
By Sarah Jaquay

“Newport used to be kind of seedy,” my friend’s sister-in-law commented as we strolled along Barnister’s Wharf. “Now it’s for tourists.” She’s a native Rhode Islander so her observations carry the weight of firsthand knowledge. I’ve been a Newport tourist three times. (I proudly own the title. Most leisure travelers start out as tourists. This “off-the-beaten path” approach has become downright obsolete—especially in the Internet age.) Each visit, I’ve learned something beyond the anticipated mansion tour social feuds among Robber Baron families trying to please Caroline Astor. Not that their palaver isn’t interesting (think “Real Housewives of the Gilded Age”), but there’s so much more to see.

We were sailing from Newport to Block Island—a summer playground that doesn’t take itself too seriously; then Montauk—a surprisingly tacky town with T-shirt shops, throngs of borough visitors and even a vintage Bates Motel-type lodging called Memory Motel. (We’re fairly certain most memories created there blossom into huge regrets.) Stonington, Connecticut—a charming town just down the road from historic Seaport Village in Mystic—was our third destination before returning to Newport to celebrate Victory over Japan Day, an official state holiday. I was born on the 10th anniversary of V-J Day, so I was delighted to discover enlightened legislators who gave an entire state my birthday off.

Before we climbed aboard, however, we were determined to visit NMAI. Located on Bellevue, Newport’s avenue of mansions, “It’s a huge art gallery stuffed in a mansion on the grounds of an arboretum,” notes James Rugis, our enthusiastic and informative guide.

First, a few sentences about artists versus illustrators: There’s an eternal debate about the difference, but suffice it to say that all illustrators may be considered artists, but not all artists are illustrators. Generally, illustrators create images for books, magazines, calendars or for advertising or technical materials. Visual artists run the gamut from painters and sculptors to ceramists and photographers.

That said, NMAI has extensive works of America’s most celebrated illustrators, including Norman Rockwell, Howard Pyle, N.C. Wyeth, J.C. Leyendecker (Rockwell’s mentor), plus Maxfield Parrish, known for his neo-classical images. The mansion was originally called Vernon Court. The same firm that designed New York’s Public Library, Carrère and Hastings, designed it for Anna Van Nest Gammell in 1898.

Visitors to NMAI will peruse illustrations in a Grand Renaissance style mansion known as Vernon Court.

When visitors walk into Vernon Court’s imposing Marble Hall, they’ll notice Norman Rockwell’s “Miss Liberty”—a young woman dressed in stars and stripes carrying a wrench, a rake and other tools. Rockwell drew Miss Liberty in 1943 to signify women’s changing roles during WWII. “Miss Liberty represents America,” notes Laurence Cutler, who co-founded NMAI with his wife Judy. “Rockwell’s [Miss Liberty] image changed our society forever in its thinking about women,” Laurence added.

When they were both undergraduates at the University of Pennsylvania, Laurence gave Judy an art book. Machinery of Modern Art by John Canaday. It sparked her interest in American art. After Judy graduated with degrees in Fine Arts and American Civilization, she quickly recognized the historic and artistic value in original posters and art, magazine covers, studies and memorabilia. Later, she collected art prints, advertising and limited edition prints from the “Golden Age” of American Illustration (1895-1945). Fortunately for savvy tourists, the Cutlers opened the doors to their magnificent home and collection in 2000. There’s an admission fee, but it’s a bargain considering the history lessons, incredible art and architecture that will be consumed during a visit (2-3 hours minimum is suggested.)

Judy and Laurence Cutler are the co-founders of Newport’s National Museum of American Illustration. They’re standing in front of Maxfield Parrish’s “A Florentine Fete,” created for the girls’ dining room at Curtis Publishing Co.

What my friend and I could barely fathom were the numerous archetypes imprinted on our brains from children’s stories illustrated by these artists, including: pirates, knights, Robin Hood characters, damsels in distress, plus cowboys and Indians. The NMAI displays a book of Howard Pyle’s pirates. Except on this cover (where the swashbuckler wears red), he’s the one who dressed them in black leather pants with ruffled shirts and a black eye patch. Pyle is called “the father of American illustration” and once ran an illustration program at Philadelphia’s Drexel Institute. He left to start a school in Wilmington, Delaware, where one of his students was N.C. Wyeth. N.C. is the father of noted painter Andrew Wyeth and grandfather of painter Jamie Wyeth. N.C. illustrated the works of Arthur Conan Doyle and formed many of our concepts of the wild American West.

Touring NMAI brings nostalgic nods from visitors who remember Saturday Evening Post covers or Scribner’s Illustrated Classics. Perhaps more importantly, these images capture the American zeitgeist depicting the public’s mood, civic and commercial aspirations over 50 years.

So don’t sail away from Newport until you’ve been a tourist at the National Museum of American Illustration. It’s on Bellevue Avenue’s not-beaten-enough path. Please see discovernewport.org and americanillustration.org for more information.