Norman Rockwell’s America: THE ART OF THE COMMONPLACE from the National Museum of American Illustration*

By Melville Holmes and Kathryn Bregdon

Norman Rockwell
“Bridge Game” - The Bid
1948, oil on canvas
46 1/2” x 38 1/2”, signed lower left
The Saturday Evening Post May 15, 1948 cover

This large painting is remarkable for the way Rockwell set up a birds-eye view of a plausible real bridge game, where the woman scratching her head, with likely the winning hand, puzzles over what card to lead.
When we speak of "Norman Rockwell's America" what exactly do we mean? Many illustrators have depicted American scenes but what is it about Rockwell's vignettes of American life that made his the most widely known, beloved and so iconic? With twenty-nine original paintings and drawings, the official government posters of the Four Freedoms, and all 322 Saturday Evening Post covers, the current exhibition at the Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture (MAC) offers visitors the opportunity to reflect on these questions and others.

The career of artist-illustrator Norman Rockwell spanned six decades and encompassed both World Wars, the Great Depression, the Civil Rights era, technological developments from the horse and buggy to men walking on the moon, and the drastic societal-cultural upheavals of the 1960s. Rockwell remained a traditionalist, a pictorial storyteller and representational-realist during the advance of modernism. Leading intellectuals were declaring his kind of work obsolete. Abstract art, epitomized by Jackson Pollock's drip canvases, was art's true future they said.

"The story of my life is, really, the story of my pictures and how I made them. Because, in one way or another, everything I have ever seen or done has gone into my pictures."

"Commonplace never becomes tiresome. It is we who become tired when we cease to be curious and appreciative ... we find that it is not a new scene which is needed, but a new viewpoint."

- Norman Rockwell

"You have to put Rockwell down, down below the rank of a minor artist. He chose not to be serious."

- Clement Greenberg, art critic and leading promoter of Abstract Expressionism

Norman Rockwell (1894-1978)
"The Doughboy and His Admirers"
1919, oil on canvas
24 1/2” x 21 1/2”, signed lower left.
The Saturday Evening Post, February 22, 1919 cover

The artist's mastery of drawing: tonal value, color, and detail are strikingly evident, down to the softened fuzzy edge on the red sweater.

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Rockwell always called himself an illustrator. To become a great illustrator like his hero Howard Pyle was his ambition from an early age. He dropped out of high school to attend art school. When he entered the Art Students League in 1911 there was no distinction between an artist and an illustrator; whether producing paintings in their own right or for print, all received the same, rigorous classical training in drawing, especially the human figure, under the eminent anatomist George Bridgman. “I entered Bridgman’s class raw; I came out browned to a turn.” In other words, Rockwell knew the anatomical structure and dynamics of the human body. Drawing had become second nature, a foundation that lies behind his exceptional ability to portray the unending variety of human character.

In 1916 he began doing covers for The Saturday Evening Post, but during a period of self-doubt in the early ‘20s, the specter of Modern Art shadowed him. He went to Paris to try getting on board with the new trends and bought some Picassos to bring home for inspiration. When the Post refused his new-style cover ideas, Rockwell decided to continue what he was good at: portraying the “common man,” with humor and good will, in the often overlooked circumstances of everyday life. The issue behind his temporary identity crisis can be put another way: modernism and illustration don’t mix.
Rockwell may have had the last laugh. His Post cover for January 13, 1962 shows a conservatively dressed man in a gray suit, with his back to the viewer, who is facing a Pollock-like drip canvas. Its telling title, *The Connoisseur*, was not chosen by Rockwell. (His titles were always applied by others). But he was really after art that spoke directly to people, bypassing the need of some middleman or critic to explain what the artist was doing.

The even bigger laugh may be owed to the swing of the proverbial pendulum at the turn of the 21st century. From 1999 to 2002 a landmark exhibition of the works of Norman Rockwell traveled to seven museums across the United States, including the Guggenheim in New York. Rockwell at the modernist Guggenheim? The sign of a real turning point came with the 1999 publication of the exhibition’s catalogue, *Norman Rockwell: Pictures for the American People*, which contained a set of very thoughtful essays. Reading them led me to realize that there is more to this artist, this man, than I ever imagined.

