



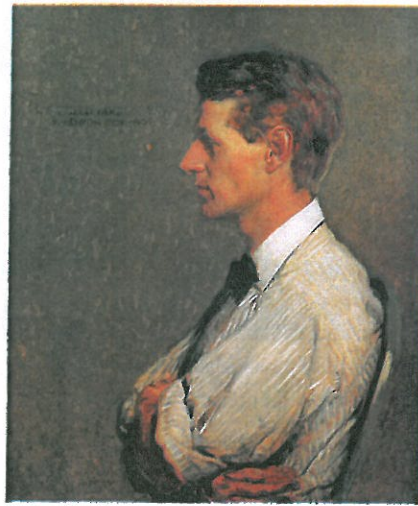
IN LATE AFTERNOON ON ICY WINTER DAYS, AN UNEARTHLY blue appears over Mount Ascutney overlooking the Connecticut River Valley in Vermont. The blue is deeper than any ocean, airier than any cloud. Suggestive of an infinite twilight, it seems to offer a window into some private Arcadia beyond the horizon. This cobalt color, though often captured on one artist's canvases, is rarely seen in museums. Instead, for more than 80 years, it has graced prints and calendars in living rooms,

dens and especially college dorms.

"Oh, they're a-hanging Maxfield Parrish in the village," rang a witty campus ballad in the 1920s. And in prints hung on dorm walls across America, that "certain blue" framed lone women perched on rocks and draped in diaphanous gowns. Between the world wars, Maxfield Parrish was the common man's Rembrandt. When a Parrish print was placed in a department store window, crowds gathered to admire it. Hotels hung his dreamscapes in their lobbies. Housewives bought his calendars, viewed them for a year, then cut off the dates and framed the pictures. In a hustling world where skies were too often gray and gardens no bigger than a Brooklyn backyard, Parrish painted the stuff dreams are made of. His trademarks were lush gardens, ecstatic women and his famous "Parrish blue," the color skies must surely be in any Eden worth the name. At the height of his career, critics denounced his "sentimental gushings," but a Parrish print hung in one out of every four American homes.

A generation after his death, Maxfield Parrish remains one of America's best-known and least-known artists. Though his utopias still adorn calendars and posters, few people have ever seen his paintings in person. Yet

The luminous *Moonlight Night: Winter* (1942), conveys a sense of domestic serenity.



Fellow artist and neighbor Kenyon Cox painted this portrait of Parrish in 1905.

the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia is currently offering a major Parrish retrospective. Going beyond the blue, the show features more than 170 works from Parrish's 68-year career. Viewers who know him only for his "girls on rocks" will be startled by the imagination, virtuosity and sheer delight of his designs. The exhibition includes his enchanting children's illustrations and magazine covers, his ambitious murals, his machine-tooled maquettes and the lonely landscapes he painted into his 90s. After showing in Philadelphia through September 25, "Maxfield Parrish: 1870-1966" will travel to the Currier Gallery of Art in Manchester, New Hampshire, and

then continue on to the University of Rochester's Memorial Art Gallery and the Brooklyn Museum of Art, in New York.

When he died in 1966 at age 95, Parrish was "in" again. Critics hailed him as a precursor of pop art. Pop prophet Andy Warhol collected his work. And as anyone who went to college in the 1960s recalls, they were a-hanging Maxfield Parrish in dorms once again. His originals now sell for six figures, and "Parrish blue" has become a cultural cliché. Yet like his paintings, layered in coats of varnish and glaze, Parrish remains hidden beneath a veneer. Only by stripping away his keen sense of privacy can we find the artist whose works invite us into his own personal paradise.

You don't look at a Maxfield Parrish; you look into it, feeling it beckon you to enter. But while his paintings say "Come in," his life is posted "Keep out." "There isn't any story here," he told publishers who begged him to do interviews. Too many "jumped at the conclusion," he said, "that because I painted pictures of a certain kind there must be something decidedly interesting about the artist: he must live in a tree, eat nuts and berries, or something . . ." Parrish characterized himself as "hopelessly commonplace," and his career belies every myth about artists. His story contains no anguished searching, no struggle for acceptance. He made it all look easy. Gifted from childhood, he earned commissions even before finishing art school. From 1895 to 1961, when trembling hands forced him to stop painting, he never lacked a market. Yet the success that kept him busy also trapped his talent and drained his boyish enthusiasm.

