
Reviews

Norman Rockwell: Illustrating Twentieth-Century America

by Bonnie James

The first comprehensive exhibition of the works of Norman Rockwell (1894-1978), at the Cocoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., was an opportunity to reassess this important American artist. In addition to more than 70 of his oil paintings and all 322 of his illustrations for the covers of the *Saturday Evening Post*, the exhibition included many of Rockwell's preliminary sketches, photographs, color studies, and detailed drawings. The exhibit spanned more than 60 years of Rockwell's career.

It may surprise you to learn that Norman Rockwell was born and raised in New York City, since his paintings, especially the *Saturday Evening Post* covers, conjure up a simpler, more innocent lifestyle, usually associated with rural America. In fact, Rockwell, in his autobiography, *My Life as an Illustrator*, reveals that he treasured the Summers he spent as a boy in the country.

Rockwell tells us that his art was aimed to please, perhaps to gently poke fun at people, but never to provoke or confront them:

“... I have always wanted everybody to like my work. ... So I have painted pictures that didn't disturb anybody, that I knew everyone would understand and like. ... Maybe (to be completely honest), the fact that this type of picture pays well has something to do with it too.

“I sometimes think that all this is a weakness. I know I'm not satisfied with my work. At times it seems shallow, incomplete. But that keeps me working. If I thought I was perfect or even close to it I'd probably pawn my brushes and quit.”

While this brutally honest self-description accurately characterizes some of Rockwell's work—especially that with which most of us are familiar through his many *Saturday Evening Post* covers, it is perhaps too self-effacing, because Rockwell, as a political cartoonist, in the tradition of the social satire of Goya or Daumier, was a genius. Much of what seems at first glance to be, at least to some sensibilities, more than a bit too sickly-sweet—all those gawky, rosy-cheeked adolescents on first dates, with beaming elders

looking on, and so forth—there is, in fact, more than meets the eye. We will look at a few of Rockwell's *Post* covers, to explore this further.

Beyond these well-known works, the most interesting thing to me, was the definitive shift which occurred in Rockwell's work after he left the *Post* in 1963, and began painting for *Look* magazine. America was then entering a period of tremendous political and social upheaval: This was the year of the Cuban Missile Crisis; the Civil Rights movement had placed the issue of justice and equality for all men before the nation's collective conscience. One could no longer pretend that the country resembled the innocent world portrayed in Rockwell's depiction of President Franklin Roosevelt's “Four Freedoms.” The war was no longer “over there,” it was on the streets, on the buses, at the lunch counters of America's towns and cities. In the ten years that Rockwell worked for *Look*, he succeeded in producing a number of paintings which surpassed any of his earlier works in their capacity to elevate the mind of the viewer to that state which is described by the poet Shelley as open to “receiving profound and impassioned conceptions respecting man and nature.” Until this period, from his first *Post* cover in 1916, Rockwell was a fine illustrator, with a sharp sense of humor and a piercing insight into character. His subjects tug at your emotions, make you smile, laugh, or even cry, but rarely do they confront you in a way that forces you to change your axiomatic way of thinking, and become a more noble person—until the 1960s, as we shall see.

The ‘Four Freedoms’

Let's begin by looking at one of Rockwell's famous depictions of President Roosevelt's Four Freedoms. In January 1941, as Europe was falling to Hitler, FDR addressed the Congress, and spoke of a “moment unprecedented in the history of the Union.” The Four Freedoms, he said, were “no vision of a distant millennium,” but “a definite basis for a kind of world attainable in our time and generation.” Rockwell did a painting for each of the Four Freedoms: Freedom from

FIGURE 1

“Freedom from Fear,” 1943



Want, and from Fear; Freedom of Speech, and of Worship. “Freedom from Fear” (Figure 1) is characteristic of his work during the war. While Roosevelt was thinking in universal terms about freeing the world from the danger of war, through a “worldwide reduction of armaments,” to end “aggression,” Rockwell takes this idea, and brings it home.

Here we see a young family: Mother is tucking the two children into bed, as Father looks on. Various homely objects are strewn about: a doll, some clothing, etc. Although the mother looks serene, as the children fall asleep, Father has an expression of concern on his face. We notice that he is holding his reading glasses and a newspaper in his left hand. The headline, faint, has the words “BOMBINGS KI. . . . HORROR HIT. . . .” The angle of the newspaper is parallel to a dark shadow that falls in a sharp diagonal across the wall above the children’s heads. This sharp angle is repeated several times throughout the painting: on the stair rail, the fold of the bedcovers, and so forth. It tells us that all is not right in the world, as we might have thought at first glance, and that, although these children are safe—free from fear—at the moment, dark shadows are falling on children somewhere else. As we take all this in, suddenly the doll on the floor, which looked so innocent a moment ago, takes on the

FIGURE 2

“Triple Self-Portrait,” 1960



appearance of a dead child. This is the subtle power of Rockwell’s art.

Rockwell experiences an epiphany beginning around 1960; as noted, he will leave his decades-long association with the *Saturday Evening Post* behind, and begin to take up subjects which bring about a revolution in his work.

