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Kailynn Bannon | The Southern Newspaper

Polk Museum of Art's newest exhibit, "Rockwell/Wyeth: Icons of Americana" is now open.

Kailynn Bannon

The Southern Editor

Not every student gets to see world-renowned paintings at their Smithsonian-affiliate college museum – in Lakeland, they do. The Polk Museum of Art (PMoA) at Florida Southern College is about to unveil their biggest exhibit yet, featuring two of America's biggest illustrators.

“Rockwell/Wyeth: Icons of Americana” opens Jan. 27, featuring 40 original paintings from Norman Rockwell and N.C. Wyeth. The exhibition has been three years in the making and is exclusive to the PMoA.

The entire first floor will be taken over by both artists' paintings, as well as Rockwell's “Four Freedoms” posters and all 321 “Saturday Evening Post” covers that he contributed to between 1916 and 1963. Additionally, ephemera (typically paper material meant to be consumed temporarily, like a newspaper or event poster) will be on display, such as original books and magazines that showcase the works of both artists.

Dr. Alex Rich, the chief curator of the PMoA, is thrilled to house an exhibit that features such renowned artists. The goal of this exhibition is for people to come and learn about these pieces and the artists, while discovering other artwork along the way.

“I think any museum dreams of hosting exhibitions with recognizable names,” Rich said.

As the chair of the Art History and Museum Studies department at FSC, which is housed in the museum, Rich is passionate about students having the opportunity to learn about these artists and have informed discussions about them.

Rich believes that this exhibition will bring in the museum's largest audience ever, and he wants students to be a part of that crowd. He knows that students will be able to learn from these pieces, whether they major in art, science, business, English or communications.

One of the struggles of being an academic museum is figuring out how to get students through the doors. Rich thinks that the familiarity of these names will help generate interest and appreciation for the school's museum.

“Many students are invested in the arts or just like the idea of taking a moment to escape and find refuge in the space of a museum, which I hope more and more students are able to do,” Rich said.

FSC students have free access to the only Smithsonian Affiliate Fine Art Museum in Central Florida, just a short walk from the main campus. Rich encourages students to utilize this as much as possible by visiting the museum and joining their Museum Ambassadors Program.

By building mutually beneficial relationships with other museums, PMoA got the amazing offer to partner with the National Museum of American Illustration. While most exhibitions are traveling installations, this one is completely unique to PMoA.

Both artists' works focused on the history of America, from World War II to The Great Depression. Their illustrations were used for advertising purposes – reaching mass audiences through books, newspapers, magazines, posters and more.

Wyeth was best known for his work that covered the fronts of adventure novels, most famously Tom Sawyer and Treasure Island. He would illustrate the mental image of America that the authors created through their words.

“We wanted to choose an array of beautiful paintings, exciting paintings, paintings whose stories take a stack to a moment of the American past that is both idealized and yet also rather nostalgic for many people,” Rich said. “One of things I think we really want to emphasize is that this is still all an idealized version of America.”

Rich believes that there is a lot to learn about history from these artists, but that everything must be taken with a grain of salt considering who was being catered to in the 20th century. Most of the subjects of Rockwell and Wyeth's works were white protagonists because many minorities were not marketed towards back in their day.

“It’s important as people visit this exhibition ... that this is not a truthful realistic rendering of everyone’s version of the 20th century in America,” Rich said. “But that’s also important because that’s a lens through which to see the way that some people experienced the world or saw the world. So these artworks are part of the culture from which they were made.”

Many considered their work to not be high art, since it was created to sell a product or cause and not made specifically for museums and galleries. PMoA believes that their art belongs in museums regardless of their original intentions. Illustrators were held at a lower level of esteem at the time, but that’s how they gained their fame.

“[The artwork] absolutely belongs in the world of a museum now, because there’s no doubt that Norman Rockwell and N.C. Wyeth were fine artists; we can see that by evidence of how wonderfully they had applied their creative talents as painters,” Rich said.

Creating an exhibition this immense hasn’t been easy. Everyone that works with the museum had to put in lots of legwork to make this happen. They have to sign contracts, plan for when the works will arrive, figure out how they’re being shipped, prepare physical and promotional materials, create the text and space for the show, get merchandise in the store and much more. It’s a stressful process, but they know the end result is worth it.

“There’s a lot of teamwork that goes into this ... the exhibition that people see in our museums is wonderful in that they get to experience the end result of a really long and laborious, but thankfully very gratifying process in the end,” Rich said.

PMoA opened to the public in 1966, moving to its current location on Lake Morton in 1988. It was originally built to house approximately 500 collection objects. They now have over 3,000 pieces. When they became affiliated with FSC in 2017, they started producing larger exhibits and events, presenting a mix of contemporary and local artists.

After seven years of functioning as both an academic and community museum, the team decided it was time to expand. As the museum grew over 57 years, they wanted to have more space to house events, meetings and even more exhibits.

The construction of the 14,000-additional-square-feet started last May, with the help of several supporters. Long-time museum donors: FSC alumni, the City of Lakeland and Polk county all came together to make this expansion happen. Constructing a museum is not cheap, but the team at PMoA knows it’ll be worth it in the end.

“It was a 30-plus year dream that has finally come to fruition,” Rich said.

The construction is on track to finish this fall. The two-story structure will be contiguous with the original structure, creating a seamless transition between the two buildings. The expansion will also give visitors much more time to spend at the museum.

“Rockwell/Wyeth: Icons of Americana” will run from Jan. 27 to May 26 of this year. The exhibit will be open for museum members the night before the grand opening. Students can attend this opening for free, whether they are members or not.

“It’s a really exciting time for the museum,” Rich said.

