

Thursday, 16 December 2010 09:30

Norman Rockwell's America, Dulwich Picture Gallery

Written by [Fisun Güner](#)

[Print](#) | [Comment](#)



'Tender Years - Treating a Cold', 1957 is typical of Norman Rockwell's gentle humour

All pictures: © National Museum of American Illustration, Newport; American Illustrators Gallery, NYC

Norman Rockwell's America. What did it look like? At the height of Rockwell's incredible fame as an illustrator, you might say it looked a lot like a movie still. Think of the films of Frank Capra, for instance: heartwarming scenes of family life shot through with poignancy as well as humour. This vision came with an instinctive appreciation that the most precious things we have in life are also the most transient and fragile. It's a vision that clearly comes with a sense of empathy for the common man, an empathy that elevates his American everyman into the heroic figure of home and hearth.

That's one version of his America, at any rate. In a career that spanned a great chunk of the 20th century – his first *Saturday Evening Post* cover was published on 20 May, 1916, and his last on 14 December, 1963 – not surprisingly, several idealised landscapes emerge. It first comes in the shape of an America which now appears wholly remote to us – in imagery that's a cross between Mark Twain and Dickens, or sometimes Lord Snooty and those sentimental depictions of happy street urchins that have been popular since Murillo.

'Rockwell is in the business of celebrating America, not revealing its neurotic underbelly'

But then modernity kicks in, the palette brightens and the geometric lines get sharper. Now we're in an America that's altogether more urbane, more sophisticated, though an element of small-town still lingers: this is a world where women are smartly attired in patterned-print dresses purchased from department stores and where men can be seen relaxing in lounge suits. The convivial couples in this brighter, snappier world play bridge, and would, I'm sure, drink Martinis, if it weren't for the fact that imbibing alcohol is rarely, if ever, seen in a Rockwell picture.

Take a look at one of his best-known images from this period: the 1948 *Bridge Game – The Bid* (**pictured right**), with its jazzy Modernist blocks of colour. Just as he'd always used the Old Masters as reference – absorbing, for instance, the painterly, chiaroscuro effects of Rembrandt – here you can see that he's also been busy absorbing **Mondrian and Van Doesburg**. It's an incredibly witty and, in terms of its design, highly sophisticated painting, and, of course, supremely stylish and aspirational, too. You might, in fact, from this period onwards, think of



Mad Men, but on a slighter tighter budget.

But we also know that this is a world where the surface is never going to crack: Rockwell is in the business of celebrating America, not revealing its neurotic underbelly.

'Each phase in Rockwell's career comes with values deeply embedded in the vision of the Founding Fathers'

As we see in this comprehensive, thoroughly absorbing survey, though there are clearly shifts in tone, mood and style throughout Rockwell's career, each phase comes with values deeply embedded in the vision of the Founding Fathers. Rockwell wasn't a political artist, in the way that many artists and illustrators were during the era of Roosevelt's New Deal, and he'd certainly never embraced communism as many of his contemporaries had. But he wasn't afraid to embrace politics. It was expressed, of course, in terms of an unambiguous patriotism, a love for the American Way, but this wasn't at the expense of a deep sympathy for the poor and the needy.

In 1943, he painted a series of posters called *The Four Freedoms*, created to raise money for the war effort (one of the posters, depicting three generations of a family celebrating Thanksgiving to illustrate the freedom from want, succeeded in raising an astonishing \$25 million in sales). Later he aligned himself with the civil rights movement. A study for his eloquent painting, *The Problem We All Live With*, 1963, depicts Ruby Bridges walking to her elementary school in New Orleans on the first day of desegregation, an event that was given huge media coverage at the time. The young girl's quiet dignity remains the unwavering focus of our gaze as she solemnly marches behind two "headless" government guards, both wearing conspicuous armbands, as if, to its shame, we are witnessing martial America. We see neither press nor hostile crowds, but the white wall behind her is splattered with a tomato that has just missed its innocent target.



Without question, Rockwell is often off-puttingly schmaltzy and kitsch (let's not forget he was foremost an advertising illustrator, not an avant-garde artist) but much of his work is also deeply and engagingly humane. And you really have to see this exhibition – the first survey of his work in the UK – to appreciate what a supremely accomplished



draughtsman he was:
unfailingly technically
impressive and a master at
conveying expression. His

1952 charcoal study, *A Day in the Life of a Little Girl* (**pictured above**), presents a fine, virtuoso study capturing the fleeting, mobile facial expressions of a child.

Ultimately, his supreme command of his craft is why America remains in love with Rockwell – and why we in this country are beginning to "get him".

- [Norman Rockwell's America at Dulwich Picture Gallery until 27 March, 2011](#)
- [Read "**theartsdesk** in Fort Lauderdale: Norman Rockwell, The American Friend"](#)

Like this? Tweet it to your followers!

Published in [Reviews](#)

Tagged under [painting](#) [drawing](#) [America](#) [Art](#) [Dulwich Picture Gallery](#)

Social sharing

Latest from Fisun Güner

- [Above Suspicion: Deadly Intent, ITV1](#)
- [Year Out/Year In: Art's Giants in Close-Up](#)
- [Whistle and I'll Come to You, BBC Two](#)

Related items (by tag)

- [Film: 127 Hours](#)
- [Year Out/Year In: Art's Giants in Close-Up](#)
- [theartsdesk in Brussels: The EU Takes On Google](#)
- [Boxing Day Bloat: theartsdesk recommends](#)
- [Ben Johnson: Modern Perspectives, National Gallery](#)

[back to top](#)