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See
Page 24

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Pyle and His Genre Honored at Vernon Court

By Betsy Sherman Walker

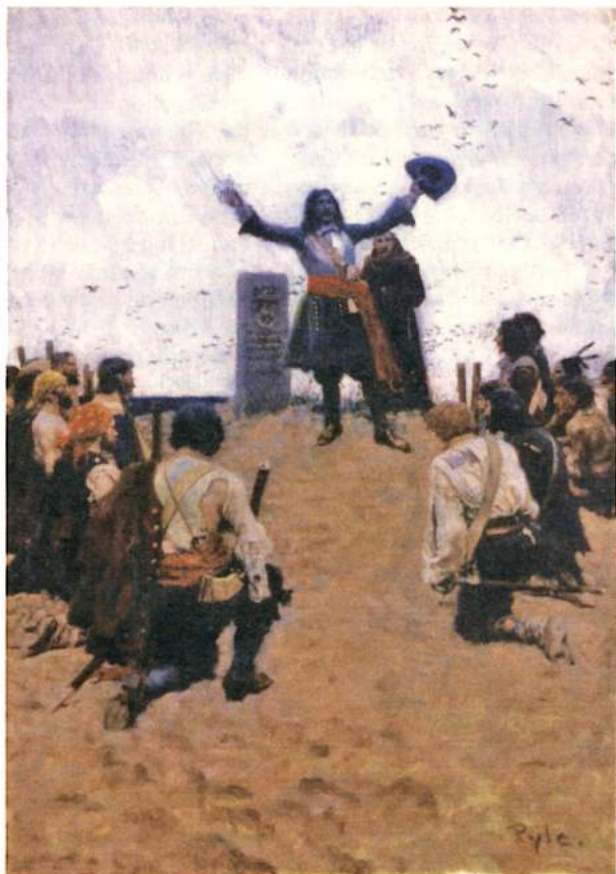
"Howard Pyle, His Students & the Golden Age of American Illustration" is a 360-degree exhibition of paintings, works on paper and artifacts currently on exhibit at the National Museum of American Illustration (NMAI) in Newport. The show highlights Pyle, along with the generation of artists he taught, his impact on those who followed, and their place in the American cultural mindset.

"Pyle was the father of American illustration," Museum Director Judy Goffman Cutler said, "but few know him, let alone his art or his impact on generations of artists."

Born in Wilmington, Del. in 1853, Pyle briefly studied art in New York City. "Like most of his students, he went into illustration to earn a living," Cutler said.

A skilled draftsman and a gifted storyteller, Pyle's work depicts pilgrims, patriots, pirates, aristocrats, knights and mythic figures. Among his commissions were "The First Visit of William Penn to America (A Conference with the Colonists)" for *Harper's* in 1883; and "George and Martha Washington Entertaining Their Friends on the Lawn at Mount Vernon" for *Ladies' Home Journal* in 1899.

In 1894, Pyle established the School of Illustration at Drexel Institute of Art, Science and Industry in Philadelphia, now Drexel University. He taught there until 1900, when he returned to Wilmington to found the



Howard Pyle (1853–1911), "La Salle Christening the Country 'Louisiana,'" 1905, oil on canvas, 24" x 16¼", signed lower right. (Image courtesy of the National Museum of American Illustration)

See **AMERICAN ILLUSTRATION** on page 19

AMERICAN ILLUSTRATORS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Howard Pyle School of Illustration. His students and his style became known as the Brandywine School.

Thirty of Pyle's works are in the show. Although outnumbered by the balance of his students' work, his influence is present in all of the other paintings, in nearly every brushstroke, Cutler said.

Take, for example, Norman Rockwell, who was born in 1894. The museum collection includes the complete inventory of Rockwell's 232 magazine covers from 1916 to 1963 for the *Saturday Evening Post*. He never actually studied with Pyle, but Cutler feels one can't truly get into Rockwell's head without bringing Pyle into the equation. "It's very important," she said. "People don't know he was influenced by Howard Pyle."

