Picturing the Nation – National Endowment for the Humanities

Chronicling America: The Art of Norman Rockwell

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Introduction

In America in 1865, in a nation not yet a full century old, the greatest crisis to challenge the young nation prompted a flowering of illustration art. Artists documented the Civil War on the war front, and their illustrations were printed in the journals of the day through wood engravings. Thus was this war "covered" as no other war had been. At the same time, a transformational new platform emerged for recording and communicating historical events that was to exert powerful influence on mass audiences. The development of the printing press converged with the emergence of commercial advertising to produce the mass-circulation journal. Rapid postal delivery of these mass-produced journals to every household changed forever the way visual images were deployed to record history and influence culture.

During the 19th century, technology transformed the role of visual imagery from documenting society and educating illiterate populations to the mass shaping of public opinion. Illustration art proved the most democratic of art forms, and would visually transform a young democratic nation. No wonder, then, that it was illustration that shaped America's national identity during the late 19th century and entire 20th century, and continues to profoundly impact society and culture today.

If art is a common language that helps people define and understand their social and personal identities, then illustration art in America has provided a common language that helps citizens define and understand their cultural and national identities. This paper will focus on one artist whose keen powers of observation of human nature and skillful artistry shaped a whole nation. I hope to demonstrate the cultural impact and influence his images had on the iconography and identity of America for seven decades during the 20th century and reveal how the convergence of technology and art changed the way visual culture defines a nation. America's premier illustrator, Norman Rockwell, had a transformative influence on America.

America's Most Popular Artist

Illustration art both reflects and shapes society through visual communication, utilizing mass media to distribute images to millions of viewers. Norman Rockwell's art profoundly shaped American culture by creating common identity through images of what it meant to be American during seven decades during the 20th century. His work helped to create a sense of national identity and shared heritage among widely disparate groups of individuals of differing backgrounds and immigrant cultures. Before the advent of television in American households, millions of viewers were exposed to Rockwell's images through the *Saturday Evening Post* and other journals. The power of the visual

image to create identity—to brand and market iconography—was pervasive. Norman Rockwell grew to be America's most popular American artist through the pages of the journals which published his work. It is estimated that in the *Post*'s heyday, one out of every four households received the magazine and through it was exposed to Rockwell's work.

Norman Rockwell was born in 1894 in New York City at the height of the Impressionism movement, came of age during the pivotal New York Armory show of 1913 that was to forever alter the course of American art, and entered his adulthood during Picasso's Cubism. He painted and persevered through Futurism, Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism, Dada, Surrealism, and ended his career at the *Saturday Evening Post* during Pop Art in the 1960s.

He launched his career when illustrators were hugely fashionable, considered celebrities on par with today's sports heroes or movie stars. By the time his career was at its pinnacle, the art world had drawn a firm line between high and low art, between commercial illustration and "fine art." A continental chasm divided realism and abstraction. By mid-century, Rockwell was viewed as hopelessly out of step with contemporary art, particularly among a younger generation of post-war artists. Among illustrators, though, Rockwell was something of a hero. Brad Holland, who became a pioneer of conceptual editorial illustration, reveled in Rockwell's *Saturday Evening Post* images, in which he could easily recognize his own Ohio home town. "One of his best pictures is *Freedom from Fear*," Holland commented. "It is simple and unrhetorical. It is like Vermeer: a genre painting that rises to the level of philosophy."

As late as 1900, wrote Thomas Wolff in his introduction to Susan Meyer's *America's Great Illustrators*, "artists moved back and forth from easel painting to commercial illustration without any real sense of crossing a boundary. Many of the most important innovations of the period of Art Nouveau, such as Beardsley's and Toulouse Lautrec's, originated in commercial illustration. From 1890 to 1920, illustrators' celebrity was comparable to that of movie stars after 1920." Meyers noted, "Magazine illustration idealized and reshaped popular taste in a way that film would after 1920."

