

American Chronicles:
The Art of

Norman Rockwell



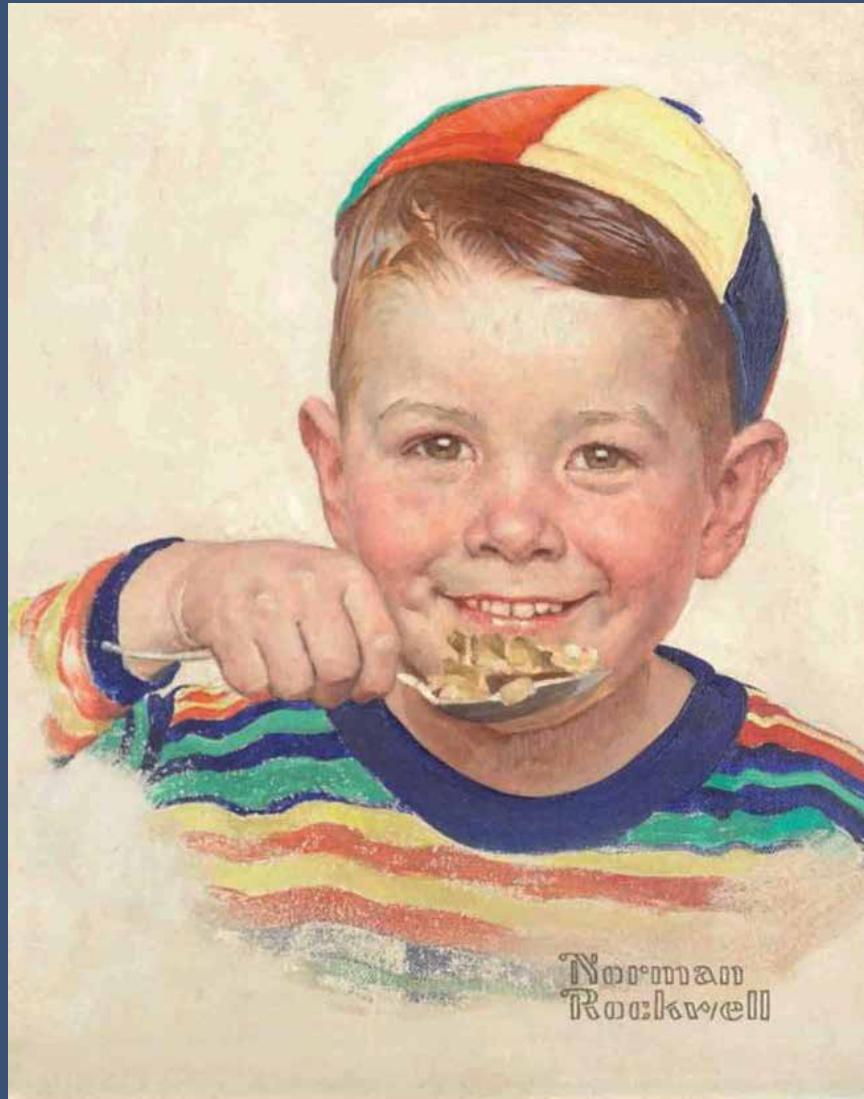


Fig. 1

America's most prominent twentieth-century illustrator, Norman Rockwell (1894–1978) worked within the realm of both aesthetics and commerce. An astute visual storyteller and a masterful painter with a distinct, personal message to convey, he constructed fictional realities that offered a compelling picture of a life to which many Americans aspired. Anxiously awaited and immediately understood, his seamless narratives seemed to assure reader engagement with the many publications that commissioned his work from the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, and *Boys' Life* to *Look*, which featured his most powerful assertions on the social issues of his day. The complexities of artistic production remained hidden to his enthusiasts, who were compelled by his vision and content to enjoy his art in the primary form for which it was intended. What came between the first spark of an idea and a published Rockwell image was anyone's guess, and far more than his public would have ever imagined.

For many Americans, Rockwell's icons of living culture were first experienced in the most unassuming of places, in the comfort of home, or on the train ride at the end of a long day. Created for the covers and pages of our nation's periodicals rather than for the walls of galleries and museums, Rockwell's images were intimately understood by a vast and eager audience who saw the best in themselves reflected in his art and in the stories that he chose to tell.

Beneath it all, Rockwell's hopeful and admiring attitude toward humanity was the hallmark of his work. He loved to paint pictures that conveyed stories about people, their attitudes toward each other, and his feelings about them. In 1943, a *Time* reporter said, "He constantly achieves that compromise between a love of realism and the tendency to idealize, which is one of the most deeply ingrained characteristics of the American people."

In 1977 Rockwell received the Presidential Medal of Freedom for having portrayed "the American scene with unrivalled freshness and clarity," and with "insight, optimism and good humor." In a rapidly changing

world, Rockwell's art had been a reassuring guide for more than six decades, and it continues to resonate today.