A transitional work, which may indicate the shift that is already under way, is Rockwell’s famously humorous “Triple Self-Portrait” of 1960 (Figure 2). His image is reflected in a mirror, which suggests, with its large American eagle at the top, a *Saturday Evening Post* cover. But Rockwell’s eyes, as reflected in the mirror, are hidden, because of the way the light reflects off the lenses of his glasses. If, as Leonardo da Vinci tells us, the eyes are the windows to the soul, then we can only see Rockwell’s soul through the eyes that peer out at us, bemusedly, from the self-portrait he has sketched on his easel. This then is the “real” Norman Rockwell—the artist, and subject of his art. He is in good company: pinned to the easel are self-portraits of Dürer and Rembrandt, as well as Picasso and Van Gogh. At the top of the easel sits a gold helmet, of the type that Rembrandt used in his portraits.

FIGURE 3
"The Problem
We All Live
With," 1964



FIGURE 4
"New Kids in the
Neighborhood,"
1967



The Civil Rights Movement

In January 1964, less than two months after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, Rockwell painted "The Problems We All Live With" (Figure 3), perhaps one his his most successful works. The huge March on Washington had taken place the previous August; and President Lyndon

Johnson would sign the Civil Rights Act of 1964 on July 2. But Rockwell chose to portray an incident that had occurred some three years earlier, on Nov. 14, 1960, during the battle to desegregate the nation's public schools. A six-year-old girl named Ruby Bridges walked through a mob of screaming segregationists in New Orleans, escorted by

U.S. marshals, into the William Frantz Elementary School, to become one of the first African-American children to integrate the public schools in the state of Louisiana.

In this painting, Rockwell has again taken up the question of freedom, this time from a new perspective. The composition focusses on a very small girl; her dark skin contrasts dramatically with the crisp white of her dress and shoes; a small, but jaunty white bow is tied around her pigtail. She walks in step with the marshals, who protect her from the mob. The calm of the scene depicted is in sharp contrast to the fury of the *vox populi*; we cannot see the mob directly, but they are visible through the evidence of their hatred: On the wall are scrawled the words “NIGGER” and “KKK”; tomatoes have been thrown at the child, and have splattered on the wall behind her. The marshals, who tower over her, are identified by the armbands they wear, while their heads are cut off by the top edge of the picture. Everything is concentrated on the expression of the little girl, who seems somewhat bewildered, but determined, as she clutches her books and pencils in her left hand, the accoutrements of her education, which is, after all, what all the fuss is about.

Rockwell has chosen to confront us with the brutality and insanity of racism by forcing us to perceive it through the eyes of an innocent child. He will do this again, in a slightly different way in “New Kids in the Neighborhood” (Figure 4), of 1967, by which time local communities were being integrated. Here we see what is obviously the first black family to move into the neighborhood, as the local kids, all white, “check out” the new kids on the block. Their expressions are not hostile, but guarded; their differences are reinforced by the various contrasting details in the picture; for example, the little black girl holds a white cat; the white children are accompanied by a small black dog. Yet, we sense that the kids will work things out, and end up being friends. It’s the “grown-ups,” who are likely to have problems. Rockwell tells us this by excluding them from the scene, except for a neighbor-lady, barely visible, as she peers from behind a curtain, in the house a couple of doors away.

By placing children at the center of his story, Rockwell defuses the tension inherent in the subject matter. He suggests that children, who are the future, will resolve this, by overcoming the ignorance and cruelty of their elders.

In “Southern Justice in Mississippi” (study) (Figure 5), Rockwell takes this polemic to a higher level. This is not the Norman Rockwell most of us are familiar with, but it is clear, in looking back from this powerful depiction of racial injustice, to some of his earlier works, that there is in fact a coherent development. Now, Rockwell, freed from the constraints placed on him by the *Saturday Evening Post*, gives expression to his deepest convictions. In 1964, Rockwell was asked by *Look* magazine to commemorate the deaths of three Civil Rights workers, Michael Schwerner, Andrew and James Chaney, who were murdered in Philadel-

FIGURE 5
“Southern Justice in Mississippi” (study),
1964



phia, Mississippi. They had just arrived there to participate in “Freedom Summer,” which aimed at registering blacks to vote. Two of the men were white, one black.

In Rockwell’s painting, one of the white men lies on the ground, apparently shot dead; another stands, bathed in a bright light, holding in his arms the bloodied black man, who has fallen to his knees. The standing man turns toward the murderers, whom we see only by the shadows they cast, and the sticks they hold. The entire painting is done in sepia tones. Our eyes are drawn to the face of the white man. Although his features are barely sketched, we sense his bewilderment and horror, but also his courage. This tells us that the cause for which these three young men gave their lives will live after them, and be strengthened by their sacrifice.

The Rockwell exhibit is also travelling to the San Diego Museum of Art, the Phoenix Art Museum, the Norman Rockwell Museum at Stockbridge (Massachusetts), and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York.