Among the Parrishes, an old Philadelphia Quaker family, charm was part of the pedigree. In 1870, Parrish's father complained to friends about his 3-day-old son: "The princi-



The Pied Piper was commissioned as a mural in 1909 for San Francisco's Palace Hotel and was later reproduced as a lithograph (above). Parrish himself appears here as the Piper.

pal trouble just now is that he will not 'work for a living.'" Stephen Parrish, raised with strict Quaker taboos against graven images, had hidden his own talent by sketching in the attic. Determined his son would not suffer such shame, he gave the boy a sketchbook labeled "Fred Parrish—Christmas 1873." The father filled 50 pages with drawings of elfin creatures, delighting the son, who was soon making his own make-believe. But mere drawing was not enough for Fred, who would later take his grandmother's maiden name, Maxfield, as his middle and then his first name. His mother, Elizabeth, came from a family of machinists whose influence turned her son into a blend of artist and artisan. As a boy, Parrish drew dragons, then cut and pasted them into pictures. As an adult, he spent as much time as he could in his machine shop, building intricate models of the

houses, barns, castles and pillars he captured in his paintings. Parrish often belittled himself as "a businessman with a brush," but his more accurate job description was "a mechanic who paints pictures."

When Parrish was 7, his father became the ideal artist's role model. Leaving his Philadelphia stationery store, the elder Parrish devoted all his time to art. His paintings and etchings were soon exhibited throughout the country, and the Parrishes went off to play in the fields of art. They spent two years in Europe—visiting many of its museums. Father and son roamed the New England coast, painting together. In 1888, Maxfield Parrish entered Pennsylvania's Haverford College, intending to study architecture. Yet his chemistry notebook, filled with coy clowns doodled beside formulas, showed his true colors. His own artistic chemistry—one part

imagination, one part wit—led Parrish to the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA). There he was hailed as "one of the most brilliant and most suggestive decorative painters in the country." He was all of 25.

To his mature sense of design, Parrish added a child's sense of play. While executing his first commission, wall paintings for the University of Pennsylvania's Mask and Wig Club, he wrote his father: "There is in it at times a wild fiendish delight which partakes of all sorts of sensations, of what is possible in art and in me and in everything." Parrish's designs for the project were soon displayed in New York, where a *Harper's* editor asked Parrish to do a cover. The 1895 Easter issue of *Harper's Bazar*, graced by two prim women holding lilies, introduced the nation to the man who would dominate the art of illustration in its golden age.



Today, critics are quick to distinguish two types of artistic talent. There are “artists,” who follow their own muses, and there are “illustrators,” who provide pictures for books and magazines. But from the 1870s to the 1910s, as magazines blossomed on newsstands, many whose paintings would later hang in museums began as illustrators. Winslow Homer drew for *Harper’s Weekly*. Newspapers employed William Glackens and John Sloan, later founding members of the Ashcan School. The chosen few did children’s books, among them Howard Pyle, N.C. Wyeth and Parrish.

If illustration was Parrish’s vocation, his avocation was keeping the world at arm’s length. Even when he married Lydia Austin, a fellow artist, in 1895, Parrish kept his distance. Mere days after the wedding, he left for Europe, alone. On his solo honeymoon, he wrote his new bride

lengthy letters about the glorious Titians and Botticellis. After two months abroad, he came home to Philadelphia and began taking any work he could get. He did menu covers for restaurants, more covers for *Harper’s* and ads for baking powder, bicycles and Wanamaker’s department store. Yet whether advertising Cashmere Bouquet soap or drawing a knight whose No-To-Bac “Kills the Tobacco Habit,” his inner mirth bubbled to his surfaces. A short, puckish man with piercing eyes—blue, of course—and a wild shock of hair, Parrish was as charming in person as in print. Quick with a quip, he was the delight of neighbors and children. Well into his 80s, he kept a twinkle in his spirit. Learning that his old letters were being sold, he noted, “I dare say they thought I was dead, and they may be right. I must look into that.” The same impish humor abounds in

his illustrations for children’s books.

