 120-car parking lot will be reduced eventually to 20 cars.

The museum's library is open to scholars only by written application to the director. (Mrs. Cutler thinks the American illustration might provide good thesis material for someone.)

For those interested in touring the museum you must call ahead and make a reservation. Proper attire and correct demeanor are required. Photography, cell phones and children under 12 are not permitted.

For more information, log on to www.americanillustration.org or call (401) 851-8949.