

Insight

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LEFT Norman Rockwell, *Bridge Game - The Bid*, 1948. ABOVE *Charwomen in Theater - Study*, 1946

AMERICAN DREAMWEAVER

Celina Fox surveys an exhibition of Norman Rockwell's optimistic illustrations of middle-class life in the US and, overleaf, reviews other current exhibitions

Graphic art long suffered from a snobbish disdain on the part of arbiters of taste, its roots lying in the academic hierarchy, which did not rank engravers on equal terms with their fellow artists. Art-school departments of printmaking and illustration never enjoyed quite the same cachet as those of painting and sculpture. Yet many famous painters first made a living from commercial art, especially in the

States, where traditional forms of patronage were thinner on the ground than in Europe. Winslow Homer worked for decades as an illustrator on *Harper's Weekly*. Edward Hopper produced covers for a range of trade magazines, including *Wells Fargo Messenger* and *Hotel Management*, as well as illustrating fiction. Yet both were frustrated in the task of having to please both art editor and

the public, and went on to forge independent careers as painters. Norman Rockwell (1894-1978) was different, accepting the restrictions of his role and insisting he was not a 'fine arts' man.

In these Postmodern times, when the distinction between academic art and popular culture has more or less dissolved, Rockwell has come into his own, as Dulwich Picture Gallery's exhibition, >

dedicated to the artist, confirms. The curatorial emphasis today on context allows us to think more about the times in which Rockwell lived than about his artistic style. Born in New York City, the son of a textile-firm manager, he trained at the National Academy of Design and the Art Students League. In 1913, aged 19, he was appointed art editor of *Boys' Life*, the official magazine of the Boy Scouts of America. Three years later, *The Saturday Evening Post* published his cover design, the first of more than 320 he was to produce for the magazine over a period of time spanning nearly half a century. With a circulation of over 3 million by the Thirties, the *Post* made his name.

Rockwell's success was based on his ability to provide middle-class America with a flattering self-image. He was a keen observer of everyday encounters and small-town life, especially after he moved to Arlington, Vermont, in 1939. His formula was to focus on a single figure or a small group, set against a plain background, until a change of cover design in the Forties, so that the gestures and facial expressions were highlighted for the reader. This approach, the themes selected and his realist style of representation were influenced by his friend and fellow artist on the *Post*, Joseph Christian Leyendecker (1874-1951). Rockwell's figures were often based on tracings made from photographs of models. Working in the tradition of Victorian narrative painting, he also took endless trouble with the props, positioned for maximum effect to help tell the story. For many critics, these were all-too-unsubtle clues, a heavy-handed literalism antithetical to the purely visual effects demanded by modernism.

In line with the editorial stance of the magazine, Rockwell projected a conservative, comforting and complacent image of American society centred on the family, from which poverty, crime and racial tensions were virtually absent. Communities got along just fine, eased by the rituals of Christmas and Thanksgiving, home remedies and volunteer fire brigades, barber shops and ice-cream parlours, bridge parties for grown-ups and baseball games for freckle-faced kids. Runaways were always retrieved by a kindly cop or clown. Rockwell left out what was uncomfortable, inconvenient and disturbing,

depicting the US as a basically decent society. 'I paint life as I would like it to be,' he said.

Yet this homespun art had an international significance. During the decades when the world was polarised between the ideologies of communism and fascism, Rockwell's take on the States presented the promise of a democratic alternative. The US government realised its propaganda value. Inspired by President Franklin D Roosevelt's speech on the 'four freedoms', or human rights, which should be universally protected, Rockwell produced four paintings in 1943 entitled *Freedom from Want*, *Freedom of Speech*, *Freedom to Worship* and *Freedom from Fear*. They were toured round the country to help sell war bonds and raised nearly \$140 million. Just as he had produced patriotic images of the troops for the *Post* and *Red Cross Magazine* in

the First World War, in the Second he followed the career of fictional private Willie Gillis, taking him on to college in 1946, courtesy of the GI Bill. It is no accident that *A Letter from the Front* painted in 1947 by the Soviet artist Aleksandr Laktionov, now hanging in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, could easily have been painted by Rockwell. Socialist realism mimicked the leading exponent of capitalist realism to sell competing political systems to the people and the enemy.

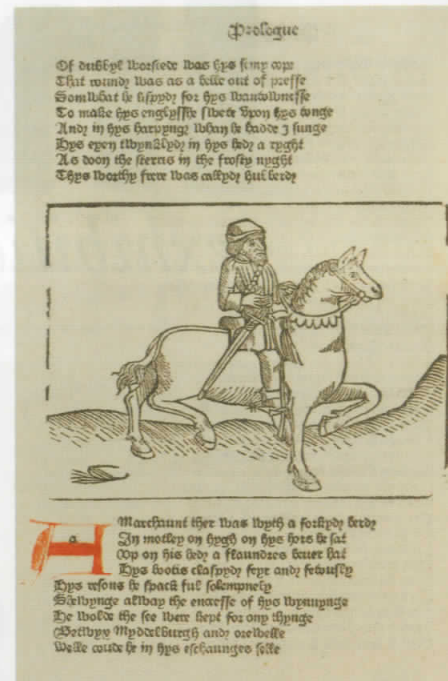
With the encouragement of his third wife, Rockwell started to work