Cut from a child’s coat of wonder, Parrish’s medieval motifs brought Kenneth Grahame’s *Dream Days* to life. His chimerical *Humpty Dumpty* enlivened *Mother Goose in Prose*, and his euphoric *The Dinkey-Bird*, from the poem by Eugene Field, sent a youth soaring on a swing before a castle in the clouds. The public was enchanted, yet as demands for more poured in, the child in Parrish was eclipsed by the hermit. In 1898, he retreated to his own blue heaven. Stephen Parrish, who had moved to Cornish, New Hampshire, lent his son \$950 to purchase 20 acres in the area. On a hill across the valley from his father’s home, looking out at Vermont’s Mount Ascutney, Parrish built The Oaks. By the time he finished it in 1906, the estate boasted a 20-room main house, and a 15-room studio, complete with darkroom and ma-

chine shop. Parrish designed and built the terraced gardens, whose gates opened in summer to reveal lush spirea, lupine and lilac. Offered teaching posts at PAFA and Yale, he turned them down, unwilling to leave his hilltop home. From on high, he sent his celestial works to the world below.

During his first decade at The Oaks, Parrish was astonishingly versatile and widely praised. He did murals, shipping the painted panels to hotels in New York, Chicago and San Francisco. He illustrated *The Arabian Nights* and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Tanglewood Tales*. His stunning landscapes accompanied *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* by Edith Wharton. He even found time to paint scenery for a Broadway production of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. At The Oaks, Maxfield and Lydia Parrish enjoyed the state of the arts in Cornish's thriving artists' colony. Dinner guests included the sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens, Ethel Barrymore and, later, Woodrow Wilson. The community cultivated its homegrown talent, staging annual dramas with sets and masks by Maxfield Parrish. Homegrown children—three boys and a girl—soon brought their own imagi-



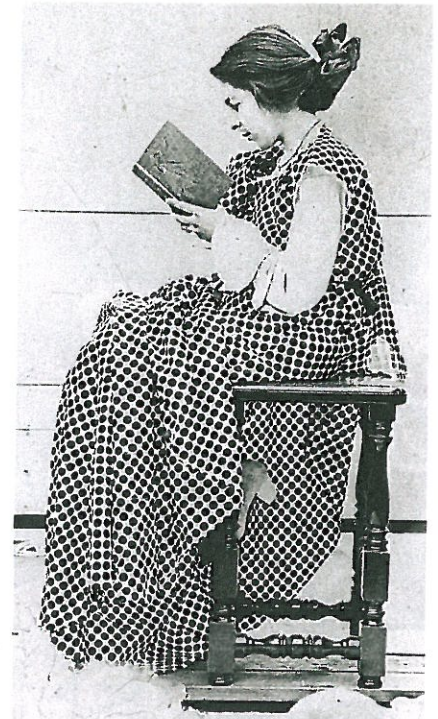
Mary Mary quite contrary
How does your garden grow?
PLANT
FERRY'S SEEDS

nations to The Oaks. And in time, Parrish began to complement his works of inner fantasy with fantastical outdoor panoramas graced by the woman who served as his muse.

Maxfield Parrish women often seem to be the same woman. In fact, many of them are. Her name was Susan Lewin, and when she came to The Oaks to help Lydia care for the children, she was 16. Slender and long-limbed, with a pre-Raphaelite profile, she quickly caught the artist's attention. Parrish asked Susan to pose for him. He rarely painted from life, instead photographing his models and working from his own prints. Soon, with Lydia wintering in Georgia, Parrish and his model began a discreet relationship that lasted 55 years. Parrish called Lewin "the faithful Susan" and they both denied any impropriety. "I'll have you know that Mr. Parrish has never seen my bare knee," Lewin is said to have protested. He must not have been looking, because a photograph of her posing nude has since been found. Lewin's room in The Oaks was connected to Parrish's by a secret passage, and in 1911, she and Parrish moved into his studio. Faithful Lydia stayed on in the main house. With Susan posing again and again, Parrish's dreamscapes matured. His work would soon be viewed by millions, yet few had the opportunity to appreciate the luminescence of an original Parrish firsthand.

When approached to do the Parrish show, Sylvia Yount was a bit hesitant. As curator of collections at PAFA, she was familiar with the Parrishes in her museum, but knew his other works only from prints. "I was not a big fan of his later work," she told me. "But there's something about seeing a Parrish in person." To prove

Parrish's daughter, Jean, posed for this nursery-rhyme ad for Ferry's Seeds.