Illustrators like Howard Chandler Christie, J.C. Leyendecker, and Rockwell defined an image of a nation. Some painted sophisticated middle class lifestyles to aspire to, as in Charles Dana Gibson's Gibson Girl or Leyendecker's Arrow Collar Man. They choreographed fashion and mores, in much the same way that Hollywood, the media, and Madison Avenue would later shape image and celebrity lifestyles. In his own distinctive way, Rockwell became a purveyor of mass culture for much of the 20th century.

Rockwell held his first job as an illustrator and art editor at age 18, painted his first *Post* cover at 22, and was a nationally known figure by the age of 30. By the 1940s, Rockwell became a household name. Some speculate he was more popularly known than Georgia O'Keeffe, Andy Warhol, and Jackson Pollock combined. Across four generations, he spoke a public who revered him and felt he knew them. He chronicled two world wars

and the impact of technological inventions including the telephone, radio, television, automobiles, electricity, airplanes, and rocket ships into contemporary society.

Rockwell's images were ubiquitous. In a Rufus Jarman 1945 profile in *The New Yorker*, calendar statisticians estimated that Rockwell's Scout calendars received one billion six hundred million viewings on any given day. Steven Spielberg and Ross Perot both say they were inspired as young men to their life's work by Rockwell through their affection for his Scouting images.

In a biographic profile, Steven Spielberg said, "Aside from being an astonishingly good storyteller, Rockwell spoke volumes about a certain kind of American morality." It is a morality based on populism and patriotism, a morality that yearns above all for goodness to trump evil. "I can't paint evil sorts of subjects," said Rockwell.

Instead, he painted subjects such as Willie Gillis, a fictional wartime private who captivated millions of *Post* readers, and Rosie the Riveter, the can-do female patriot who fueled the war effort at home. He painted presidential portraits and political leaders. He formulated advertising art for products ranging from Jell-O to Crest toothpaste. Although many people associate his work with the values of hearth and home, Rockwell also tackled contemporary and often controversial issues such as Civil Rights, school integration, the Peace Corps, and moon walks.

Rockwell found hidden fragments of beauty in the chaos of life and helped us recognize moments of common grace. In a century of rapid social change, economic disparity, international wars, and technological advances, Rockwell's pictures helped Americans feel connected to a cultural homeland. They did so by reminding us of the details of life that are often overlooked.

His neighbors were his subjects, ordinary moments his themes. "The commonplaces of America are to me the richest subjects in art," Rockwell wrote in 1936. "Boys batting flies on vacant lots; little girls playing jacks on the front steps; old men plodding home at twilight, umbrellas in hand—all of these things arouse feeling in me. Commonplaces never become tiresome. It is we who become tired when we cease to be curious and appreciative."

Whether it is the proud strength of *Rosie the Riveter*, the democratic principles in the *Four Freedoms*, the injustice of bigotry conveyed with dignity and respect through a young child in *The Problem We All Live With*, or the joys and struggles of everyday life as in *Girl at Mirror*, Rockwell's paintings powerfully portray the universal truths, aspirations, and foibles of humanity. His work is part of the fabric of America, and at its best reflects and confronts our most fundamental beliefs about who we are as a people. Rockwell was honored late in life by President Ford with our nation's highest civilian honor, The Medal of Freedom, for his "vivid and affectionate portraits of America."

The Rise of Illustration

For more than seven centuries, artists in the Western Hemisphere were employed to display the wealth and power of their patrons. In the nineteenth century, however, a change occurred, and the publishing industry—replacing most traditional patrons—emerged as the chief employer of the artist. Publications exceeded both church and state as the great showcase for artists, and illustration, a creation of the Industrial Revolution, was established as a profession.

At the end of the 19th century and during the early decades of the 20th, books and periodicals provided the major source of entertainment. Illustrated images allowed businesses to reach a wide, popular audience and, consequently, the work of illustrators assumed an importance of unprecedented proportions. Now that publishing has surrendered its exclusive power to television, film, and the Internet, it is difficult for a contemporary audience to imagine the impact of illustration on public perception. Illustrators working at the time, known as the Golden Age of Illustration, were far more than picture makers—they had a crucial role in affecting the cultural appetites of the day. Their influence in shaping the American character as we know it is inextricably linked to the development of an industry whose main purpose was to embrace the aspirations of a nation and create an American dream.

