

[Home](#) > [Features](#) > [Entertainment](#) > [Art](#)

# 'Rockwell and Contemporaries' show in Newport honors rich era of illustration

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"The Doryman," by N.C. Wyeth, from the book "Trending into Maine" by Kenneth Roberts.

6 of 6 

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Together, they're the Big Three of American illustration: N.C. Wyeth, the Bay State native who virtually invented the art of adventure-book illustration; Maxfield Parrish, he of the neon-hued sunsets; and Norman Rockwell, the benign but sharp-eyed chronicler of small-town life.

But are the Big Three the only three? Not according to "Norman Rockwell and his Contemporaries," an eye-opening new exhibit at the National Museum of American Illustration (NMAI).

Besides showcasing iconic works by Rockwell, Wyeth and Parrish, the exhibit includes paintings, drawings and other works by a dozen or so lesser-known artists, including some — like the pioneering magazine illustrator J.C. Leyendecker, the mordantly funny John Falter and the influential action-adventure specialist Howard Pyle — who clearly deserve a place in the illustration pantheon.

"As great as they were, artists like Wyeth and Rockwell didn't create in a vacuum," says museum co-founder Judy Goffman Cutler. "There were older illustrators like Leyendecker and Pyle who they admired and learned from. And there were younger artists who learned from them."

In all, the show features about 80 artworks representing a wide array of styles and mediums — everything from tire ads and calendar illustrations and to patriotic recruiting posters.

(If nothing else, the show reminds us that even the most successful illustrators often took work wherever they could find it. Parrish, for example, produced dozens of electricity-themed illustrations for the Edison-Mazda Co., a forerunner of today's General Electric. Rockwell, meanwhile, happily allowed his name and work to be used on a line of illustrated candy boxes.)

If you haven't visited NMAI before, you should also know that the term "illustration" — at least in this context — can be a little misleading. While nearly everything in the museum was created for commercial use, works from the so-called Golden Age of American illustration often started out as traditional oil paintings before being reproduced in books, magazines and other publications.

When you visit the museum, what you see are the original paintings, not reproductions. Needless to say, there's a big difference between the original works created by Rockwell, Wyeth and other artists and the printed versions you may have seen in books and magazines.

In fact, one of the first things you notice about these "illustrations" is how painterly they are. Leyendecker, for example, could paint a face or a figure with near-photographic accuracy. His backgrounds, on the other hand, are often as freely painted as any Abstract Expressionist canvas.

Wyeth, meanwhile, had a knack for creating color and lighting effects that would have pleased Impressionist masters such as Monet and Renoir. (A case in point: a painting called "Archers in Battle," in which the darkened figures of the archers are surrounded by gem-like shades of red, blue and green. Originally painted for a 1922 edition of "The White Company," a swashbuckling yarn by Sherlock Holmes creator Arthur Conan Doyle, it still glows as brightly as a stained glass window.)

Of course, such effects served a practical purpose: When they were reproduced, details such as Leyendecker's highly textured backgrounds and Wyeth's high-keyed colors would have softened considerably, making them much less noticeable. Yet they also remind us that artists like Leyendecker and Wyeth weren't just top-notch illustrators. In many cases, they were also first-class painters.

By focusing on specific themes and subjects, the exhibit also highlights how different illustrators approached their work. Pirates, for instance, turn up in several of the show's paintings, including works by Rockwell and Pyle. But what a difference! While the stranded pirate in Pyle's "Marooned" looks like an extra from one of the "Pirates of the Caribbean" movies, the "pirates" in Rockwell's "Cousin Reginald Plays Pirates" are just kids playing at being buccaneers. The contrast between Pyle, who worked hard to convey a sense of drama and verisimilitude in his work, and Rockwell, who worked just as hard to elicit a sense of childhood innocence and humor in his, couldn't be more apparent.

While Rockwell is clearly the star of the show (yes, there's a reason it's called "Norman Rockwell and His Contemporaries"), other illustrators also make a strong impression.

Pyle, for example, had a knack for creating scenes that were as powerful as any action-adventure movie. An influential teacher as well as an illustrator, he also served as a mentor to many younger illustrators, Rockwell and Wyeth. Another standout: John Falter, a Nebraska-born illustrator who shared Rockwell's fascination with small-town life, but whose sense of humor was often drier and darker than Rockwell's. A good example: a painting of a 1930s-era political convention that's not far removed from one of Ralph Steadman's famously surreal illustrations for "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas."

***"Norman Rockwell and His Contemporaries" runs through Aug. 31 at the National Museum of American Illustration, 492 Bellevue Ave. in Newport. Hours: Thurs.-Sun. 11-5. Admission: \$18 adults, \$16 seniors and military, \$12 students and \$8 ages 5-12. For more, call (401) 851-8949, ext. 18 or visit americanillustration.org.***



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