

'Our benevolence and philanthropy'

This museum is a nonelitist treasure

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TWO RECENT LETTERS to the Journal require a response:

1). "Welcome to my own private museum," July 13, M.A. Podolak, of Pawtucket

2). "Museum's sellout to Bellevue Ave. exclusivity," July 14, Darlene Ciolfi-Donley, of Cranston.

The mission of the National Museum of American Illustration, at Vernon Court, in Newport, is to share "the most American of American art" with the public and to preserve it in perpetuity. We are the first museum in the nation devoted exclusively to illustration art.

The museum is open solely because of our benevolence and philanthropy, although we will need help to develop an endowment fund. A nonprofit approved by the IRS as a 501c(3) organization, we pay real estate taxes, which almost no other nonprofit in Newport does.

Our American Imagist Collection, assembled over 35 years, comprises 2,000 original paintings, 80,000 works on paper, vintage pieces and memorabilia (e.g., Norman Rockwell's first paint box). We have the largest collection of Maxfield Parrish paintings (68). No other museum has more than six. The Metropolitan, in New York, has 3. Next to the single-artist Norman Rockwell Museum, we have the largest Rockwell collection (121). We have one of the largest collections of J.C. Leyendecker, N.C. Wyeth, Howard Pyle ("Father of American Illustration"), Charles Dana Gibson ("The Gibson Girl"), and 75 other luminaries from the "Golden Age" of American illustration.

We also have contemporary illustrators, such as Drew Struzan — *Star Wars*, *Indiana Jones, ET*, etc. Recent loans by us to other institutions include to the Guggenheim, High Museum (Atlanta), Art Institute (Chicago, Norman Rockwell Museum, the National Arts Club (our founding institution), etc. We have 135 art works on public display with over 400 paintings hanging.

Compare this with blockbuster shows at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts or the Metropolitan. These museums display 50 to 75 works for a show.

As a former professor at Harvard, MIT and RISD, I endeavor to enlighten audiences to American illustration art. My wife, Judy Cutler, the museum's director, is a former educator with degrees from the University of Pennsylvania. She helped take American illustration international by curating over 35 exhibitions worldwide. In Tokyo, 360,000 people visited in six weeks, the biggest blockbuster in fine-art history to date. In Rome, the prime minister opened our exhibition, while Ambassador Walter Mondale opened our Tokyo exhibition.

The museum and several institutions of higher education are discussing associations on a permanent basis. Educators on our board include Martin Mey-

erson, president-emeritus of the University of Pennsylvania; Milo Beach, director of the Smithsonian art museums (Sackler and Freer Galleries); Prof. Emeritus Vincent Scully, of Yale; Viscountess Bridgeman, of London's Bridgeman Art Library; Judy Berkowitz, chairwoman of the Center for Educational Innovation; Roger Mandle, president of RISD; Bob Power, of the Newport school system; and others. We have 75 advisory board members. These include artist Jamie Wyeth; author Tom Wolfe; filmmaker George Lucas; foundation director Andrew Sordani; publisher Zoe Burke; illustrator Wendell Minor; sportsman Peter de Savary; businessman Paul Choquette Jr. — luminaries all.

We recently authored two books on Maxfield Parrish (Regency House Ltd./Random House). Our archives provided images for a book by Peggy Wagner of the Library of Congress (Pomegranate Artbooks). We just developed a CD-ROM disc with 1,400 public-domain images for use by libraries and schools. Judy participated in the first documentary film on J.C. Leyendecker, and we are completing a manuscript on that illustrator for Harry Abrams Publishers.

Abrams, the most noted fine-arts publisher in the world, will soon do a book on our collection, architecture and gardens. Our Web site (www.americanillustration.org) won the Golden Web Award for the past two years as one of the best in the world. We are preparing "A Guide to the Grand Tour" for visitors. Our unique library will open to scholars in the future.

One can readily see that we are very interested in sharing the resources we offer with the public, hardly an "elitist" stance.

We received 4,000 visitors during our first year. Of those visitors, most were discounted groups or gratis (advisory board members and guests, National Arts Club members, other museum directors and staff).

There are reasons for our current admissions procedure. It is not meant to exclude folks, yet some will be because of our criteria. Our present entry procedure gives us the luxury of moderation while we learn. We hope to provide for future visitors correctly and are taking measured steps to do so. We are testing systems, crowd control, signage, etc. Reservations are limited, as they are at the Barnes Foundation museum, near Philadelphia, the Borghese Gallery, in Rome, and some other famous museums.

Other than the two letters that the Journal has published, we have had no complaints and everyone has been thrilled that we selected Newport over New York City, Palm Beach, Savannah, Kennebunkport, etc., as the home for this unique collection.

Visitors to the museum have included J. Carter Brown, director emeritus of the National Gallery of Art, who stated: "I was bowled over by Vernon Court

and the collection. Its state of conservation should be a role model for everyone in the preservation field." Dale Chihuly, famed glass artist, stated, "This was the greatest museum experience of my life." Victor Wiener, executive director of the Appraisers Association of America, stated: "The visit was the definitive high point of our visit to Newport. The collection, the mansion was a true *tour de force*."

As for the local gentry, Social Darwinism has dissipated. Elitism on Bellevue Avenue is a figment of old imaginations and wannabes. Past social elitism of the Gilded Age kind was a blight on our American ideals. Its notions of exclusivity were based on similar un-American thoughts.

Some visitors to Newport cater to such archaic thoughts or assume they exist here still. However, the trappings of social defense have been diminished by national diversity. Education, accomplishment and personal character as true measures of worth have replaced them.

Newport has changed, and it is now as American as the reasons for its original founding.

We had an unnecessary zoning battle because of a handful of bad apples in a community that otherwise welcomed us with open arms. The naysayers cost us much time, and, as a consequence, we are behind schedule. Although we agreed to requests from their "neighborhood association" to certain terms in exchange for support through zoning, they violated the *quid pro quo*. It was only their members who hired lawyers to fight us.

Therefore, the mutual agreement was nullified. They could not have their cake and eat it too. The Superior Court upheld our rights since everything proposed was within the zoning ordinances. The malicious battle had little to do with neighborhood concerns and more to do with commercializing Bellevue Avenue (now being commercialized extensively with brand names and the like), while we are not commercial.

Keith Stokes, executive director of the Newport County Chamber of Commerce, said about the museum, "It's attracting quality people who are staying for multiple days, visiting other museums, staying at hotels, spending more time here, and more money than those visiting other attractions."

It should be noted that we want visitors — not tourists.

Rhode Island can boast that it has the first museum in the nation devoted exclusively to illustration art — a national attraction and cultural treasure.

We cordially invite you to make an appointment to visit with us for a guided tour, group tour or VIP Tour. The self-guided tour will, we hope, be ready this fall.

Laurence S. Cutler is chairman of the National Museum of American Illustration.