"To us," Rockwell commented, "illustration was an ennobling profession. That's part of the reason I went into illustration. It was a profession with a great tradition, a profession I could be proud of." Rockwell entered the limelight just as illustration had reached its heyday, at a time when artists were in great demand by publishers and manufacturers, and illustrators were among the celebrities of the day.

The years between 1865 and 1917 represent publishing's most dramatic time of expansion, a period in which the industry evolved from a collection of small enterprises into a great American business institution. Immediately after the Civil War, hundreds of new publications were launched. For example, while only 700 periodicals existed in 1865, by 1900 nearly 5,000 more had come into being. Soon, one publication came to dominate the industry—the *Saturday Evening Post*—called the greatest show window in the world for an illustrator.

It will come as no surprise that the expansion of publishing during these years corresponds directly to the overall growth of American industries during the same period. The ingredients needed for the success of the publishing industry were the same as those required for the expansion of any industry—a sufficiently large market, an economical method of manufacture, and an efficient means of distribution. All three of these components fell neatly into place for publishing after the Civil War.

The explosion of books and periodicals produced was a direct result of America's growing demand for reading material that had increased substantially after the Civil War. The widespread introduction of public education throughout the nation had greatly reduced illiteracy, and more Americans than ever now possessed reading skills. Public libraries—another great American institution that expanded substantially after the Civil War as a result of legislation and private philanthropy—provided ready access to reading

matter. Private industry had also given many Americans the increased time and income needed for reading. Reader consumerism was a direct outgrowth of the Industrial Revolution.

But the success of publishing periodicals depends not only on readers, but on advertisers as well. The expansion of industry after the Civil War meant there were new wares to be sold, and periodicals provided the vehicles for manufacturers to hawk their merchandise, competing against their rivals in these pages for a greater share of the market. Starting with *Scribner's* in 1887, the first magazine to carry pages of advertising, this source of income grew increasingly important with the years.

Because of the greater dependence on advertising for income, the emphasis was increasingly placed on acquiring more readers at any cost. Sophisticated methods of expanding circulation were instituted, such as premiums, and it became less important to distribute magazines economically, but mandatory to reach more and more readers to attract larger advertising revenues. A circulation of 100,000 may have been considerable in 1890, but relatively insignificant by 1910. Every literate American was reading published material and images were speaking to everyone else.

Technological improvement had as great an impact on the publishing industry as it had on other industries. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the rotary press was introduced, a machine that enabled publishers to produce larger editions more rapidly and at lower cost. Of all technological advances, however, none was more important to the American illustrator than improvements made in pictorial reproduction. The significance of this advancement was the single most important factor in making it possible for illustrators to expand their creative powers. This freedom hastened the development of illustration as a popular art.

Until the 1880s, all reproduction was accomplished by wood engraving. But when photography was introduced into the printing process, all this was to ultimately change. The newly developed screen halftone process created a preference for realistic pictures, and a new school of illustrators emerged to meet this popular demand. The new process recorded everything, displaying the best qualities of an expert illustrator and exposing the deficiencies of the less qualified. By 1900, additional experiments with printing had improved the process sufficiently to allow for the printing of color half tones. Color printing, though expensive, became one of the chief attractions in the publishing of books and periodicals.

Because of these technological, social, and economic developments, hundreds of publishing companies naturally emerged to produce a vast array of printed materials. A few of these periodicals, and the illustrators whose work appeared in them, represented a force in American cultural life that is almost unimaginable. They had a major impact on the taste, humor, morals, and buying habits of the American public.

The activity in publishing, and the proliferation of adult and children's books, family magazines, youth magazines, and humor magazines produced a diverse group of

illustrators to serve the varied functions in demand. The outlets for artists were vast and lucrative. In fact, there were more opportunities than there were artists, and editors and publishers competed for the limited supply of fine illustrators available to them. With the ability to pay high fees for art, and with their vast circulations, magazines constructed the most spectacular showcase for illustrators.