"The faithful Susan" Lewin, Parrish's muse and model, often created her own costumes.

her point, Yount led me to a painting being prepared for the show. *Moonlight Night: Winter* (1942) was like no Parrish I'd ever seen. Its snow seemed to shimmer on the canvas. Its night sky was a chilling Parrish blue, a surreal indigo. Painstaking craftsmanship produced such hues, Yount explained. Like the lithographers who made his prints, Parrish layered his paintings color by color. After applying blue straight from the tube, he varnished the entire painting. When it dried, he added a second color, then another layer of varnish. Often working on several paintings at once, he added more color, more varnish, until the works seemed backlit. Parrish held few gallery shows during his lifetime. He is known for his prints, whose mass-produced color always disappointed him. Hence, the PAFA show will offer a surprising look at an artist some think they know well. "Many



Painted for a 1910 issue of *Collier's*, whose large format allowed Parrish to explore more complex designs, *The Idiot* reveals the artist's talent for achieving vivid optical effects.

curators still don't believe Maxfield Parrish was an artist," Yount said. "I hope to fight that attitude."

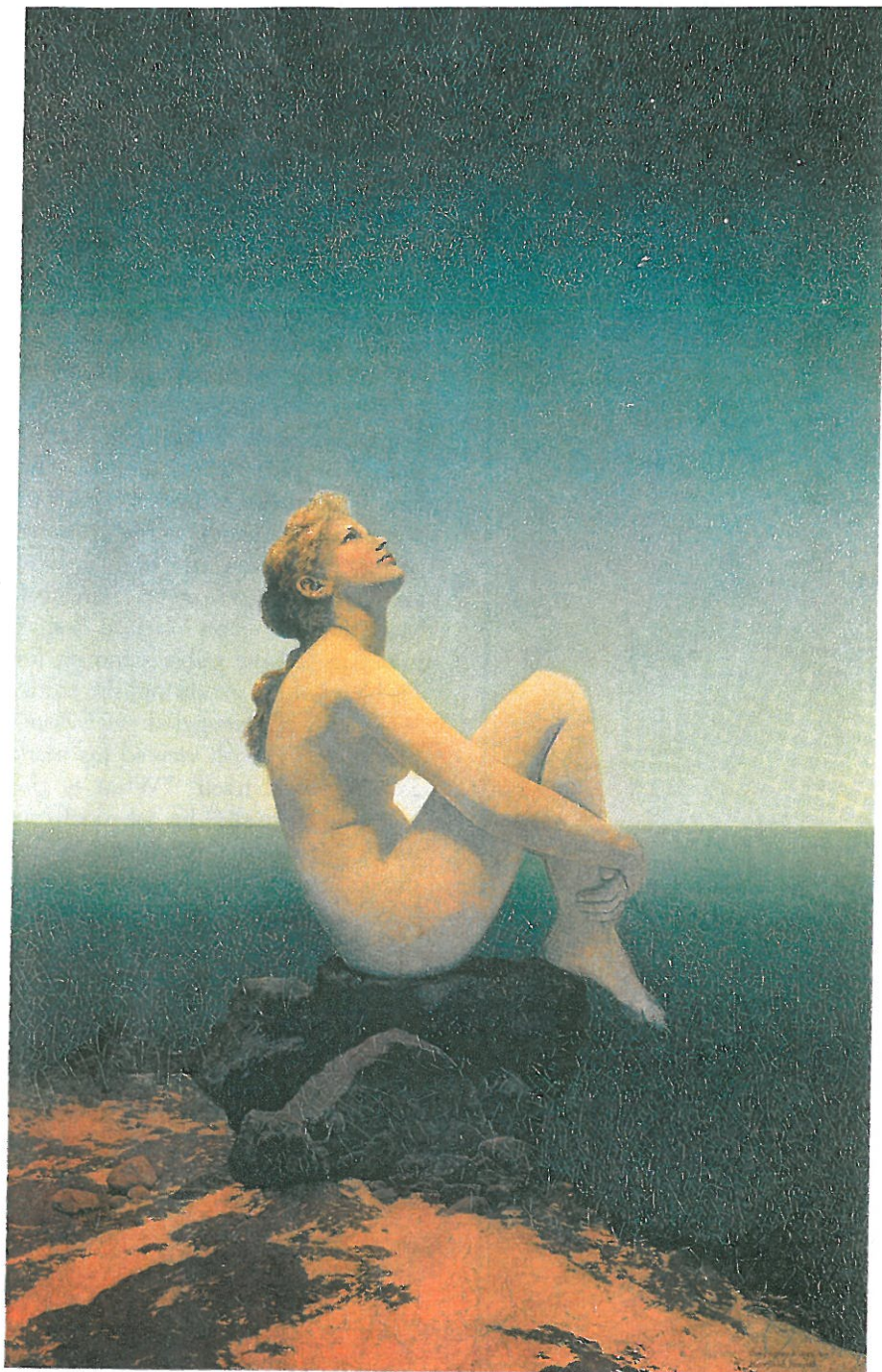
But it will be an uphill fight. As Parrish matured, so did highbrow ideas of what art should be. In the wake of the 1913 Armory Show, which exposed Americans to Picasso and other moderns, critics proclaimed that a painting no longer had to be