American Chronicles: The Art of Norman Rockwell represents fifty-six years in the artist's career and features many iconic works, some formerly in his personal collection, from his 1914 interpretation of American folk hero Daniel Boone securing safe passage for settlers to the American West (fig. 2), to his 1970 report on American tourists and armed Israeli soldiers witnessing a Christmas Eve ceremony at the Basilica of the Nativity in Bethlehem (fig. 3).

We invite visitors to compare their American experience with that portrayed by Rockwell, and to consider how the artist's vision may have inspired their own.



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

Telling Stories in Pictures

"I love to tell stories in pictures," Rockwell said. "For me, the story is the first thing and the last thing." Conceptualization was central for the artist, who called the history of European art into play and employed classical painting methodology to weave contemporary tales inspired by everyday people and places. His richly detailed, large-scale canvases offered far more than was necessary even by the standards of his profession, and each began with a single idea. By his own admission "hard to come by," strong pictorial concepts were the essential underpinnings of his art. From the antics of children, a favored theme of his youth, to the nuanced reflections on human nature that he preferred as a mature artist, each potential scenario was first cemented with a simple, thumbnail sketch. What followed was a carefully orchestrated process of image development that demanded the integration of aesthetic concern and graphic clarity.

A perfectionist, Rockwell went to elaborate lengths to create reference photographs, sometimes as many as one hundred for a major work, that portrayed his concepts exactly. Scouting models and locations,



Fig. 4.1



Fig. 4.2



Fig. 4.3

researching costumes and props, he carefully orchestrated each element of his design to be photographed before putting paint to canvas. (See figures 4.1–4.3.) Staging his scenarios for the camera, the artist instructed his photographers when and what to shoot as he directed a cast of amateur actors. Rockwell produced a wealth of photographs for every new composition, which

he then transferred, in whole or in part, to his final work.

Art Inspired by Art

A storyteller at heart, Rockwell was a closet intellectual who knew and cared about the history and art of painting. Sometimes framed in humor, narratives about the act of creating art and of viewing art were recurring themes in his work.

The artist's self-portrait, *Artist Facing Blank Canvas (The Deadline)* (fig. 5) is a case in point. The blank canvas is a quandary for many artists, and in this 1938 cover for the *Saturday Evening Post*, Rockwell scratches his head in befuddlement with no idea how to begin.



Fig. 5

An ingenious aspect of this work is that Rockwell turned the problem into its own resolution: not knowing what to paint has become the subject of his art. At one and the same time, Rockwell states his concern and involves the viewer in his conundrum, making himself the subject of his own joke. Hiding behind the humor is a statement of some seriousness.

In fact, Rockwell rarely began a painting at the oil-on-canvas stage. By the time his canvas was primed and on the easel, he had completed a fully detailed charcoal drawing that was the same size as the canvas, and was ready to transfer the basic outlines of his composition onto his support. "Meeting deadlines and thinking up ideas are the scourges of an illustrator's life," Rockwell said. "This is not a caricature of myself, I really look like this."

Age of Innocence



A popular theme in twentieth-century magazines, imagery reflecting the carefree idylls of childhood launched Rockwell's career and remained a life-long focus. But in mid-twentieth-century America, childhood and Rockwell's conception of it were changing. The population swell of the baby boom, women's emerging role in the workplace, the cold war, and the proliferation of nuclear weapons forced Americans to see the world and themselves in a different light. As a perennial idealist, Rockwell did not include the worries of the new generation in his work, but he did look more seriously at the subject of youth, depicting adolescents as more complex, dimensional people. Children were seen less at play and more at learning how to grow up, ultimately to face the problems of a modern world and deal with issues that were previously, in Rockwell's words, "swept under the rug."



Fig. 6

One of Rockwell's most evocative images, *Girl at Mirror* (1954, fig. 6) is a poignant reflection on life's transition from childhood to adolescence, a transition that everyone experiences and understands. Youth is not quite left behind for this young lady, whose doll is cast aside but still close at hand. Rockwell commented that he regretted adding the magazine opened to a picture of actress Jane Russell, seen in the girl's lap, for he felt that it dated the painting too specifically. The artist auditioned at least three other models before selecting Mary Whalen for *Girl at Mirror*, who recalled, "there was a little stool I sat on and he told me what to do. He might have made a

few adjustments ...but he was removed—he was behind me somewhere. And he would speak to me. 'Just move your head ...just a little ...yeah ...that's good, that's good,' very, very quietly. ...There was seriousness in that room."

Images for a Changing World



In the 1960s, leaving behind his beloved story-telling scenes, Rockwell threw himself into a new genre—the documentation of social issues. He had always wanted to make a difference, and as a highly marketable illustrator, he had the opportunity to do so. Humor and pathos, traits that made his *Saturday Evening Post* covers successful, were not needed for telling the story of life in 1960s America. The textures and colors once used to weave his lighthearted yarns were replaced by a direct, pared down, reportorial style more appropriate for magazine editorials.

In the years that followed, Rockwell reported on civil rights issues and on the space race, depicting the moon landing before and after it actually happened. The artist's 1963 painting, *The Problem We All Live With* (fig. 7), gently presents an assertion on moral decency. Inspired by young Ruby Bridges's story, his first assignment for *Look* magazine was an illustration of a six-year-old African American schoolgirl being escorted by four U.S. Marshals to her first day at an all-white school in New Orleans.