By the 20th century, visual imagery permeated American culture, ultimately becoming the primary means of communication. Born with an innate gift for storytelling and observation, Norman Rockwell had a talent for reflecting his times through representations of everyday life that became the official art of this nation. From the 1920s through the 1950s, his style set the standard for commercial artists who used realism to illustrate books, magazines and advertisements, though none surpassed Rockwell's ability to capture the quintessential human moment.

Norman Rockwell's America

Rockwell's images have become part of a collective American memory. We remember selected bits and pieces of information and often reassemble them in ways that mingle fantasy with reality. We formulate memory to serve our own needs and purposes. Rockwell knew this instinctively: "Everything I have ever seen or done has gone into my pictures in one way or another. … Memory doesn't lie, though it may distort a bit here and there."

As an illustrator, Rockwell was a painter of visual narratives. He dwells in the particular, (no detail is too small or unimportant), unerringly finding the eternal in the fleeting. This is not accomplished through simplicity, but rather through complexity deftly handled. ("Every single object shown in the picture should contribute directly to the central theme," he noted.) His skill as a painter is to communicate a theme instantly, as well as reward the longer look of many minutes or a lifetime. Like all virtuosos, he made it look simple—and that may be why we sometimes think it, and he, was.

In fact, Rockwell was a complex and worldly man. Born in New York City, he led a bi-coastal life. He traveled frequently from New England, where he resided most of his adult life, to California, the home state of his second wife. He was as comfortable in Hollywood as he was in Washington, D.C. He painted portraits of six U.S. presidents, and a wide range of national and international dignitaries, including Egyptian president Nasser, British philosopher Bertrand Russell, and Josip Tito of Yugoslavia. He documented the Soviet education system and the activities of the Peace Corps in countries such as Ethiopia, India, and Columbia. In 1950, Rockwell traveled around the globe for Pam Am airlines to promote leisure air travel, making numerous stops and hundreds of sketches. Rockwell visited dozens of countries in his lifetime; he was a true citizen of the world.

Rockwell's early work reflected his youthful experiences—children on the playground; youth adventure stories of the American West; the young Scouting movement; and intergenerational themes. Humorous and playful, Rockwell was honing his skills as a painter of story illustrations, advertisements, and magazine covers. He had begun to

attract a following among the American public who eagerly looked for his next image on the covers of their favorite magazines. Rockwell was to illustrate more than 800 magazine covers over the course of his career, and it was this art that was to capture the public imagination.

During the first Great War, illustrators were put to work designing war bond posters, enlistment and recruitment images and defining a war taking place far from American shores. *GI Telegrapher* in the style of JC Leyendecker, famous for painting the high society life of the 1920s, or images of the youthful GI (only recently a child himself) cavorting with European children, belie the tragedy and trauma of the war that was to return with the soldiers. Life went on with the war a romanticized and patriotic event, buoyed by the illustrators' images.

When as many as 25% of the nation was unemployed during the Great Depression, the lives of the illustrators went on mostly unscathed. Artists remained in demand for selling magazines through their covers, and while advertising shrunk, and many publications went out of business, Rockwell's career ascended. The public eagerly awaited his weekly images to boost morale, garner a smile, and provide reassurance.

In 1941, Rockwell painted his iconic *Four Freedoms*, inspired by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's January address to Congress. The next year, *Four Freedoms* went on a cross-country tour and helped raise $133 million in war bonds and stamps. The paintings brilliantly distilled each of Roosevelt's lofty ideals into specific, recognizable human experiences. *Freedom of Speech*, for example, depicts a man standing up to speak his mind at a town meeting. His meticulously rendered clothing, face, and, hands mark him as a working man, in contrast to those seated around him. His views, we surmise, may represent the minority opinion. Yet still he speaks, and is listened to. The image is signature Rockwell, in both its iconographic power and its embrace of decency.

