



The New York Times | <http://nyti.ms/1K2hZzS>

N.Y. / REGION | ARTS | LONG ISLAND

The Art of Maxfield Parrish

By AILEEN JACOBSON JAN. 23, 2016

For much of the first half of the 20th century, a quarter of American homes were decorated with art by Maxfield Parrish, said Judy Goffman Cutler and her husband, Laurence S. Cutler. They are the curators of “Maxfield Parrish: Paintings and Prints From the National Museum of American Illustration,” an exhibition at the Nassau County Museum of Art in Roslyn Harbor.

The artist, known for his portrayals of fetching young women perched on rocks and for his colorful mural of “Old King Cole” that hangs in the King Cole Bar and Salon at the St. Regis Hotel in Manhattan, was a savvy marketer of his own works, the Cutlers said. Norman Rockwell and Andy Warhol were among his admirers, they added.

His illustrations often appeared on the covers of popular magazines like Life and Collier’s and on widely distributed calendars, as well as on candy boxes and posters. He called himself a “businessman with a brush,” said the Cutlers, founders of the National Museum of American Illustration in Newport, R.I., from which they selected for this show 182 works by Parrish (who lived from 1870 to 1966), including vintage prints and paintings, and a small number of pieces by other artists. The couple has also written books

about Parrish.

To add a local touch, the Nassau museum included one of its own paintings by Louis Comfort Tiffany, who had a house on Long Island. “It’s in a grouping with Parrish’s fanciful figures perched on rocks,” said Karl Emil Willers, the Nassau museum’s director. “It’s kind of Tiffany emulating Maxfield Parrish.” The two artists collaborated on at least one project, a lobby in Philadelphia, said Dr. Willers, who once served as the executive director of the Newport Art Museum, where he met the Cutlers. “I’ve been a great admirer,” he said of the couple’s work. “They tailored this exhibition for our museum.”

The Cutlers even found a connection between Parrish and the Nassau museum, though it is tenuous. In 1897, Ogden Codman Jr., the architect who designed the mansion that is now the Nassau museum, wrote a book, “The Decoration of Houses,” with Edith Wharton. In 1904, Wharton wrote “Italian Villas and Their Gardens,” for which Parrish provided 26 illustrations. An edition of the book is on display in a glass cabinet, and three of Parrish’s oil paintings for it, including the 1903 “Villa Scassi, Genoa,” hang nearby.

“She was a little resentful that he got almost equal billing on the cover,” Ms. Cutler said. “And most of the fan letters came to him,” Mr. Cutler added.

“If something had a picture by Maxfield Parrish on it, it sold better than anything else,” said Mr. Cutler, pointing to boxes of Crane’s Chocolates from the early 1900s decorated with work by Parrish, one an Egyptian scene with Cleopatra, another featuring a regal crane. A vivid 1921 poster Parrish made for Swift’s Premium Ham shows a man and woman lustily consuming sandwiches, a huge ham on the table between them, as their dog looks on.

From 1918 to 1934, Parrish produced illustrations for calendars that the Edison Mazda Lamp division of General Electric used as advertisements. Each calendar had only one image, which stayed put when people ripped off the months as they passed, Ms. Cutler pointed out. People kept the calendars as

“prized possessions,” she said, sometimes the only art in their homes. Among the calendars from this era is “Ecstasy,” a 1930 image of a young woman in a diaphanous, vaguely ancient-Greek outfit standing on a rock and gazing up at the sky, her arms raised behind her head. “Contentment,” the 1928 calendar, shows two young women, also in flowing dresses, sitting on craggy rocks within a mountain range.

In 1934, Parrish moved to the publishing house of Brown & Bigelow, where he painted another popular series of advertising calendars featuring vast landscapes, often based on vistas near his home in Plainfield, N.H. His 1955 “Peaceful Valley,” another popular image, is among them.

Also featured in the show is “Daybreak,” a 1923 print not in a calendar series, which was Parrish’s most reproduced image of the 1920s era, according to a wall text. Another dreamy landscape, it includes two large classical columns and, like “Contentment,” two graceful young women — though they are not on rocks. One was his daughter, Jean, and the other her friend Kitty Owen, a granddaughter of William Jennings Bryan, the politician and orator. (Bryan bought the original 1922 painting for \$10,000, a high price at the time, and it most recently sold at Sotheby’s for about \$7.6 million.)

Parrish often photographed his landscapes and his models — including himself — and then projected and traced the images onto a canvas. A photo shows him posing on a horse, with one arm raised, for “The Desert Without Water,” a mixed media on paper laid on canvas that he made in 1902 in Arizona, where he went to recover from tuberculosis and, according to a wall text, “discovered the brilliant light and color that transformed his art.” He alternated layers of color and varnish on his canvases to achieve the luminous effects he wanted.

Another photograph shows Parrish posing as Jack for his “Jack and the Giant,” a 1908 oil painting that shows Jack as a very small figure in a giant’s hand. This image was reproduced for a cover of Collier’s magazine in 1910.

The large “Old King Cole” that resides at the St. Regis is represented here by a much smaller 1906 print. The piece in the show underscores Parrish’s acumen as a businessman, the Cutlers said, because he sold many prints of the King Cole image, multiplying his earnings.

“Maxfield Parrish: Paintings and Prints from the National Museum of American Illustration,” runs through Feb. 28 at the Nassau County Museum of Art, 1 Museum Drive, Roslyn Harbor. Information: 516-484-9337 or nassaumuseum.org.

A version of this review appears in print on January 24, 2016, on page LI9 of the New York edition with the headline: Businessman With a Brush: The Art of Maxfield Parrish.