Maxfield Parrish and N.C. Wyeth are two of Pyle's better-known students. The other students (among them Harvey Dunn, Anton Otto Fischer, Philip R. Goodwin, Elizabeth Shippen Green, Violet Oakley, Frank E. Schoonover, and Jessie Willcox Smith) might not be household names, but their work is instantly recognizable.

The show transports us back to a way of life when one read for pleasure, holding a book or a magazine, one that bridged two World Wars, the Korean War, and the transition from the Eisenhower era into the turbulence of the 1960s.

There are illustrations for classic adventure novels, magazine covers and advertisements, scenes from American history, folklore, and literature. Depicted are the founding fathers, cowboys and Native Americans; frontiersmen, sailors, soldiers, clipper ships and railroad workers; scenes from plays, Greek mythology and Biblical tales; Robin Hood, Robinson Crusoe, Benjamin Franklin, Rip Van Winkle, Abraham Lincoln and the Peace Corps. There are murals, commissions for federal buildings, illustrations for fairy tales, Mother Goose and Dickens. There are ads for watches and wartime posters. And, of course, there is a healthy dose of Rockwell's covers for the *Saturday Evening Post*.

Judy and Laurence Cutler founded the NMAI in 1998, purchasing the Bellevue Avenue estate, Vernon Court, as a place to house and present their collection of more than 2,000 works. They also own the American Illustrators Gallery in New York City.



Howard Pyle (1853–1911) in his studio. (Image courtesy of the National Museum of American Illustration)

On a walk with the Cutlers through the exhibit, every painting provoked a discussion about another painting, and a pivot to point out yet another. Artists lead interesting lives, and the Cutlers do a good job of curating that as well.

At one point during the tour they came to a halt in front of an oil by N.C. Wyeth, "The Doryman," painted in 1933. During the 1920s, the artist illustrated editions of "Robinson Crusoe" for Cosmopolitan Books, "The Deer Slayer" for Scribner's, and "The Odyssey" for Houghton Mifflin, and also painted everyday scenes from a small harbor in Maine.

"This is the one," Cutler said, "that Jamie [Wyeth, grandson of N.C. and son of Andrew] comes to see."

The Cutlers feel that the history of art criticism has not always been fair to illustrators. "With the talent they had and the work they did to sell the product, to be designated by the art establishment [as unimportant], is unconscionable," Judy Cutler said. When she began giving tours at NMAI, "[People] did not look at the artwork. When I started, I'd have to explain everything."

Pyle, the teacher, also grappled with that attitude. "I have been able to train such artists," he wrote, "so that their work has made a distinct impression upon the world of American art, at least of American magazine art."

The Cutlers believe that his passion, taught "at the verge

of the publishing boom of the 20th century, laid the foundation for a century of America's iconic illustrators."

In 1910, the teacher became the student once again, when Pyle traveled to Italy with his family to study the old masters and mural painting. He died, unexpectedly, a year later at age 58.

One little-known "extraordinary" fact, Judy Cutler told *Newport This Week*, is that Pyle was a strong advocate for women. "At times, up to 50 percent of his students were female students," she said, which was "unheard of in those days."

The show makes a strong statement about the need to validate a truly American style, meeting standards of high art. "Michelangelo had his commissions. The Sistine Chapel, popes captured in oils," Judy Cutler said. Pointing out that Maxfield Parrish had once been referred to as "a businessman with a brush," she said, "They all had to start somewhere."

"Howard Pyle and His Students" is up through Dec. 29. One final tip: take time to check out the frames on the paintings, which are works of art in themselves.

Museum summer hours (through Labor Day) are Thursdays through Sundays, 11 a.m.-5 p.m., with guided tours Fridays at 3 p.m. The show was first presented last spring at the Pennoni Honors College at Drexel University. For more information on the NMAI and on the exhibit, go to americanillustration.org.