Ordered to proceed with school desegregation after the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, Louisiana lagged behind until pressure from Federal Judge Skelly Wright forced the school board to begin desegregation on November 14, 1960. Rockwell's focus on the brave

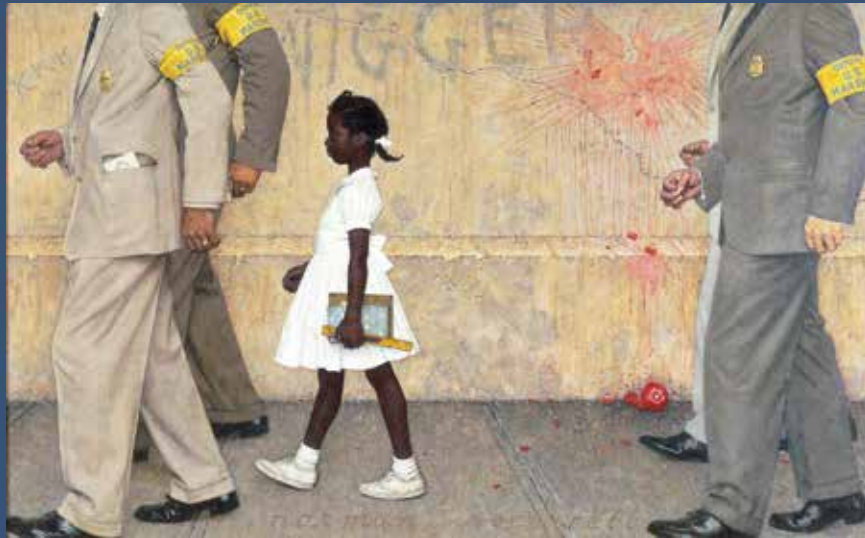


Fig. 7

girl, undeterred by the taunts of an unseen crowd, humanized the subject for many Americans. In seeing the published piece, one Florida reader wrote, "Rockwell's picture is worth a thousand words.... I am saving this issue for my children with the hope that by the time they become old enough to comprehend its meaning, the subject will have become history."

Stephanie Plunkett, deputy director and chief curator
Norman Rockwell Museum

Illustrations: Cover and figure 8: *Triple Self-Portrait*. Cover illustration for *The Saturday Evening Post*, February 13, 1960. © 1960: SEPS. Norman Rockwell Museum Collections; Figure 1: *Beanie*. Kellogg Company Corn Flakes advertisement, 1954. © Norman Rockwell Family Agency. All rights reserved. Norman Rockwell Museum Collections; Figure 2: *Daniel Boone, Pioneer Scout*. Story illustration for *Boys' Life*, July 1914. © Norman Rockwell Family Agency. All rights reserved. Norman Rockwell Museum Collections; Figure 3: *Christmas Eve in Bethlehem*. Story illustration for *Look*, December 29, 1970. © Norman Rockwell Family Agency. All rights reserved. Norman Rockwell Museum Collections; Figure 4.1: *Art Critic*. Cover illustration for *The Saturday Evening Post*, April 16, 1955. © 1955: SEPS. Norman Rockwell Museum Collections; Figure 4.2: Photographer Bill Scovill. Photograph of Mary Rockwell for *Art Critic*. Cover illustration for *The Saturday Evening Post*, April 16, 1955. © Norman Rockwell Family Agency. All rights reserved. Norman Rockwell Museum Collections; Figure 4.3: Study for *Art Critic*. Cover illustration for *The Saturday Evening Post*, April 16, 1955. © Norman Rockwell Family Agency. All rights reserved; Figure 5: *Artist Facing Blank Canvas (The Deadline)*. Cover illustration for *The Saturday Evening Post*, October 8, 1938. © 1938: SEPS. Norman Rockwell Museum Collections; Figure 6: *Girl at Mirror*. Cover illustration for *The Saturday Evening Post*, March 6, 1954. © 1954: SEPS. Norman Rockwell Museum Collections; Figure 7: *The Problem We All Live With*. Story illustration for *Look*, January 14, 1964. © Norman Rockwell Family Agency. All rights reserved. Norman Rockwell Museum Collections

About Norman Rockwell Museum

Located in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, Norman Rockwell's hometown for twenty-five years, the Norman Rockwell Museum holds the largest and most significant collection of art and archival materials relating to the life and work of Norman Rockwell. The Museum also preserves, interprets, and exhibits a growing collection of original illustration art by noted American illustrators, from historical to contemporary. The Museum's collections are a comprehensive resource relating to Norman Rockwell and the art of illustration, the role of published imagery in society, and America in the twentieth century.



Fig. 8

American Chronicles: The Art of Norman Rockwell

November 1, 2013–February 9, 2014
Frist Center for the Visual Arts


American Chronicles: The Art of Norman Rockwell has been organized by the Norman Rockwell Museum in Stockbridge, Massachusetts.

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