But there is an odd, almost existential problem with Norman Rockwell. He has long been a fashionable target to dismiss, minimize, or fault in some way. Finally we may once again call him an artist, but still not a *great* one.
A great illustrator, yes, but the America he painted wasn’t real, they say. An episode from 2005 in the PBS television discussion program *Think Tank* asked the question, “Was Norman Rockwell a Great Artist?” Anne Knutson, an art historian and one of the panelists, was guest curator for the traveling Rockwell exhibition at the High Museum in Atlanta. Asked how she happened to get involved with the Rockwell project, she admitted to some initial hesitation.

“You know, my undergraduate, graduate history classes — ” she said, “— Rockwell is introduced to be dismissed. And of course, that’s very typical, because there is no content behind this kind of thing. You’re not shown his images. His name is up here: “Sentimentalism” — and just dismissed. But, once I got into the project, and once I saw the paintings, I was completely transformed, and all those preconceptions shattered.”

Seeing his real paintings does make a difference. His work remains largely known through printed or digital reproductions. Rockwell didn’t paint to show in art galleries for sale but for publication. But his oil paintings really are spectacular and larger than might be expected if one only saw the images in magazines.

But was Norman Rockwell’s the “real” America, as some continue to contest? Rockwell eschewed the dark and seamy sides of life. His pictures are all carefully staged. Likening his process to motion picture making, he was the author-screenwriter, set designer, casting director, costume designer, prop master, and director. (It is not always recognized that to work for the *Post* one had to adapt to its conservative editorial policies. By 1963 he left and started doing covers and illustrations for *Look*, which gave him more freedom to address societal issues he found important.)
His insistence on authenticity in his productions cannot be denied. For Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* he had gone to Hannibal, Missouri but ran into difficulty finding clothing with the right wear and tear for his models. "You can't buy a new straw hat and make it look old by rubbing dirt into it. I'd tried that; it doesn't work. A hat has to be worn in the sun and sweated in and sat on and rained on. Then it'll be old. And look it."

Near desperation he happened upon "...a man walking along the road wearing a straw hat in a beautiful state of decay — sun-bleached, ragged — and trousers patched and stained and tattered and boots down at the heel and out at the toes. I stopped the car. I was desperate. 'Will you sell me that hat?'" 4

Rockwell's was the first artist's name I heard and his *Post* covers the first art I saw in color. I call my early childhood in the '50s my "Norman Rockwell's America" period because the human types he illustrated were just like those around me: the family doctor (when they still made house calls), the nurse-secretary with her white uniform and nurse's cap, the corner grocer (to whom my mother gave the list and he'd climb a ladder to get the Post Toasties down from the high shelf), the garage mechanics, the friendly policeman who let me sit in his car, the old spinster school teacher ... there was then what seemed a stable order to the world.
In Norman Rockwell’s America there was a continuity with the past. Looking through old Post covers, there are threads of human traits, interactions, and little predicaments that one can recognize and relate to. And there were shared ideals. Rockwell did a lot of illustrations for the Boy Scouts (his first steady job was art editor for Boy’s Life magazine). The Scouts’ Law stated, “A scout is trusty, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent.” When I was a Boy Scout I was happy to go along with these ideals, except when the reality of human nature began to spoil it ... like my Scoutmaster’s son who was an incorrigible cutup. Another scout stole my grandfather’s U.S Marine Corps jackknife and pretended to help me look for it.

Rockwell’s America was not a denial of reality but a choice of the good, the true, and the noble. I’m reminded of the line from Robert Duvall’s character in Secondhand Lions, “Sometimes, the things that may or may not be true are the things that a man needs to believe in the most: That people are basically good. That honor, courage, and virtue mean everything. That power and money, money and power mean nothin’. That Good always triumphs over Evil. And I want you to remember this, that love — true love never dies. ... Doesn’t matter if they’re true or not, you see. A man should believe in those things because those are the things worth believin’ in.”

Endnotes
2. Ibid p. 89
3. Abigail Rockwell, personal communication.
4. My Adventures as an Illustrator pp. 336-7