‘Icons of Americana’ Exhibit Opens Saturday at the Polk Museum of Art

Paintings by beloved 20th-century illustrators Norman Rockwell and N.C. Wyeth will be on display through May 26.

By Kimberly C. Moore  January 23, 2024


Two of America’s most beloved 20th-century illustrators are being celebrated in a new exhibit at the Polk Museum of Art at Florida Southern College, opening to the public on Saturday.
“Rockwell/Wyeth: Icons of Americana” features 40 original paintings by Norman Rockwell and N.C. Wyeth, as well as an installation of all 321 covers of The Saturday Evening Post illustrated by Rockwell. The large-scale exhibition, exclusive to the Polk Museum, occupies the main first-floor galleries.

“I’m thrilled to introduce you to our major blockbuster new exhibition,” said Alex Rich, the museum’s executive director and chief curator. “The show has been five years in the making and is formed in partnership with the National Museum of American Illustration. A total of 365 works is our largest show ever in the history of the museum.”

Wyeth and Rockwell had their own distinctive styles, both of which captured the imaginations of readers. Wyeth is best known as a prolific book illustrator, who invigorated the pages of Scribner Classics like “Treasure Island” and “Robin Hood.”
Rockwell is synonymous with The Saturday Evening Post and the cover illustrations he produced for it between 1916 and 1963 — art that sought simultaneously to sell magazines and to reflect shifting American interests and values across several decades.

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— ALEX RICH, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AND CHIEF CURATOR OF THE POLK MUSEUM OF ART

Posters of Rockwell’s “Four Freedoms” are on display, showing “Freedom of Speech,” “Freedom of Worship,” “Freedom from Want” and “Freedom from Fear.”
“So many of our shared visions of a seemingly simpler, not-too-distant American past — however idealized they might be — have been shaped through the prism of Rockwell and Wyeth’s illustrations,” Rich said.
“While Rockwell and Wyeth helped define the visual culture we associate popularly with America at its most ‘American,’ their paintings did not match the lived realities of” many Americans living in those decades.

As Rockwell grew older, his work began to tackle those realities, including a painting of Ruby Bridges walking to school among federal marshals, with the n-word scrawled on the wall behind her. “The Problem We All Live With” appeared as an illustration in 1964 for LOOK Magazine.

In a sneak peek of the exhibit for LkldNow, Rich pointed out that both men were illustrating for a particular audience, mainly middle and upper-class Americans. The exhibit has two depictions of minorities, including a Black shoeshine man.

Despite their revered status today — and in their own day by the public at large — Rich said Rockwell and Wyeth weren’t held in as high regard as other fine artists of the time because of the commercial nature of their work. But, he said, the exhibition pulls back the curtains on Rockwell and Wyeth’s commercial illustration process.
“We’re expecting a lot of people who love the name Rockwell, who love the name Wyeth — some may know Rockwell better, some may remember Wyeth better from their childhoods — to discover the artists or rediscover them in new ways,” Rich said, standing among the artwork. “While most people experienced Rockwell and Wyeth’s work in print — in magazines or in books or in advertisements — all of their commissioned commercial work began as full-scale paintings, like those around me in our two main galleries here at the museum.”

The Rockwell and Wyeth exhibit runs from Jan. 27 to May 26.
Also on display as people enter the museum are three Auguste Rodin sculptures, on loan for two years.

“It’s a really special time to come visit the museum because not only do you get to see Rockwell and Wyeth, but also we have three Rodins back on display,” said Rich.

The Rodin sculptures stem from a fall 2022 exhibit called “Rodin: Contemplation in Dreams,” the largest sculpture exhibit in the museum’s history.

Eleven more Rodins will be brought to museum in phases, leading visitors from the 1988 building to the 2024 addition. They will remain at the museum until 2026.

In summer 2023, the museum began construction on an $8 million expansion and renovation project, which will add more than 14,000 sq. ft. of education and exhibition space to the current building, including six new galleries and multi-functional classroom and event spaces.

Visitors who haven’t been to the museum recently will notice a great deal of construction progress. The expansion is expected to be complete in the fall.

The Polk Museum of Art at Florida Southern College is a not-for-profit academic and community museum open Tuesdays–Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. and Sundays from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m.

The museum is closed on Mondays and major holidays. Admission to the Museum is always free, thanks to the Ting Tsung and Wei Fong Chao Foundation and CORE Wealth Advisors.