



National Museum of American Illustration, Newport, RI

GREAT ESCAPES 06.01.14

Newport's Secret Norman Rockwells

Behind the hedges in Newport, a treasure trove from America's golden age of illustrators, from N.C. Wyeth to the creator of Santa Claus as we know him.

When the hordes of people from around the world descend upon Newport, Rhode Island, between Memorial and Labor Day, they flock to its famous beaches, mansions like The Breakers and Rosecliffe, the International Tennis Hall of Fame, or its historic downtown.

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However, perched behind a row of tall bushes, barely visible from famed Bellevue Avenue, is a breathtaking piece of architecture housing a fantastic collection of art—The [National Museum of American Illustration](#) at Vernon Court.

Designed by architectural firm Carrere & Hastings and finished in 1901, Vernon Court was built for widow heiress Anna Van Nest Gambrill.



William
O'Connor





Now, its fantastic rooms house the first national museum focused solely on the art of American illustration.

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Founded in 1999 and opened to the public in 2000 by Laurence and Judy Cutler, the mansion's already stunning walls are bedecked with more than 2,000 original works by icons like Norman Rockwell, Maxfield Parrish, J.C. Leyendecker, and N.C. Wyeth.

American illustration, as the museum defines it, was art created for commercial use to be reproduced in magazines, books, and later in advertising. Its golden age started just after the Civil War and went into the 1950s until technology took over, as well as artists like Andy Warhol who merged the commercial and art.

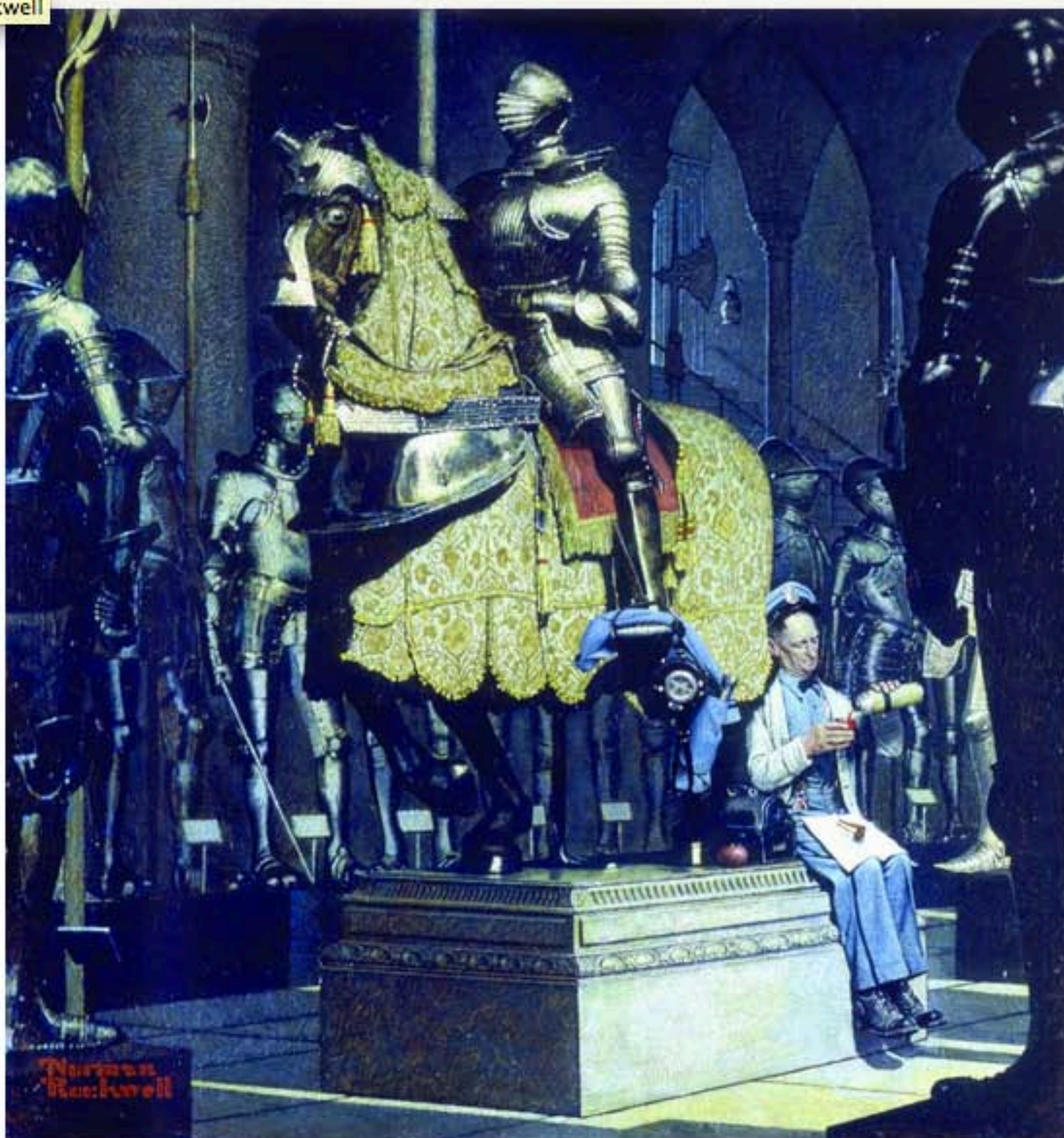
Their impact was prodigious. Rockwell's art raised \$135 million for war-bonds efforts. If a magazine had a cover with art by Leyendecker, it was guaranteed to sell out.

