A ROCKWELL REVIVAL

He's never been out of style, but the recovery of three long-missing Norman Rockwell pieces has helped renew our appreciation for this all-American artist.

By Alasdair Nichol

It could have been out of the pages of the old TV mystery series The Rockford Files—or in this case, The Rockwell Files.

Earlier this year, authorities recovered a trio of Norman Rockwell paintings that were missing for more than two decades. The three paintings were among seven Rockwells stolen from a Minneapolis gallery in 1978. Previously, two came to light in Philadelphia and another two farther afield in Rio de Janeiro. The three remaining works reappeared courtesy of a Brazilian art dealer who confessed to FBI agents that he had tucked them away in an old farmhouse.

The recovery of any stolen artwork is always cause for celebration, but this find was even more so because of Rockwell's status as one of America's most cherished artists and illustrators. Certainly his work is immediately familiar to us all; it now adorns everything from coffee mugs to mouse pads. He's also one of a handful of artists whose very name instantly conjures up a particular slice of life—in Rockwell's case, the comforting flavor of homemade apple pie. His enduring—and increasing—popularity lies in a quote from his autobiography: "I paint life as I would like it to be."

Born in New York, Rockwell was 5 years old at the start of the 20th century, so he lived and painted throughout an era marked by social and political turmoil. But by chronicling the warmth and humor of small-town America (a geography he knew well after living in Arlington, Vt., and later Stockbridge, Mass.) Rockwell's art provided for many a refuge from modern life's complexities.

ON DISPLAY

The recovery of the long-lost paintings comes at a time when Rockwell's art is already enjoying a renewal of sorts. In the ever-fluctuating art market, a major exhibition can often have a strong impact on an artist's reputation and prices. A case in point is the recent blockbuster show "Norman Rockwell: Pictures for the American People." Beginning at the High Museum in Atlanta in 1999, the exhibit visited six other major venues nationwide before arriving at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, where it finished in early 2002.

Cont'd, on p. 15

Based in New York and Philadelphia, Alasdair Nichol is senior vice-president at Philadelphia-based Freman, America's oldest auction house. He's been an Antiques Roadshow appraiser since 1999. Write him at anichol@freemansauction.com.
A Rockwell Revival

Cont'd, from p. 1

An extraordinarily successful show, the exhibit included the original artworks for Rockwell's best-known and most coveted illustrations: the covers for Saturday Evening Post, of which he produced 322 from 1916-1963.

The public came in droves, finally getting the chance to see Rockwell's large, fully realized oil paintings first-hand rather than as faded reproductions on a magazine cover. The difference in effect was startling. Spectators marveled at Rockwell's virtuosity with oil paint, skills as a colorist, and mastery of composition.

The critics, too, sat up and paid serious attention. In the past, many had been dismissive (if not downright hostile) toward the work of a "mere illustrator." Now comparisons were being made with the Dutch and Flemish masters of the 17th century.

Rockwell, an ardent admirer of Rembrandt, would have relished this turn of events. The irony of his life's work hanging in the Guggenheim—the temple of Modernism—would not have been lost on him either.

Given that Rockwell has performed the posthumous feat of being both a public favorite and critical darling, where does that leave the market for his work? Well, as you have probably gathered, he is something of a "hot" commodity. "The pricing of Rockwell's work," says Judy Goffman Cutler, director of the American Illustrators Gallery, "has evolved with critical appraisal and demand." Increases, she says, have been "incremental" in the course of her 35 years as an art dealer.

"While many celebrities own original Norman Rockwell work," Cutler adds, "art collecting is often a private matter and has had little effect on either the prices or the current renewed interest. The work speaks for itself. While auctions have gone no higher than $1 million, private sales have climbed as high as $3 million for Rockwell's more famous and sought-after works."

It's surely a matter of time before the Rockwell auction record of $937,500 (set in 1996 for his painting "The Watchmaker") is broken. Regardless, his paintings command hefty prices. And similar paintings from the artist's classic period of the 1940s and '50s regularly fetch well into the figures at auction. They may be affordable for devotees like Ross Perot and Steven Spielberg, but what of the collector of more modest means?

Well, the good news is that (as visitors to the "Pictures for the American People" exhibition know) Rockwell did many studies and preliminary drawings prior to the final painting. Such works do turn up with some frequency at auction. While they're not inexpensive, they're certainly less costly than Rockwell's finished pieces.

Example: At Freeman's in Philadelphia, we recently sold a very small oil study for "After the Prom" for $26,000, after fierce trade bidding, to a private collector. The study's previous owner had won it at a charity raffle. The large finished oil painting of the same piece, one of Rockwell's most popular images, sold at auction in 1995 for $800,000.

On Antiques Roadshow, we regularly see pencil-signed prints by the artist. Generally these are worth $300-$500, although the better-known images could draw $1,500-$3,000 or more at auction.

And what about actual covers from Saturday Evening Post magazines? Even these have some value, usually around $10-$15, although I recently saw one on eBay sell for around $50. So the answer to that old Rolling Stones question "Who wants yesterday's papers?"—at least in the case of Saturday Evening Post—must be: "Lots of people, as long as there's a Rockwell on the cover."