“New Litter of Kittens,” John Falter, 1954, oil on canvas. [NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ILLUSTRATION IMAGE]
Sentimental giant

New exhibit opening Thursday at the National Museum of American Illustration helps to contextualize Norman Rockwell’s career

By Alexander Castro
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DO YOU REMEMBER THE FIRST PLACE YOU SAW A Norman Rockwell? For me it was the Burger King on Metacom Avenue in Warren, where a print of Rockwell’s “Homecoming G.I.” hovered aside people lining up for Whoppers. That Rockwell’s imagery was considered safe for a fast-food joint should give you some indication of his popularity and normalcy.

Rockwell, who died in 1978 at age 84, may be the best known scribbler who toiled during and after the Second World War, but he wasn’t the only professional illustrator getting gigs. A new exhibit at the National Museum of American Illustration in Newport helps to contextualize Rockwell’s career.

“Norman Rockwell and His Contemporaries: Fabulous Forties to Sensational Sixties,” opening Thursday at the Bellevue Avenue museum, promises a mix of war, leisure and civil rights — all relevant themes, and each distilled by artists skilled in visual summary.

It’s an appropriate show for a venue that, according to the museum’s Executive Assistant Lauren Scriva, is commonly mistaken for the Norman Rockwell Museum itself. (The actual Rockwell Museum is in Stockbridge, Massachusetts.)

“Norman Rockwell is probably the only name that people come here and they already know,” Scriva said. This exhibit displays not only the artist’s enduring “folksy” images but some of his “more intense” work, such as “Blood Brothers” (1968), a sanguine, antiracist plea.

The show, which runs through the end of 2019, illuminates Rockwell’s periphery and the milieu in which he worked. John Falter’s wide-angle covers for the Saturday Evening Post influenced Rockwell’s mid-career working style. Falter’s busy scenes are easily identified by the inclusion of a balding self-portrait. Or take Rockwell’s mentor J.C. Leyendecker, whose plump, glossy New Year’s baby was apparently a thing in the 1940s.

You’ll also find artists commenting directly on the hot topics of their time, whether as cartoonists or propagandists.

A cartoon by Ric Hugo makes the moon landing earthbound by placing it in the context of economic crisis. James Montgomery Flagg’s “Help China!” (1942), meanwhile,

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makes for strange reminisc -
ing amid recent tariffs and
trade wars.

Concurrent with
Rockwell’s status as a house-
hold name was the rise of
abstract expressionist paint-
ing, an ascent he chronicled
for the cover of the Saturday
Evening Post, one of his
most frequent clients. That
cover, “The Connoisseur,”
provides one of the exhibit’s
most curious entries: a study
that’s pure abstraction, a
bright jumble of brushwork
in assorted colors.

It’s joined by another
amused art critique, “Picasso
Vs. Sargent” (1968), which
contrasts the titular artists’
fan bases through a juxta-
position of hair curlers and
tight jeans. Rockwell comes
off as more appreciative of
modern art than you might
expect. He seems to have
taken it seriously enough that
he scored a prize when he
entered his abstract study in
a modern art competition in
the Berkshires.

Yes, there’s range in
Rockwell’s oeuvre, but he
remains a fundamentally
conservative artist. He and
many of his contemporaries
propped up a postwar idyll
of nuclear families, return-
ing soldiers and baseball
diamonds — an iconography
memorably trounced by
historian Stephanie Coontz
in her book “The Way We
Never Were.”

Even at his most aware,
Rockwell’s images remain
manipulable. A 1996 article
in The New York Times
tells us that, during the O.J.
Simpson trial, the Juice’s
lawyers staged his home for
a jury visit. Down came a
photo of Simpson’s white,
naked girlfriend. Up went
Rockwell’s “The Problem
We All Live With,” in which
a black schoolgirl marches
onward, the background
a wall marred with toma-
toes and slurs. The painting
is one of Rockwell’s most
conscious, its composition
orbiting the cruel vocabu-
lar y at its center. But its
deployment in this case was
strategic, “aimed at arous-
ing the sympathy of the
mostly black jury,” the Times
reported.

Rockwell’s paintings
are a kind of shorthand for
“All-American” values. As
this show makes clear, his
contemporaries peddled the
same message. Scrima said
that some even worked for
free on war posters, want-
ing to help the war effort.
Intentionally or not, the
exhibit makes for an excellent
primer on how the status quo
can reproduce itself through
art.

Rather than dismiss these
artists as evidence that
yesterday’s citizenry was
more gullible, we might
wonder which public cre-
atives operate in the same
register today. Rockwell and
his contemporaries reveal
much about what Americans
wanted — and likely still
want — reflected back at
them.

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