A chance to see this collection is well worth the side stop on the typical Newport swing, but especially so this summer, as the museum has opened a fascinating new exhibition, *Norman Rockwell and His Contemporaries*.

Rockwell's work was part of a larger conversation about a country going through immense changes.

The world of American illustrators was a tight-knit one. A lot of them were trained in the same schools, lived in the same region, and were featured on the same types of media.

The most notable venue for these works was *The Saturday Evening Post*, a weekly magazine featuring human-interest stories, editorials, and so on. It became the destination for many of Rockwell's most iconic images.



Norman Rockwell (1894-1978), *Lunch Break with Knight*, 1962, oil on canvas, 34" x 32", signed lower left, *Saturday Evening Post*, November 3, 1962 cover. (National Museum of American Illustration, Newport, RI)

Rockwell has often been dismissed as an artist, partly because of his popularity in the pejorative meaning of the word, but also because his work was seen as too sentimental.

What becomes apparent while wandering through the paneled rooms with trompe l'oeil ceilings and seeing his work in the context of his competitors and contemporaries is that Rockwell's work was part of a larger conversation about a country going through immense changes. At the same time, and this is where his work can seem sentimental, people still lived their lives, went to school and church, and played sports.



Tiffany Loggia, featuring the original ceiling murals at Vernon Court, home of the National Museum of American Illustration. Photos by Steven Brooke. (National Museum of American Illustration, Newport, RI)

One of those contemporaries was Maxfield Parrish, whose fairytale-esque works capture a desire for escapism common in Americans as well as their romance with nature. His illustration *Daybreak* was once the most reproduced work of art in the world. Apparently, even Whoopi Goldberg is a fan, as she gushes in the museum's introductory film about a study she bought of the Parrish work.

Though small in size on the mansion's grand walls, Parrish's *Aquamarine* feels inordinately large as the viewer is suddenly swallowed by its impossibly blue lake.

Parrish's work gets much of its wistful quality from its glow. He famously once said, "When I'm gone, if you look at a beautiful sunset, turn around and look the other way... I'll be there."

Parrish's teacher was Howard Pyle, who is considered the father of American illustration. He apparently told Parrish to leave school, saying he didn't need any more of his training. Pyle founded the first school of illustration at what's now Drexel University in Philadelphia, after seeing the need for artists trained in commercial work as opposed to classical art.

Another of Pyle's students featured in the exhibition is N.C. Wyeth. Wyeth painted roughly 4,000 illustrations for publications, much of it Western-themed, and his work was often used for covers of books about adventure, including *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, and *Tom Sawyer*.



J.C. Leyendecker (1874-1951), *Lune de Miel (Honeymoon)*, 1926, oil on canvas, 28 1/4" x 21 1/4", signed lower right, *Saturday Evening Post*, July 17, 1926 cover. (National Museum of American Illustration, Newport, RI)

But perhaps the most fascinating to learn about was Rockwell's idol and role model, J.C. Leyendecker. The most recognizable work by Leyendecker today is probably most famous for the definitive *Arrow Collar Man*, which refers to the male models used in ads for detachable collars sold by Clutt Peabody & Co. But the exhibition sheds light on other noteworthy parts his career. He was behind the creation of depicting a newborn baby to symbolize the new year, the red-clad chubby Santa Claus, and fireworks for the 4th of July.



Ballroom at Vernon Court, home of the National Museum of American Illustration. Photos by Steven Brooke (National Museum of American Illustration, Newport, RI)

As it is housed in a mansion that was graced by the likes of Edith Wharton, John Jacob Astor, Grand Duke Boris, and Lord Duveen (of the Elgin Marbles), the building is itself an interesting aspect to the museum. There are restored murals by Tiffany & Co., an exact replica of the Romance Staircase from the Petit Trianon at Versailles, as well as the Hammersmith Longcase Clock made famous from the 1953 photo of Jackie Bouvier descending the stairs at her wedding to John F. Kennedy.

So, next time you are stuck in traffic on Bellevue trying to mansion-gaze, just hop out and watch American history unfold in unforgettable works of art.

The museum is open Thursday through Sunday from Memorial Day to Labor Day