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ART

Unique commercial art

By Brooks Robards



COURTESY OF THE FOUR GENERATIONS GALLERY

A vintage periodical cover by H. Willard Ortlip.

Unlike most Island galleries, Vineyard Haven's Four Generations Art limits itself to the 19th-, 20th- and 21st-century work of one large and successful family of artists. Some is for sale, but other works are not — an unusual aspect of the Vineyard art scene. This week the gallery is operating like a small museum by showing a collection of not-for-sale magazine covers by Ortlip family artists. The exhibit is called "Period Illustrations and Vintage Covers: Two Generations of Commercial Art."

The exhibit is the product of seven years' research by Managing Director Josh Sommers, who is married to watercolor and pastel artist and gallery director Michele Ortlip. Sommers combed flea markets, attics, and auction houses to build up the collection of Ortlip magazine covers and paintings. As online sites have proliferated in the past five or 10 years, Sommers's work became easier, and he

was able to increase the commercial art collection, as well as enhance the gallery's inventory of early Ortlip paintings. A committee of Ortlip family members also works to find and reproduce Ortlip art.

The current show provides a rare opportunity to see magazine covers that offer snapshots of the World War I era and later periods as painted by three members of the Ortlip Family. The bulk of the nearly two dozen vintage covers feature art by H. Willard Ortlip and his wife Aimée Eschner Ortlip.

Several books with illustrations by Willard are also on display. The exhibit even includes a World War II poster by Willard and Aimée's son Paul that was reproduced on the cover of the now defunct New York Journal-American's Pictorial Living Magazine.

Both Willard and Aimée Ortlip studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia. Willard's uncle, Henry McCarter, taught at the Academy during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, helping to institute a commercial art curriculum there.

In addition to commercial work, Willard Ortlip painted society commissions in Philadelphia before moving to New York City and, eventually Fort Lee, N.J. Aimée built a reputation as a still-life and landscape painter in addition to her magazine work. Their granddaughter Michele and her husband, Vineyard residents, opened the gallery last year.

A number of the paintings of the senior Ortlip artists are also on exhibit and Sommers speculates they may have been turned into as-yet undiscovered magazine covers. The most striking example of the painting-to-illustration process comes in "The Golden Age," a large painting by Willard Ortlip of a mother and child, both Ortlip relatives. The painting is on exhibit along with its reproduction on two different magazine covers.

Many of the covers on display depict children or women with children and illustrate prevailing cultural attitudes of the time. In magazines like "Successful Farming," "Every Week" and "The American Woman," the two artists romanticize children in a manner popular in the period. "Colliers" covers, however, use a more naturalistic technique to show a father and son playing baseball and a youthful victim of an April Fool's joke. If not as well known as the work of Saturday Evening Post illustrator Norman Rockwell, these cover illustrations, if less broadly comic, are comparable in theme and execution.

Other covers portray war-related scenes, like one titled "Helping Pershing Win" that shows a boy scout holding up a basket of produce. "Father's Return" features a mother and child in front of a window overlooking soldiers marching in front of the Capitol. Covers for magazines like the Christian Herald employ religious scenes.

In addition to the magazine covers, the Four Generations Art Gallery is keeping on exhibit the portrait by Michele's father Paul of Apollo 17 Commander Eugene Cernan. It was completed this winter for the 35th anniversary of the space program. He is well known for his paintings of astronaut and military works, a number of which are owned by the Smithsonian Institution's Air and Space Museum and the U.S. Naval Historical Center.

Most of the floral still-lives by Aimée Ortlip in the current show will stay up for the next Four Generations Art Gallery exhibit, "Flowers and Gardens," starting Sunday, July 22.

The Gallery is located at 517 State Road. Hours are 1 to 6 pm Thursday through Sunday .

Brooks Robards is a contributing writer to The Times.