'NORMAN ROCKWELL: AMERICAN IMAGIST'

Through Aug. 30

National Museum of American Illustration, 492 Bellevue Ave., Newport

BY LISA UTMAN RANDALL

Norman Rockwell was a master at bringing both humor and poignancy to everyday images of American people in everyday settings. It's one thing to see his work in the context of a Saturday Evening Post cover - he created 323 between 1916, when he was just 22 years old, and 1972 — or as an illustration in a

But to see his original images in oils on canvas, framed and hanging on the wall, is a different thing altogether.

"When you see his work in person, you see that he was really an amazing painter," says Sara Bliss, assistant to the director at The National Museum of American Illustration in Newport which is now hosting a traveling exhibit spanning six decades of Rockwell's career. "Rockwell was influenced by artists like Rembrandt and he took his painting very serious-

"Norman Rockwell: American Imagist" consists of images gathered from the museum's extensive permanent collection as well as pieces borrowed from private collectors. Hung throughout the various rooms and intermingled with paintings by Rockwell's contemporaries such as J.C. Leyendecker, Maxfield Parrish and N.C. Wyeth, it includes original oil paintings, drawings, studies, sketches, posters and limited edition TruChrome prints. The traveling show, which made its debut at the Naples Museum of Art in Florida — where it broke attendance records - is presented in chronological order, affording the viewer the rare opportunity to experience a comprehensive progression of the artist's work.

The show was curated by Judy Goffman Cutler and organized by Laurence S. Cutler, who together founded the museum in 1998. The museum is housed within Vernon Court. one of Newport's most spectacular mansions, designed by architects John Merven Carrère and Thomas Hastings (of Carrére & Hastings who also designed the New York Public Library and national monuments). Built in 1898, Vernon Court occupies a full block on Bellevue Avenue and was designed specifically to accommodate a museum on the first

Rockwell began his career by capturing humorous, slice of life images, such as his first Post cover - "The Baby Carriage" (1916) - which featured a petulant young boy pushing his young sibling in a baby carriage while his peers mocked him, but he quickly moved into weightier subjects including world wars, the stock market crash and the



The walls can talk. 'Boy Graduate' (1959), used for the cover of the June 6, 1959, edition of the Saturday Evening Post, is shown at far right in the Tiffany Loggia at the National Museum of American Illustration, along with 'Christmas - Knight Looking in Stained Glass Window' (1930), 'Volunteer Fireman' (1931) and the sculpture 'Apollo & Daphne,' circa 1845, by an anonymous artist. PHOTO BY JACQUELINE MARQUE

Civil Rights Movement.

Rockwell's distinctive style is a blending of keen draftsmanship with an ability to portray emotion through physicality. In Volunteer Fireman" (1931) a fireman, a young boy and a dog all speed toward a distant fire. There is excitement on the young boy's face, determination on the visage of the ax-wielding professional and pure eagerness in the body language of the dog.

Next to it is "Boy Graduate" (1959) in which a young man in cap and gown stands straight before us, motionless as though posing for a photograph taken by a proud parent. The stillness of the figure contrasts nicely with the striving threesome in the painting before it, but nonetheless manages to express a similar degree of emotion. The graduate holds his diploma and eagerly peers ahead as if barely able to contain himself from running toward the very possibility of his future.

It is in this way that Rockwell gives us the stories of our own culture. The figures are recognizable because they are stopaction caught in mid-expression; they are unaware that they are being seen and so are acting

completely authentically.

"Breakfast Table Political Argument - Study" (1948) is a perfect example of this. In the painting, a man and woman argue across the table - he in his suit presumably heading off to work, she still in her robe as a young toddler cries at their feet. If a neighbor were to suddenly happen along, the scene would be destroyed in an instant. The man would settle his face into a smile and the woman would swoop the child up with a soothing word, but Rockwell gives us instead the unvarnished truth - one moment at a time.

Rockwell, who was born in his parents' Upper West Side apartment in New York City in 1894, depicted people, human nature and events through the aftermath of World War I, into the Roaring Twenties, through the Depression years and World War II and on into the 1950s, the turmoil of the '60s and through most of the '70s before he died in 1978. He captured the ethos of each era through a rigorous process of looking closely and expertly rendering what he saw.

During his later career, after his Saturday Evening Post years

when he worked for Look Magazine and other publications, Rockwell traveled to Ethiopia, Russia and Jerusalem and created wonderful portraits of the people he encountered along the

During this time he also took a hard look at America with paintings such as "The Problem We All Live With" (1964), in which a young black girl in a white dress is escorted to school flanked fore and aft by a group of men - the red insides of a tomato are splashed across the wall of a nearby building having just been thrown by what one can only assume is an angry crowd outside the frame. There are a couple of studies for this particular painting in the exhibit, which allows one to see how Rockwell experimented with color and structure to create the version with the most impact.



'The Problem We All Live With - Study,' Norman Rockwell, 1964, tempera on board, 11 5/8" x 19 7/8"

The artist completed at least a couple studies for an illustration for the cover of the Jan. 15, 1964, issue of Look magazine. COPYRIGHT NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ILLUSTRATION, NEWPORT, RI. PHOTO COURTESY ARCHIVES OF AMERICAN ILLUSTRATORS GALLERY, NYC.

The museum is open year-round for visitors and group tours by advance reservation. Tickets \$18. \$16 seniors, military, \$12 students, \$8 children 5-12. See hours, Page 17. (401) 851-8949, Ext. 18, www.americanillustration.org.