pretty, just personal. Countering the shock of modern art, Parrish became the anti-Matisse, a painter of pleasing pictures for the masses. Picasso had his Blue Period; Parrish had his blue rut. He began digging it in 1915 when Crane's Chocolates featured his romantic reveries on its holiday gift boxes. Reprints sold in the hundreds of thousands, landing Parrish con-

tracts for annual calendars for General Electric. Weary of the "commercial game," Parrish tried a different market, creating paintings specifically to be made into prints. Yet the public demanded more of the same. Rather than renounce the income that let him live on his hilltop, he painted paradise ad nauseam. In the 1920s, his prints made him the highest-paid artist—or illustrator—in America. More than 17 million Maxfield Parrish calendars fed the public's hunger for his blend of the exotic and the erotic.

Modern art struggled with complexity, but Parrish viewed his work as simplicity itself. "What is the meaning of it all?" he asked of one work. "It doesn't mean an earthly thing . . . something beautiful to look upon: a good place to be in. Nothing more." Some critics say if you've seen one of these Parrishes, you've seen them all, but one in particular captured the public's fancy.

As the nation accelerated into the 1920s, Parrish was part of the cultural landscape. In his story "May Day," F. Scott Fitzgerald called a window's reflection "a deep, creamy blue, the color of Maxfield Parrish moonlight." Hoping to be more than a cliché, Parrish began dreaming of "the great painting." He prepared a small canvas and began "thinking great things into it." He then posed a young Cornish neighbor and his 11-year-old daughter, Jean—one reclining as the other bent over her—and framed them in pillars according to principles of "dynamic symmetry," a contemporary theory that championed harmonious patterns of interlocking forms. Behind, he painted a garden draped in blossoms fronting the usual perfect peaks. The result was *Daybreak*, and it became, in the words of a Parrish biographer, "the decorating sensation of the decade." Given as wedding gifts, hung in homes and, of course, in college dorms, *Daybreak* sold more than



Following the success of *Daybreak*, Parrish created *Stars* (1925). Though it became one of his most famous images, Parrish felt that the nude should have been more idealized.

200,000 prints. In 1925, when a New York gallery exhibited 50 Parrishes, the original and two other works each sold for \$10,000, then a record for a living American artist. The buyer of *Daybreak* swore the gallery to secrecy, thus as it became one of the most reproduced artworks in history, no one knew where the original was hung. The mystery went unsolved for nearly a half-century. Then in 1974, the painting surfaced at a Boston

gallery. *Daybreak's* buyer had been politician William Jennings Bryan, the grandfather of its reclining model, Kitty Owen. Bryan had installed the painting in a climate-controlled stateroom on his yacht and allowed only a few friends to see it.

Parrish's admirers are more varied than his works. Among his collectors are film stars Jack Nicholson and Whoopi Goldberg, and that master of his own make-believe, *Star Wars* cre-

ator George Lucas. Yet anonymous fans have gone to great lengths to acquire an original. In 1935, Parrish's *Twilight* sold for \$3,000, a fortune during the Depression. The buyer was a young schoolteacher. "Everybody thought I had lost my mind to spend all my teacher's salary on a painting, but I wanted it more than any other thing I ever bought," the woman told Parrish collector Alma Gilbert. Gilbert understood perfectly.

During the 1970s, Gilbert ran a small gallery in San Mateo, California. She specialized in "investment art," handling Andrew Wyeths, Rembrandt etchings, and works by various local artists. When one customer asked Gilbert to get a Maxfield Parrish, she had no idea she was about to fall in love. As we stand before the artist's glittering *Land of Make Believe* in her Cornish Colony Gallery and Museum, Gilbert explains. Searching for Parrish, she found his works at the Vose Galleries in Boston. Alone with dozens of his works, she was smitten. "It was that wonderful, absolutely glorious sense of light in his paintings. I was transported into them." Gilbert bought not just one Parrish that day but 17. Since then, she has owned some 300 Parrishes, has written several books about the artist and lives in his own paradise.

