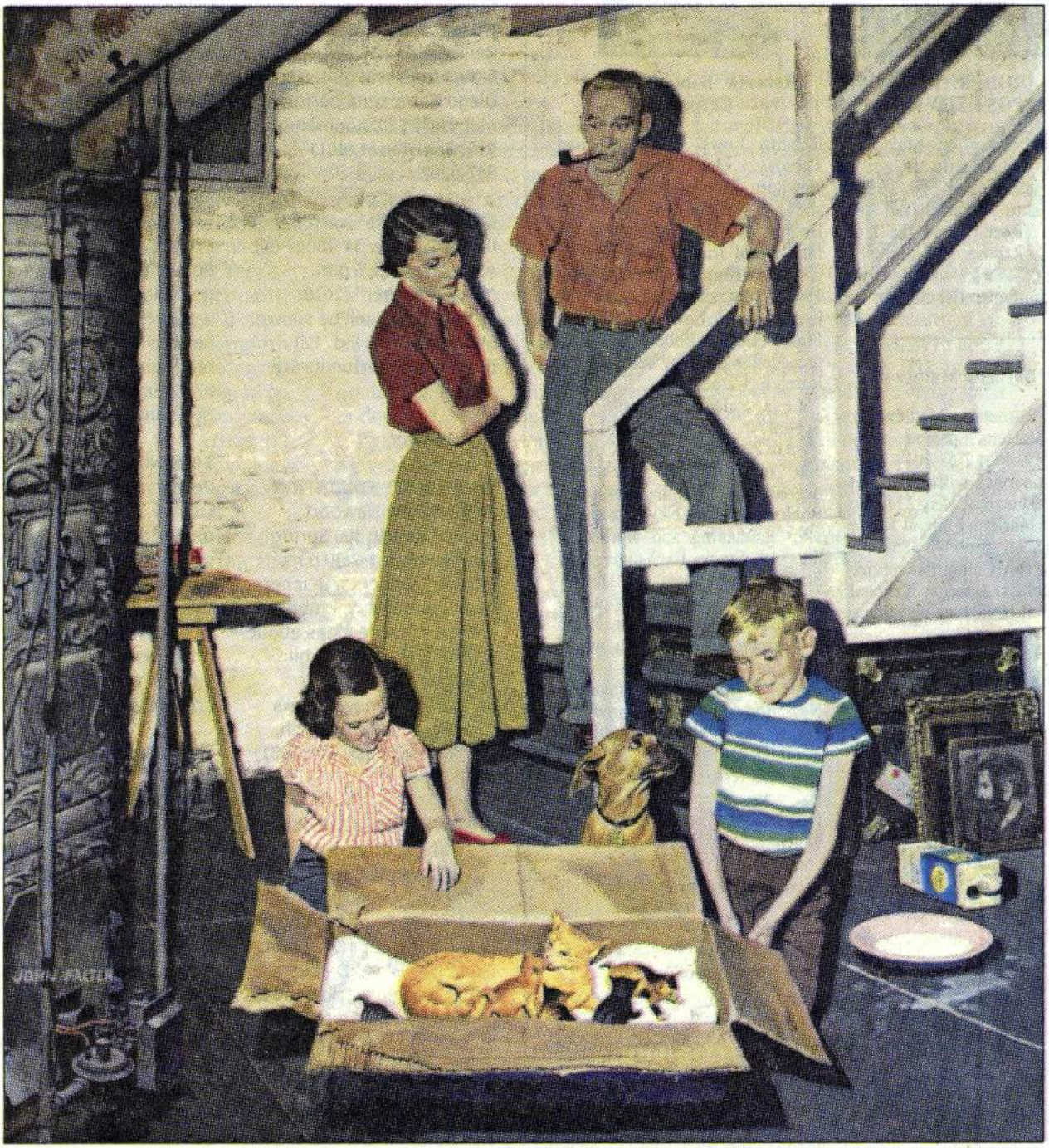
LOCAL & STATE

REVIEW



"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
Special to The Daily News

NEWPORT

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 Scrima, 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," Scrima 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.

