

Arts And Antiques

Norman Rockwell's America: A Visual Documentary

By Abby Cronin

Best known for his iconic illustrations of the everyday lives of 20th century Middle Americans, Norman Rockwell's career spanned nearly seventy years and has left us with a legacy of over 4,000 original works. He was born in New York City in 1894, the son of a textile-firm manufacturer. The well-to-do family moved to suburban Westchester Country where Norman grew up. His early passion for drawing led him to study art at the Chase Art School and the Art Students League in New York before setting up his first studio in New Rochelle, New York in 1915. He gained his first commission to illustrate Christmas cards at the tender age of 16 and by 1912 even more commissions came his way. He did them for children's books and in 1913 became art editor for *Boys' Life*, published by the Boy Scouts of America. But Rockwell knew that the cover of *The Saturday Evening Post* was the greatest window in America for an illustrator: "If you did a cover for the *Post* you had arrived." The *Post* was the most beloved magazine in America during the 1920's and 30's and its circulation peaked at 6 million in 1960. It was pushed through



Boy With Baby Carriage, 1916 SEP

letterboxes or tossed on the front porches of millions of households across the country every week. Rockwell's big break came in 1916 when G H Lorimer, the *Post's* editor, commissioned him, a mere 22 year old, to paint a cover. 'Boy With Baby Carriage' (pictured), a comic narrative, published on May 16, 1916. Thus began Rockwell's forty-seven year association with the *Post* and his recognition as a talented artist.

Rockwell's subject matter highlighted and punctuated mainstream cultural and social mores as they changed throughout 20th century America. Familiar situations are captured in his portrayal of tense conversations at a breakfast table, bridge games and barbershop quartets (pictured: *Breakfast Table-Political Argument*, 1948 & *Barbershop Quartet*, 1936). He explored themes such as small embarrassments, discomforts, humiliations, gossiping neighbours, youth and ageing, growing up and much-loved domestic pets. Symbols of American culture were reinforced by Rockwell's imagery. Timeless themes such as old-fashioned patriotism, the Boy Scouts, public holidays and portraits of U.S. Presidents suited The *Post's* vision of a unifying Americanism. Rockwell aided the War effort in the 1940s with his well known paintings of Roosevelt's Four Freedoms which toured the country and raised well over a million dollars in sales of war bonds. In addition to Rockwell's 322 *Saturday Evening Post* covers, he completed illustrations for more than 40 books, several covers for *Look* and other magazines, Boy Scout calendars, advertise-ments, postage stamps, murals and

greeting cards. And that's not counting what went up in flames when a fire destroyed numerous works in his Arlington, Vermont studio in 1943.

Despite his popularity with the wider public, Rockwell's work was not well regarded by the art establishment during his lifetime. Critics felt his illustrations were too nostalgic, overly-affectionate and too patriotic. While his storytelling moved millions who understood and identified with the subject matter, his style of portraying stories through narrative and figurative illustration was felt by intellectuals to be simplistic and innocent. Did such a 'Rockwellian' small-town world really exist? Was Rockwell's view merely the 'American Dream' – pictures of a naïve world? Some art historians viewed his work as excessively sentimental and kitsch. They even questioned his artistic techniques and methods. Was it legitimate to use photography to pose and



Breakfast Table-Political Argument, 1948



Barbershop Quartet, 1936, SEP

record events, which Rockwell routinely did, before transferring them to canvas? Unashamedly, Rockwell explained that he was “The kid with the camera eye”.

From the 1930s he engaged photographers to record carefully conceived scenes that he imagined in his mind's eye. A recent publication, *Norman Rockwell: Behind the Camera*, by Ron Schick, 2009, explores Rockwell's photographic techniques. And in his book, *How I Make a Picture*, 1949, Rockwell referred to his works as ‘pictures’. David Kamp, writing in *Vanity Fair* (11.2009) explains the process Rockwell used.

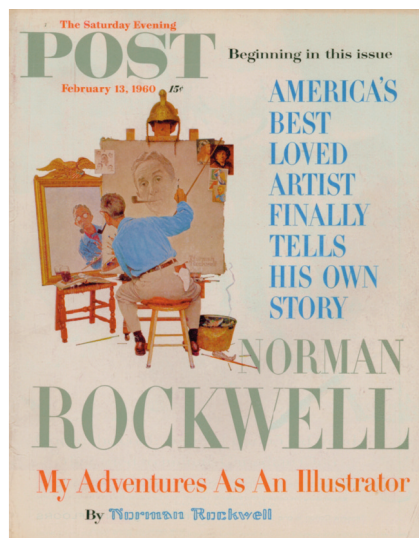
First came the brainstorming and a rough pencil sketch, then casting of the models and the hiring of costumes and props...coaxing the right poses out of the models.....the composition of a fully detailed charcoal sketch...then a painted color sketch....then, and only then, the final painting.