In 1978, Gilbert bought The Oaks and opened a Parrish museum there. Less than a year later, the magnificent house burned to the ground. More than 20 years after she saw her first Parrish, she has endured a divorce, near bankruptcy and a lawsuit over Parrish copyrights, which she won. This summer, her Cornish gallery will offer the first public showing of the murals that Parrish painted for Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney from 1914 to 1916. Next summer, she says, there will be another Parrish show. And another. And another. "It will always be Parrish here," Gilbert

told me, "until they plant me."

Gilbert's devotion is not hers alone. During the Depression, when a colorful print on the wall was the only art most Americans could afford, the three most reproduced artists were Van Gogh, Cézanne and Parrish. But the artist whose first commission had filled him with "wild fiendish delight" was tired. Tired of art, of paradise, even of his "tiresome M.P. blue." "I'm done with girls on rocks," he declared in 1932 during a rare interview. "I've painted them for thirteen years and I could paint them and sell them for thirteen more. . . . It's an awful thing to get to be a rubber stamp." Four years later, he painted his last human figure. Then, still vigorous at 66, up every morning at 5:30, he turned his energy to landscapes. "Only God can make a tree," he often quoted. "True enough, but I'd like to see Him paint one." During the next 25 years, Parrish did more than 100 landscapes, half for annual calendars, the rest for his own amusement. He had finally earned his independence. When a publisher suggested he add excitement to a farm scene, he refused. The only way he could make the painting more exciting, he replied, would be to set the barn on fire. But with independence came neglect. Throughout his 70s and 80s, while art turned abstract, Parrish was passé. Then in the 1960s, art's pendulum swung again.

When New York's Gallery of Modern Art held a Parrish show in 1964, many were amazed to learn that the artist was still alive. Reporters trekked to The Oaks, where they found him living alone but still in wry humor. (Lydia had died in 1953, and Susan, having devoted her life to Parrish, had left The Oaks, at 71, to marry a childhood sweetheart.) Puttering around



The rustic simplicity of *Winter*, painted for a 1906 *Collier's* cover, evokes the work of such artists as Winslow Homer.

his home, often humming, Parrish was bemused by the sudden attention. "How can these avant-garde people get any fun out of my work?" he asked. But Parrish was all the rage. In the next few years, 17 museums showed his work, and countless college students hung him again.

Parrish died as a dreamer should—peacefully. Four months short of his 96th birthday, he passed away in his sleep at The Oaks. Within a few years, he passed eternally into pop culture. The landscape from *Daybreak* has been featured on bank checks. Parrish images are sold as computer screen savers and mouse pads, refrigerator magnets, tote bags, even trading cards. As pop, Parrish is as popular as ever. Yet in his hometown, few were prepared for the outcry when one of his murals nearly left the city.

Just off Philadelphia's Independence Square stands a Maxfield Parrish rendered in glass. *Dream Garden*, in the atrium of the Curtis Center, is a collaboration. Parrish painted the garden in 1914, and Tiffany Studios spent more than a year turning it into a mosaic. Hailed at its unveiling as "a veritable wonderpiece," *Dream Garden* stands 15 feet high and nearly 50 feet long. It contains more than 100,000 pieces of glass, in 260 colors. The

mural weighs four tons, but that didn't stop it from being sold and almost moved this past summer. When the *Philadelphia Inquirer* announced that the masterpiece was destined for a Las Vegas casino, petition drives, letters to the editor and public demonstrations were mounted to save Philadelphia's own Parrish. Responding to the outcry, *Dream Garden's* new owner, casino mogul Steve Wynn, graciously withdrew his bid. The city then moved to protect the mural from the market,

designating it Philadelphia's first "historic object." Future attempts to send the work packing will require approval by the city's Historical Commission. The decision is currently under appeal and the argument continues.

At twilight, the sky above Mount Ascutey is still as cerulean as ever. Last February, Alma Gilbert took me up the hill to The Oaks. There I understood how Parrish came to be on such intimate terms with paradise. From The Oaks, which Gilbert rebuilt following the fire, one looks out on a scene worthy of a Parrish calendar. The gently sloping mountain soars above lofty ridgelines. Unfolding fields and pastures seem to stretch into infinity. Towering oak trees dwarf the house and frame the view. Parrish did not imagine paradise. Like his fans who feel beckoned to enter his prints, he lived in it. "Parrish stirs something deep within people," Gilbert told me as she stood on his favored hilltop looking out at the blue. "You see his light and you understand things about yourself and the world. And you say, 'Oh, he saw these things, too.'"

Author Bruce Watson's son and daughter are great fans of Parrish's children's illustrations.