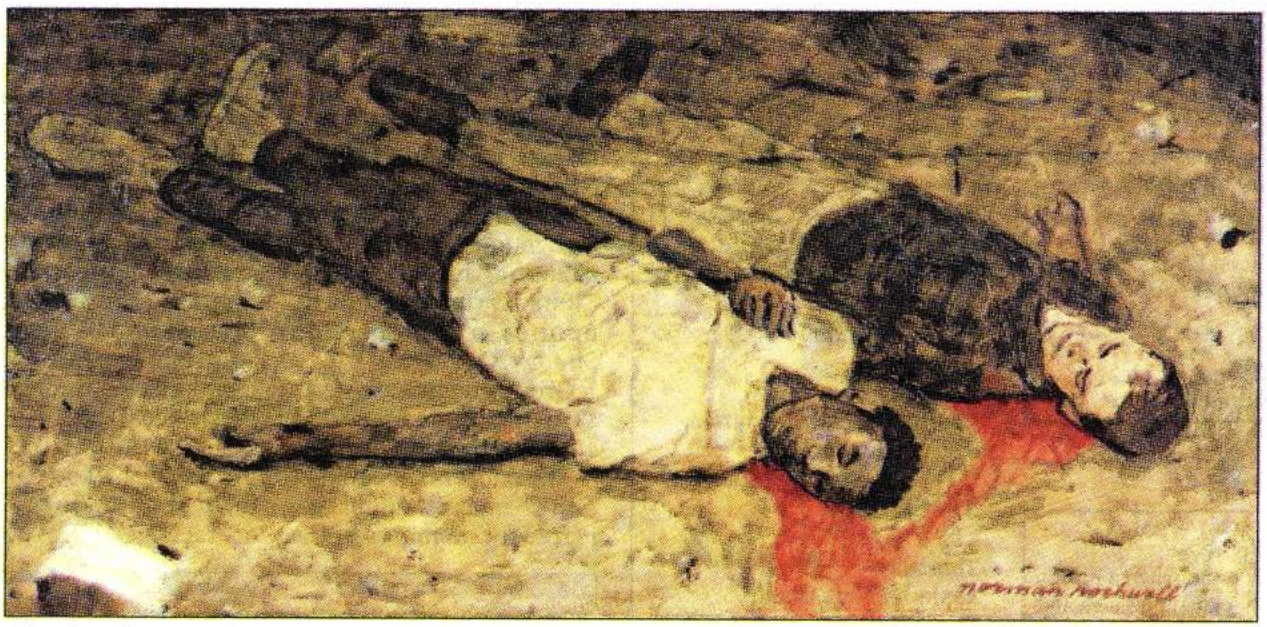
The show, which runs through the end of 2019, illuminates Rockwell's periphery and the milieu in which he worked. John Falter's wide-angle covers for the Saturday Evening Post influenced Rockwell's mid-career working style. Falter's busy scenes are easily identified by the inclusion of a balding self-portrait. Or take Rockwell's mentor J.C. Leydendecker, 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,

See EXHIBIT, A5

TO GO

What: "Norman Rockwell & His Contemporaries: The Fabulous Forties to Sensational Sixties."
When: May 23 through Dec. 27. Open Thursday-Sunday, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Also open Monday, May 27, for Memorial Day. Self-guided audio tour available all day; guided tour Fridays at 3 p.m.
Where: National Museum of American Illustration, Vernon Court, 492 Bellevue Ave., Newport.
Admission: $20, $18 seniors and military, $14 students, $10 children ages 5-12.
Information: (401) 851-8949, americanillustration.org.



"Blood Brothers: Study," Norman Rockwell, 1968, oil on board. [NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ILLUSTRATION IMAGE]

EXHIBIT

From Page A3

makes for strange reminiscing amid recent tariffs and trade wars.

Concurrent with Rockwell's status as a household name was the rise of abstract expressionist painting, 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 juxtaposition 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, returning 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 tomatoes and slurs. The painting is one of Rockwell's most conscious, its composition orbiting the cruel vocabulary at its center. But its deployment in this case was strategic, "aimed at arousing 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, wanting 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 creatives operate in the same register today. Rockwell and his contemporaries reveal much about what Americans wanted — and likely still want — reflected back at them.

Alexander Castro is an independent journalist covering the arts scene in and around Rhode Island. Follow him on Twitter at @OhNoCastro.