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WEEKEND EDITION



Philip Sherman | Staff photographer

Don Trachte Jr. gestures to a replica of Norman Rockwell's 'Breaking Home Ties' painted by his father around 1972. The painting is one of several replicas painted by Trachte's father that he hid to keep from his ex-wife during a bitter divorce in the 1970s. A copy of the original hangs to the right, along with the check signed by Rockwell written by Trachte's father for \$900 to buy the painting.

## Exhibit unveils **what's behind the walls**

### Secret paintings featured at Museum of American Illustration

By Sean Flynn  
Staff writer

NEWPORT — Artist Don Trachte, best known for drawing the "Henry" Sunday comics from 1948 until 1995, died in 2005, leaving behind his most prized possession, "Breaking Home Ties," a Norman Rockwell original painting.

He purchased it for \$900 on July 2, 1962 and his son, Don Trachte Jr. still has the check to prove it. That is notable, since Trachte Jr. and his two brothers sold the painting for \$15.4 million in 2006, a record sum for a Rockwell painting at that time.

But that's getting ahead of the story.

The parents, Trachte and his wife, Elizabeth, went through a divorce in 1973 and decided to leave eight original paintings by famous artists to their three sons. However, under the agreement, the mother would continue to hang five of the paintings in her house and the father would continue to hang three paintings, including the Rockwell, in his house.

That's what happened, or so everyone believed.

"On March 17, 2006, my brother Dave found a crevice in the wall of my father's house and tried to pry it open," Trachte Jr. said this week.

After removing the top and bottom shelves of a bookcase against the wall,

the brothers were able to slide the wall open. There were the eight original paintings. Their father had made copies of all eight paintings, removed the original frames, and put them on the replicas, which he hung on the walls.

Most of these paintings and the Trachte replicas are the subject of a special exhibition that opens this weekend called "Secrets Behind the Wall: by Don Trachte," at the National Museum of American Illustration, 492 Bellevue Ave. The museum is open Thursdays through Sundays, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Visitors can see the "Breaking



# Walls

Continued from A1

Home Ties" replica created by Trachte, and a reduced-in-size print of the original Rockwell painting. Sotheby's sold the original painting to an unknown private collector.

Trachte apparently did not want his wife to have possession of any the eight original paintings and may have been concerned about their security.

"This didn't surprise me at all," Trachte Jr. said.

A road divided the Trachte farm near Arlington, Vt., with the ex-husband living on one side of the road and his ex-wife living on the other side. His parents did not speak after the divorce, his son said.

Trachte lent his replica of the Rockwell painting for an exhibit between 1970 and 1973, when he was offered \$35,000 for it. Trachte would not part with the painting. No one suspected it was a replica.

A note from Rockwell to Trachte, also part of the exhibit, refers to the offer from the 1970s:

"You must be crazy not to sell it, but I adore your loyalty," Rockwell wrote.

The family lent the Rockwell painting replica to the Norman Rockwell Museum in Stockbridge, Mass., when the father was in failing health, for exhibit between 2002 and 2005. During that time, experts noticed discrepancies between the painting and the illustration that had been on the cover of Saturday Evening Post.

Don Trachte Jr. sent the painting to art experts in Williamstown, Mass., to determine if the painting had been changed, or if there was a layer underneath. They found no changes and said the painting was original, which was confusing. No one suggested at the time that it was a replica.

"I did not want to admit anything was wrong with the painting," Trachte Jr. said.

Differing details, such as the eyes, remained a mystery, since the provenance — the history of ownership — was



Philip Sherman | Staff photographer

Don Trachte Jr. discusses Norman Rockwell's 'Four Freedoms' hanging in the National Museum of American Illustration, located at 92 Bellevue Ave. in Newport. The museum is open Thursdays through Sundays from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.

## 'My Dad was a huge fan of Norman Rockwell. He was a model for some of his paintings.'

DON TRACHTE JR.

so clear. It had gone directly from Rockwell to Trachte, with no other owners in between. The mystery was not solved until the secret wall was discovered.

"How did a guy who drew silly cartoons create this Rockwell?" Trachte Jr. asked.

"He could have been a master forger," said Judy Goffman Cutler, director and co-founder of the National Museum of American Illustration with her husband, Laurence S. Cutler.

Goffman Cutler viewed the replica painting at the Rockwell museum in the early 2000s and noticed the differing details. She obtained a print of the original Saturday Evening Post cover from the museum gift shop, and pointed out the slight differences, unnoticeable to a non-professional observer, to her husband.

While the Cutlers were making the comparison, another man in the museum came over to them and said he, too, had noticed the differences.

The seven other paintings are by artists including Mead Schaeffer, Gene Pelham, and George Hughes. Visitors will be able to compare the original works and the replicas to see if they can spot the differences.

Born in Madison, Wis., in 1915, Trachte began drawing cartoons while still a student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Carl Anderson was almost 70 when he originated the "Henry" comic strip, which featured a bald-headed mute boy who was always getting into trouble.

"My Dad was an advanced student of Anderson's and began drawing the strip for him," Trachte Jr. said. "He was Carl's right-hand man."

Trachte, who was an Army lieutenant during World War II, took over the Sunday "Henry" strips in 1946 just before Anderson's death in 1948, and continued to draw the strip until 1994.

The new exhibit here includes Trachte's personal

collection of Henry books, his replicas and some of his Sunday strips of Henry's adventures. The daily "Henry" strips were drawn by another artist.

In 1950, Trachte moved his family from Madison to Arlington, where there was an artist's colony that included Rockwell.

"My Dad was a huge fan of Norman Rockwell," Trachte Jr. said. "He was a model for some of his paintings."

"Norman Rockwell and His Contemporaries" continues to be the main current exhibit at the National Museum of American Illustration.

Trachte Jr. will speak about his father on Thursday, July 21, when the museum will open its Benefit Silent Auction to raise money for future exhibits. One of the auction items is a thumb nail study by Rockwell of "Breaking Home Ties" before he did the painting.

For more information about the current exhibits and upcoming events, visit [americanIllustration.org](http://americanIllustration.org).

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