for *Look* magazine in 1964, taking on more radical subjects including civil rights, poverty, the Peace Corps in Ethiopia and even schoolrooms in Russia. One poignant image, *The Problem We All Live With*, marks the occasion in 1960 when six-year-old Ruby Bridges was escorted by towering federal marshals past a wall defaced by racist graffiti on her way to become the first African-American child to attend a hitherto all-white elementary school in the South. *New Kids in the Neighbourhood* of 1967 records the wary reaction of white children to the arrival of an African-American boy and girl in their suburb. Rockwell's art tells us more about the mood of those times than abstract expressionism ever could. 'Norman Rockwell's America' is at Dulwich Picture Gallery from December 15 to March 27, 2011

ABOVE Norman Rockwell, *Volunteer Fireman*, 1931



IN ROCKWELL'S COMPLACENT IMAGE OF AMERICA, POVERTY, CRIME AND RACIAL TENSIONS WERE VIRTUALLY ABSENT



LOOKING AT LANGUAGE

There can be no more appropriate venue for an exhibition that explores the evolution of the English language over the centuries than the British Library. The only surviving manuscript of *Beowulf*, Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, Shakespeare quartos, the King James Bible and Dr Johnson's Dictionary are displayed alongside mass-media advertisements, newspapers and comics to trace how different social, cultural and historical strands have woven together to create English as it is spoken today. These are backed up by a wealth of sound recordings, with speeches from Churchill, Gandhi and Mandela, as well as samples of different dialects. Web pages and text messages also feature, in the language now used by some 1.8 billion people worldwide. 'Evolving English: One Language, Many Voices' is at the British Library, 96 Euston Road, NW1 (0843-208 1144; www.bl.uk) until April 3, 2011; admission, free

TOP Extract from *The Canterbury Tales*, Geoffrey Chaucer, 1483. BELOW Illustration from *Punch*, October 27, 1855





LEFT Empress's informal robe with flower and butterfly design, Guang-xu reign, 1875-1908. BELOW Paul Cézanne, *The Card Players*, c. 1893-96

MAKING MASTERPIECES

Continuing its series of exhibitions focusing on masterpieces in its collection, the Courtauld Gallery has brought together a group of paintings, preparatory drawings and watercolours by Cézanne, which depict card players and pipe smokers. The sitters were all workers on the family estate of the Jas de Bouffan outside Aix-en-Provence. Cézanne drew them individually, using some studies as the basis for individual portraits and bringing others together on the canvas, seated at a table. He strove to express their character, as immutable, in human terms, as the Montaigne Sainte-Victoire, which dominated the surrounding landscape. As he later said, 'I love above all else the appearance of people who have grown old without breaking with old customs.' The works, borrowed from the Musée d'Orsay, Paris, the State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, the Metropolitan Museum, New York, and other American collections, enable us to see how Cézanne pushed the boundaries of painting in radical new directions, using a vibrant patchwork of brushstrokes to animate the surface of the canvas and reinforce the monumental form of the sitters. 'Cézanne's *Card Players*' is at the Courtauld Gallery, Somerset House, Strand, WC2 (020-7848 2526; www.courtauld.ac.uk) until January 16; admission, £6



DYNASTIC DRESS

While Western couture was constantly reinventing itself, Chinese imperial dress evolved at a much statelier pace, as demonstrated by the sumptuous examples on display at the V&A. Loaned by the Palace Museum in the Forbidden City, Beijing, and shown for the first time in Europe, they include ceremonial, symbolic and practical garments from the Qing dynasty (1644-1911). Even informal dresses were made from the finest materials and embellished with exquisite embroideries, while the dragon motif and a particularly vibrant shade of yellow could only be worn by the imperial family.

'Imperial Chinese Robes from the Forbidden City' is at the Victoria & Albert Museum, Cromwell Road, SW7 (020-7942 2000; www.vam.ac.uk) from December 7 to February 27, 2011; admission, £5

FASHION IN THE FRAME

Another aspect of the graphic arts is currently on show at the Design Museum. Although fashion plates had disseminated the latest styles for centuries, fashion drawing took off after 1900, once it could be reproduced by photomechanical means for publication in quality women's magazines such as *Vogue*. Guest-curated by fashion historian Colin McDowell, the exhibition has been selected from a collection formed over 30 years by Joelle Chariou. Frequently reflecting the art movements of the day, examples range from art-deco designs by Georges Lepape and Erté (Romain de Tiroff) to the bold calligraphic images of René Gruau that promoted Christian Dior's New Look. Film, photography and music help set the scene and the current state of the genre is explored through the work of Mats Gustafson, François Berthoud and Aurore de la Morinerie. 'Drawing Fashion' is at the Design Museum, Shad Thames, SE1 (020-7940 8783; www.designmuseum.org) until March 6, 2011; admission, £8.50 □



Aurore de la Morinerie, *Couture 1*, 2010