Freedom of Speech has been selected as a signature image in the National Endowment for the Humanities program *Picturing America*. The right to freedom of expression is at the heart of the rights and privileges of American democracy. Norman Rockwell Museum utilizes this iconic image to teach history, inspire character education, and explore the roots of democracy. Students engage in a mock Town Meeting, learning the importance of respectful listening as well as powerful oratory. President Roosevelt's idealized concept and Rockwell's *Freedom of Speech* is a heroic image that galvanized a nation to support the war and inspired the fight for human rights around the world.

Rockwell convinced us we shared a common heritage—making collective memory through his scenes of everyday life. His less politically charged works depict quieter human dramas: the kitchen-table bickering between husband and wife over politics; the defiant schoolgirl in the principal's office sporting a black eye; the coming together of family around the holidays; the return of a soldier to his doting mother; the yearning of a girl to grow up; the bond between a police officer and his young charge, a would-be runaway. "I was showing the America I knew and observed to others who might not have noticed," he explained.

Rockwell chronicled the Civil Rights movement, and helped to unite us through his pictures. As elder statesman, he painted *Golden Rule*, a vision of diversity and tolerance across the human family; *Peace Corps*, a tribute to John F. Kennedy's international service program; *The Problem We All Live With*, a depiction of the ugliness of racism and the strength of those who defy it; and *Murder in Mississippi*, a haunting portrayal of murdered Civil Rights workers.

Like the quickly frozen moment of a snapshot, Rockwell illuminated life's passages. His art celebrates the common humanity that binds us together, regardless of who we are, where we live, and how we vote. Always, there is his sense of humanity. As Rockwell matured as an artist and as a man, his subject matter matured and became increasingly emotionally complex. As Rockwell himself moved through life's passages emerging from his boyhood to youthful love, from a novice parent maturing to middle age, experiencing his children leaving home, to growing into a world citizen and elder statesman, the subject matter of this artwork grew more nuanced, more subtle, and more attuned to human nature, revealing through expression our idiosyncrasies, our fears, and our foibles, as well as our joys, wisdom, and pleasures. He revealed to us our inner selves.

Conclusion

Although realism and representation have not been fully rejected, illustrators today have evolved away from Rockwell's style, if only because the role of contemporary illustration has changed, too. In Rockwell's heyday, illustration was the primary visual mechanism of mass media, and print publications were the primary conveyors of information and entertainment. Today, illustration is subservient to other visual forms in both print and electronic media, and provides more intellectual stimulation than documentation. The field of children's picture book illustration, however, provides a place for artists who are interested in Rockwell's brand of narrative storytelling to pursue their ideas. In addition, the world of animation and visual effects has been transformed by gifted illustrators, whose vision has carried us into the 21st century.

Norman Rockwell Museum is the premier museum of illustration art in the United States. The leading organizer of illustration art exhibitions, the Museum is committed to deepening scholarship in the important field of visual communication. The Museum has recently announced a major new initiative in the field of illustration art. The Rockwell Center for American Visual Studies is the first research institute in the nation devoted to the art of illustration. Its mission is to galvanize scholarly activity related to illustration art and raise the public profile of the field. Housed within Norman Rockwell Museum, the Rockwell Center is a national hub of scholarship and preservation. It serves to build and leverage networks of institutions and scholars, foster and support academic study and research, and use digital media to preserve and promote illustration art.

Norman Rockwell captured the imagination of a nation for 65 years, keeping his finger on the pulse of a changing America through four generations, two world wars, the Great Depression, and the American Civil Rights movement. His indelible images have become

firmly rooted into the American psyche, crafting a common heritage among a nation of immigrants and uniting Americans around the core values of our nation and culture—democracy and freedom. His images illuminate our common humanity with humor and kindness, decency and tolerance. His images are burned into our collective memory and his name has become an eponym. "Rockwellian" is ubiquitously applied to conjure an image of America. The power of the illustrated image to create identity and teach beyond words is no where more powerfully demonstrated than through the art of Norman Rockwell. He was a master communicator, and will be remembered as a compassionate and idealistic humanitarian, as well as one of the greatest artists of the 20th century.

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