WINCHESTER — Exhibits of the realistic and colorful artwork created by magazine illustrators are always popular at the Museum of the Shenandoah Valley.

In recent years, the MSV has showcased the works of master illustrators Mort Kunstler and Maxfield Parrish to great success.

But scheduling an exhibit of the works of Norman Rockwell — probably the best-known name in American illustration — took a bit longer.
“We had been looking for a Rockwell exhibit for a long time,” said Nancy Huth, the museum’s Deputy Director of Arts and Education. “We felt a Rockwell exhibit would really appeal to our guests.”

The MSV finally found the right exhibit, one that features the 323 covers Rockwell drew for The Saturday Evening Post — from his first on May 20, 1916, of “Boy with a Baby Carriage” to his final cover on Dec. 14, 1963, of President John F. Kennedy.


Looking at the magazine covers, which are displayed in chronological order, will provide museum visitors a walking timeline through such pivotal eras in U.S. history as the Depression and World War II.

“It’s a little glimpse into history,” Huth said.

Also included in “Norman Rockwell’s America” are more than 25 original paintings, studies and drawings that provide insight into the artist’s creative process. Twelve of his original paintings are displayed alongside vintage Saturday Evening Post covers bearing the same image.

The exhibit also displays the posters from Rockwell’s popular 1943 series on the Four Freedoms (Freedom of Speech, Freedom of Worship, Freedom from Want, Freedom from Fear). Alongside these posters is a video compilation of photographs created by the For Freedoms group that reimagines Rockwell’s scenes as if they actually reflected the diversity of America’s population today.
First published in 1821, The Saturday Evening Post is one of the country’s oldest magazine and is still published six times a year by a nonprofit society. In the 1920s, when Rockwell was first hired at age 22, the weekly magazine had a circulation of 3 million subscribers, Huth said. It published articles on current events, human interest pieces, humor, poetry, cartoons and fiction by well-known writers. Landing a cover spot would have been a great achievement for a young illustrator. Rockwell was paid $75 for that first cover.

“It appealed to the mid-section of the American public,” Huth said of the magazine. “Certainly people in Virginia and the Valley would have subscribed to The Saturday Evening Post.”

The cover art didn’t need to reflect the actual content inside each issue of the magazine, so initially Rockwell was free to explore his own themes and to share his view of life in small-town America. Even today, people often say something is “Rockwellian” if they’re searching for a word to describe a scene or situation that evokes an idealized history.
Rockwell worked hard to perfect his feel-good, realistic style, Huth said. It wasn’t unusual for him to gather 75 to 80 photographs and create several charcoal drawings and at least one color sketch before starting the oil painting that would ultimately become the cover.

“He would do tons of preparation so that when he sat down to paint it went relatively efficiently,” Huth said. “If it went really well a cover could take a week and if it didn’t go well it could take a month.”

For models, Rockwell used kids in the neighborhood, including his own children. “He used the same kids over and over again,” Huth said. “He didn’t care for professional models, so he often used faces he knew.”

Working on a freelance basis for The Saturday Evening Post, Rockwell managed to make a good living by his craft. But by the early 1960s, the magazine’s editors increasingly wanted portraits of famous Americans for the cover rather than the touching, often witty, pictures of everyday workers and children that Rockwell liked to paint.

Rockwell was changing as well. As he increasingly became interested in civil rights, space exploration, poverty and other issues of national concern, he wanted more creative freedom. He left The Saturday Evening Post and for the next 10 years created covers for Look magazine.
The Museum of the Shenandoah Valley is offering a couple of educational programs for adults to wan to learn more about “Norman Rockwell’s America.”

- A lunch and learn virtual session from noon to 1 p.m. March 18 will delve into Norman Rockwell’s career and the Golden Age of American Illustration with Sara Bliss Cohen of the National Museum of American Illustration (NMAI) as she discusses the NMAI and its role in bringing many Golden Age illustrators to prominence.

Pay what you can. Register by March 17; register online at www.theMSV.org. After registering, you will receive an email confirmation with the Zoom link for the program.

- A virtual happy hour pairs a look at works in the exhibition Norman Rockwell’s America with a vodka martini. Led by with MSV Deputy Director of Arts and Education Nancy Huth. 5:30 to 6:30 p.m. April 6.

Pay what you can. Register by April 5. You will receive an email with a Zoom link before the program date. Register online at www.theMSV.org; contact smeyer@themsv.org or 540-662-1473 ext. 226 with questions.

The MSV is located at 901 Amherst St. in Winchester. The galleries are open year-round Tuesday through Sunday from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. (10 a.m. to 5 p.m. April through December). Admission is $15 for adults and $10 for seniors and youth ages 13 to 18. General admission is always free to youth ages 12 and under and to MSV members. Admission is free to all every Wednesday thanks to corporate partner Howard Shockey & Sons, Inc.,. For more information, see www.theMSV.org or call 540-662-1473, ext. 235.

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