During the past twenty years his work has been studied closely and reassessed. Today Rockwell is regarded as an accomplished painter-illustrator who spent his whole life sketching, drawing and observing the daily lives and habits of people he knew in the New England communities where he lived. Finally appreciated, Rockwell has earned a place in the history of Western art and ‘Rockwellian’ is no longer a term of abuse. As pictures they may be familiar – tapping into our personal memories and experiences, but they also serve as reminders of Rockwell's ability to observe and record views of tolerance in fraught social situations. His apolitical stance gradually shifted to confront and record a changing American social and political landscape. New Deal reforms, World War II, the rise of national identity, civil-rights movement and United Nations became core themes. In post-war America, Rockwell brought to life informative and penetrating views of acute political problems endemic in American society, such as *The Problem We All Live With*,



The Problem We All Live With, 1964, Look Magazine Study

1964 (pictured). This remarkable image served as a warning sign-post. He is telling us we must not allow such treatment of our fellow citizens.



Triple Self-Portrait, 1960, SEP

There is no question that Rockwell understood and was heavily influenced by the Old Masters. His command of composition, design, perspective and use of light demonstrate a sophisticated grasp of artistic skills. This is particularly evident in his pictorial autobiography, *Triple Self-Portrait*, 1960 (pictured). We can actually see three self-portraits. He is working with multiple images, each with a different attitude. His image on the easel shows an outgoing, friendly and confident face; the figure on the stool is somewhat awkward and uncertain, while the serious face in the mirror has his eyes obscured by light on his glasses. Four Old Master self-portraits by Rembrandt, van Gogh, Dürer and Picasso are attached to the top right corner of his canvas and sketches of Rockwell's face are tacked to the top left. A caricature of the American eagle is perched on the mirror, a Paris fireman's helmet sits at the top of the canvas and smoke is billowing from the trash can. Rockwell is playing a game, in effect asking the viewer to construct his self-portrait from the images. Read carefully, this is truly an autobiographical self-portrait.

Rockwell's current status has soared to new heights – he is back in vogue. *New Yorker* art critic, Peter Schjeldhal, sees Norman Rockwell as “... a visual storyteller of genius...a story-maker, a bard. He didn't illustrate Middle America. He invented Middle America.” (*The New Yorker*, 22.11.1999) I agree, and in my view,

Norman Rockwell was a New England scribe with brushes. He recorded a nearly-vanished idealised America. His illustrations and art are no longer viewed as having portrayed American culture in a populist manner. Instead, they convey an intrinsic optimism. Fortunately for us, Rockwell himself established a trust in 1973, placing his works in the custody of the Norman Rockwell Museum in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, where he lived with his family from 1953 until his death in 1978. The museum is open to the public and attracts many visitors. More recently major retrospective exhibitions of his work have travelled across the United States including one at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City in 2001. And major Hollywood filmmakers, Stephen Spielberg and George Lucas have loaned their personal collections of Rockwell's art to the Smithsonian American Art Museum where the exhibition, ‘*Telling Stories: Norman Rockwell from the Collections of George Lucas and Steven Spielberg*’, opened on 4th July 2010 through to January 2nd 2011. Of even more significance is the museum dedicated to the work of American illustrators, the National Museum of American Illustration (NMAI) which opened in Newport, Rhode Island in July 2000. It is the creation of Judy Goffman Cutler and Laurence Cutler, life-long art collectors. The museum's rich archive of major illustrators includes an important collection of Rockwell's work. The Cutlers are bringing a selection of Norman Rockwell's art, including 322 vintage *Saturday Evening Post* covers together with illustrations for advertisements, magazines and books, across the Atlantic for the first time. Visitors to the Dulwich Picture Gallery will be able to enjoy the exhibition of *Norman Rockwell's America*, when it is open to the public on 15th December through to 27th March 2011.

All the images shown come from the National Museum of American Illustration (© 2010 Images by The National Museum of American Illustration, Newport, RI, USA, and the America Illustrators Gallery, NYC. © 2010 Saturday Evening Post covers by SEPS, Curtis Publishing)

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