

Big plans at Vernon Court



TED HAYES

Judy and Laurence Cutler in Vernon Court's Tiffany mural room. The Cutlers hope to acquire another large mural for their National Museum of American Illustration, and would likely build a new wing on the museum if they do.

Possible acquisition of iconic mural could spur addition at illustration museum

BY TED HAYES

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NEWPORT — Nine years after they opened their doors to the public, the founders of the National Museum of American Illustration may soon take possession of one of the master works of American mural art — a 160-foot long, 12-foot tall mural depicting the evolution of the telephone that until recently hung in the former Boston headquarters of telephone giant Verizon.

And if museum founders Judy and Laurence Cutler are successful in their quest to bring the piece to Vernon Court, they hope to build a new wing on the mansion to accommodate it.

"We're very excited," said Mr. Cutler. "We're absolutely the right place for it."

But to get the piece — "Telephone Men and Women at Work," a 1951 mural by Dean Cornwell, they'll have to fend off challenges also filed by the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and another Miami museum. All three have asked Verizon officials for the painting since company officials sold the building last year and earlier this year removed it from the lobby where it had hung for more than half a century. Verizon officials

have been mum on who will win out.

The Cutlers will also have to rise above criticism from those in the art world, some of whom have protested the painting's possible move out of Boston, the historic home of the telephone.

The painting

Mr. Cornwell, one of America's best loved muralists and illustrators, created the piece for New England Telephone and Telegraph, the forerunner of Verizon, between 1947 and 1951. Referred to as the "Dean of American Illustration" by Norman Rockwell, he was primarily an illustrator who sold works to the popular magazines and periodicals of the day while also creating murals for private companies, courthouses, libraries and other institutions. He loved the large format pieces, said Mr. Cutler, because "they would last and give him a life beyond death." Newport's museum already has about 15 other, smaller Cornwell works.

The imposing telephone piece, which Mr. Cornwell painted in the attic of Grand Central Station in New York City, depicts 197 people performing telephone-relat-



A worker painstakingly removes the 160-foot-long mural from the Verizon building in Boston over the summer.



Detail from Dean Cornwell's "Telephone Men and Women at Work."

MUSEUM: NMAI is apparently one of three in the running for iconic mural

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ed functions throughout the device's history. Painted in rich tones and hues, it depicts male and female telephone operators — they replaced the men after it was determined their voices were more soothing — wire workers, Alexander Graham Bell and more than 190 other people.

The mural hung inside the Verizon offices for decades until Verizon sold the property to another firm last year and reached an agreement to remove the mural. Mr. Cutler heard about its uncertain fate quite by accident, from a friend who lives in Cambridge, Mass.

"My roommate from grad school walked in to see the mural. A security guard told him they were being taken off and they were looking for a museum to take them. A lightbulb goes off in his head, and he called me."

Mr. Cutler called Verizon officials a short time later, who told them other institutions were

interested in the piece. Nevertheless, Verizon officials invited him to travel to Boston to watch the canvas mural being removed; the canvas had been secured to the walls with a lead-based adhesive and took some time to remove.

After traveling to Verizon, the Cutlers met with company officials, were asked to give their appraisal of the piece, and are currently waiting to hear whether they'll win it. The painting is in storage.

New wing?

Though their Newport museum houses two other large murals — one by Tiffany and another by Maxfield Parrish — the Cornwell piece, if obtained, would necessitate an entirely new wing as it's too large to fit properly in any existing spaces.

The Cutlers said they always wanted to build an addition onto Vernon Court's south facade, but until the mural became a possibility "we thought it would be done by someone else, after we were gone," said Mr. Cutler, a trained



Detail from Dean Cornwell's "Telephone Men and Women at Work."

architect.

After studying the painting's dimensions, though, he realized its acquisition could be the perfect impetus for building now. He started sketching.

"I did some measurements and if we got (the painting) it would exactly fit" in a space they'd already identified as the perfect spot for a new main entrance, Mr. Cutler said.

The plan — Mr. Cutler has already talked to city officials about it and has determined that the plan would need a new round of zoning approval — is to build a 60-foot long, 40-foot wide addition on Vernon Court's south side. The addition would butt up to a brick walkway that would serve as the new main entrance for museum visitors. Inside the addition, museum staff could house a gift shop, restrooms, a reception desk and possibly a coat room. Outside, parking areas could be reconfigured, with parking added behind Vernon Court walls where tennis courts are now housed.

"You want to get people oriented as soon as you get them in the museum," he said. "This would do it. The ideal would be to also have the museum shop there."

The mural had been previously housed in an oval room, and Mr. Cutler said he would round off the interior corners to accommodate

it. "This would fit very nicely," he said.

Since word leaked out in Boston art circles that Newport and Miami were under consideration for the mural, there has been more than a little online scuttlebutt over its possible move to the City By The Sea. Much of it has come from Boston-based art lovers and historians who want the painting to stay in Boston.

Susan Park, president of the Boston Preservation Alliance, was one of many in Boston to state opposition to the move. In an interview with the Boston Herald, she said, "It has no reason to be in Newport. Bell made the first telephone call in the South End, not Newport."

But from the Cutlers' perspective, Newport has an edge. Their museum celebrates muralists and illustrators like Cornwell, has an impressive collection, and they have a real plan for how to use it. As for keeping it in Boston?

"I understand their feelings, but I think the most important thing is that it stay in New England," said Mr. Cutler.

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