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News, Trends, and Analysis from the World of Antiques and Collectibles

ON THE LOOKOUT

FASHIONABLE FOLK

There's no doubt craft-type folk art items are hot (see p. 3). So, too, are paintings that fall into the American folk art realm. Consider the piece pictured here. Attributed to Deacon Robert Peckham (1785–1877), the oil on canvas went on the block at Skinner Inc. in Bolton, Mass., on Feb. 24. Its pre-auction estimate: \$15,000–\$25,000. By the time bidding ended, the piece had sold for \$182,000.



This mid-19th-century painting drew \$182,000 at a Skinner Inc. auction.

WHEATIES ON ICE

In a tradition that dates to the 1930s, Wheaties is about to honor a new star: figure skater Sarah Hughes, 16. Olympic-star Wheaties boxes, though, tend not to rise in value. You can find boxes depicting past medal-winners for under \$10.

9/11 CONTROVERSY

Is Sept. 11–related memorabilia tasteless—or does it help Americans continue to come to grips with the terrorist acts of that day? New York City chief attorney Michael Cardozo says a large number of collectibles related to Sept. 11 are “blatant attempts to profit from mass murder.” Cardozo sent a cease-and-desist letter to auction site eBay calling for a ban on Sept. 11 items. Cardozo pointed to such items as “uncut rescue tapes,” objects pulled from World Trade Center wreckage, and police and fire department patches and pins violating city trademarks. eBay spokesman Henry Gomez told Associated Press that “There are tens of thousands of eBay users, many of whom are selling items that are appropriate, some who are not. We’re pulling the items that are not.” Legitimate items, he said, include WTC postcards and photos of the building that people may have taken years ago. ●

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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.



Rockwell's “Liberty Girl,” from the National Museum of American Illustration, is a 41¾ x 31¼-inch oil on canvas.

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.

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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 dollars, 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 six figures at auction. They may be affordable for devotees like Ross Perot



The study from Norman Rockwell's classic "After the Prom" (far left) sold for \$26,000 at auction. An oil on card with traces of pencil, it measures 11x10³/₈ inches. Finished product appeared on the May

25, 1957, *Saturday Evening Post* cover. Recently, the San Francisco Music Box Co. made "Prom" the subject of one of its music boxes, a \$75 item.

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." ●

INSIDE INFO

ARTISTS AS ILLUSTRATORS

The market for illustration art—like baseball—is a particularly American phenomenon. It helps to remember that many of the best American artists, from Winslow Homer to Andy Warhol, began as illustrators, and that unlike in many other nations, the line between "fine art" and "illustration" is a blurred one.

Many of the appraisals I've done at *Antiques Roadshow* events have featured illustration artists. Often the owners of these works are unaware of the current market and have been pleasantly surprised by the values.

How do you know whether you own an example of illustration art? By definition there will be a strong narrative element. These are, after all, pictures that tell stories or advertise products. Popular magazines that commissioned illustrators include *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Collier's*, *Leslie's Weekly*, and *Harper's Weekly*. Early works may be simple black ink drawings (not to be confused with etchings, which are prints) or they may be *en grisaille* (literally "in gray") tonal studies. Often there may be written instructions in pencil to the printer or publisher on the front of a drawing or on a canvas's reverse.

Good condition, while important, is not vital. I have sold a number of works in what I considered to be poor condition, including the Haddon Hubbard Sundblom piece shown here. It had very bad water damage resulting in significant paint loss (including most of the signature!), but that didn't stop a private Pennsylvania collector from paying \$16,000 against a \$1,500–\$2,500 auction estimate. Sometimes a dramatic—or in this case charming—subject can make all the difference!

There are three artists at the top of the illustration tree: **Norman Rockwell**, of course; **N.C. Wyeth** (specialist Debra Force appraised a Wyeth work for \$250,000 in an *Antiques Roadshow* segment that was taped in Indianapolis and airs May 13); and **Maxfield Parrish**, whose work has fetched in excess of \$4 million at auction. For the novice collector, there are many excellent—and affordable—examples to be found amongst the lower branches, including turn-of-the-century pen and ink drawings by such artists as **Joseph Clement Coll**, **James Montgomery Flagg**, and **Charles Dana Gibson**.

—Alasdair Nichol

RESOURCES: SITES TO SEE

- **American Illustrators Gallery**, New York, N.Y.: www.americanillustrators.com
- **Illustration House**, New York, N.Y.: www.illustration-house.com
- **The Norman Rockwell Museum**, Stockbridge, Mass.: www.nrm.org
- **National Museum of American Illustration**, Newport, R.I.: www.americanillustration.org
- **The Society of Illustrators**, New York, N.Y.: www.societyillustrators.org
- Also, visit these directories to art and illustration sources: www.askart.com and www.artnet.com.



Water damage and all, this Sundblom art drew \$16,000.