## Norman Rockwell's vision of America at Dulwich Picture Gallery

By Richard Moss Published: 13 December 2010

Tags: Graphic art, Painting, oil, Pictures, London, Greater London, American



Norman Rockwell, (1894-1978), Cousin Reginald Plays Pirates, 1917, Country Gentleman, November 3, 1917

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Exhibition: Norman Rockwell's America, at Dulwich Picture Gallery, December 15 2010 until March 27 2011.

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As American as apple pie, Coca Cola and MacDonald's, the paintings and illustrations of Norman Rockwell offer a vision of Middle America that you either love or hate.

In a career spanning over six decades of the twentieth century it was Rockwell's depiction of everyday American life that dominated the magazine covers of the country's news stands for decades and even led to an adjective; "Rockwellian".

For some the term is a dirty word denoting a sugary sentimentality and a projection of America as it was wished to be rather than the way it was. But looking at the paintings on display in Dulwich Picture Gallery's fine retrospective - the first in this country to show his original works – it's hard to argue against the enduring quality of his version of small town USA.

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Norman Rockwell, (1894-1978), Threading the Needle, 1922, Saturday Evening Post, April 8, 1922 cover

© 2010 Images by The National Museum of American Illustration, Newport, RI, USA, and the American Illustrators Gallery, NYC. Copyright 2010 Saturday Evening Post covers by SEPS, Curtis Publishing Perhaps it's the ubiquitous nature of the Rockwellian image? For over six decades of the 20th century, he was astonishingly prolific. In between producing 322 covers for the Saturday Evening Post (all of which are on display) he painted countless other magazine illustrations and advertisements.

Each of them captured an idealised version of everyday American life. On the face of it Rockwell's world is a whimsical, Disney-like place where wholesome Huckleberry Finn types have adventures, New England couples play bridge and mom bakes a pie.

Yet behind the schmaltzy sentimentality there lies a skilled painter in oils whose work has in recent years enjoyed a posthumous critical re-assessment.

Between his illustrations and advertising efforts Rockwell also painted politicians and in his later years even managed to produce a

series of searing images in support of the civil rights movement.

His intense depiction, The problem we all live with, of the young Ruby Bridges entering a kindergarten under protection during the desegregation in New Orleans utilised his trademark sentimentality to produce a surprisingly impactful comment on race relations in the USA.

But it is the sweetly sentimental vision of America for which he is best known. Rockwellians will be wowed by the 40 original paintings and hundreds of vintage magazine covers on display here.

## More on the venues and organisations we've mentioned:

• Dulwich Picture Gallery

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