Norman Rockwell: lost America captured in Kitsch

Norman Rockwell's simple domestic scenes were so adored by Americans that prints would sell as many as 25 million copies. But a new show reveals that the artist's own life was not at all the apple-pie idyll he painted. Mark Hudson reports

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Norman Rockwell's Bridge Game ? The Bid, 1948 Photo: AP

By Mark Hudson 5:16PM GMT 02 Dec 2010

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"You paint your happiness," Norman Rockwell's psychoanalyst once told him, "but you don't live it". The harsh American illustrator of the 20th century, acclaimed as "America's best-loved artist" and "the Dickens of the paintbrush", Rockwell has become synonymous with sweetly humorous, almost simple-minded portrayals of domestic contentment. Yet behind them lurks a far more troubled personality than is generally supposed.

In one of his best-known images, an elderly lady, overseen by her fond-faced husband, heaves a roast turkey on to a laden, white-clothed table, ringed by the laughing, expectant faces of the younger members of her family. The scene isn't entirely idealised (the old lady wears glasses), but her expression of modest, yet tender devotion to this most American of celebrations – Thanksgiving – speaks volumes about the image's intentions. Part of a series, the Four Freedoms, created during the Second World War, it sold 25 million copies, raising vast sums for the war effort and becoming one of the most widely distributed works of art in history.

Rockwell is associated, on this side of the pond, with a wholesome, patriotic, apple pie and picket fence conception of Middle America. On his home territory, he is identified with these things to the extent that the idea of the "Norman Rockwell Thanksgiving Dinner" is something that every American implicitly understands – that every American, whatever their background, can achieve through hard work and the American way.

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Rockwell, who is receiving his first major British exhibition at the Dulwich Picture Gallery this month, was a constant presence in American life through most of the 20th century. He was an affable, avuncular figure, rake-thin, with sloping shoulders and a pipe perpetually jammed between his teeth. He created 322 covers for the Saturday Evening Post, America's most popular magazine, between 1916 and 1963 – images that were looked forward to with an avidity unimaginable today.

Rockwell's art represents America before the Fall: pre-drugs, pre-Vietnam, almost pre-sex, set in a timeless, small-town world – generally in a mythic, New England backwoods, where life retains a pioneer cohesiveness. In the relatively early, Good for Another Generation, of 1923, an elderly horologist puts the final touch to a grandfather clock that will keep on ticking for decades in Rockwell's unchanging world. In Father's Return Home, painted 50 years later, wife, children and dog rush with wild enthusiasm to meet Dad at the front door. And where has he come from? Why, simply back from work. The celebration of the daily domestic round is enough.

Yet since the Sixties, as ideas of American identity, ethnicity and gender have become increasingly embattled, Rockwell, a purveyor of what used to be called "gentle humour", who wished to do nothing more than entertain, has become controversial.

In Woody Allen's Annie Hall, the eponymous central character, played by Diane Keaton, refers to her grandmother as "Grammy Hall", to which Allen's character reacts with incredulity: "What d'you do, grow up in a Norman Rockwell painting?" The inference is clear: Keaton's character, from a secure Wasp background, belongs in Rockwell's America; Allen's, from a precariously situated, immigrant Jewish family, doesn't.

Even a view of America as current as Mad Men, BBC4's ineffably stylish drama set in advertising in the Sixties, draws heavily and knowingly on Rockwell, with the lead character, Don Draper, and his wife moving out of Manhattan to an idyllically Rockwellian small town. The place turns out to be populated by hypocrites, the wife soon succumbs to depression and the children exhibit signs of delinquency. In this sophisticated, metropolitan view, the Rockwell life leads to alienation and mental illness. As soon as she realises her husband doesn't belong in this poker-faced, quasi-rustic world, Draper's wife drops him for a Right-wing political fixer.

But then, it could be argued that the vast majority of those consuming Rockwell's images didn't belong in this world, and neither did the artist himself – certainly not by birthright. Indeed, while the Fifties' McCarthyite witch hunt can be said to have come into being to protect Rockwell's America from a perceived Leftist threat, the man himself was by no means an unthinking conservative.

Born in New York in 1894, the son of a white-collar worker, Rockwell grew up in extremely modest circumstances in a succession of boarding houses. He trained at the National Academy of Design and by 19 was art editor of Boys' Life, the magazine of the Boy Scouts of America.

He was essentially a cartoonist, of the old-fashioned kind who deals not in punchlines but in whimsical narrative moments, which he realised in oils using techniques derived from the Old Masters – a way of working that was then common in commercial art, before being superseded by more modest media such as gouache, watercolour and digital image-making.

Rockwell was married three times, always to school teachers, but it was only when he moved to Arlington, Vermont, in 1939, when he was already 45, that his quintessential small-town imagery crystallised. And for all his apparently unflagging optimism, his work's insistence on humanity's essential goodness, Rockwell was prone to depression, as was his severely alcoholic second wife, Mary. In 1953, they moved to Stockbridge, Massachusetts, so they could receive treatment from Erik Erikson, the pioneering psychologist and psychoanalyst who coined the term "identity crisis".

But it was when he was still living in Arlington that Rockwell created his most famous works, the Four Freedoms. Attending a town meeting, where a man whose views went against the majority was listened to with respect, Rockwell conceived of a series of paintings illustrating each of the four principles of human rights outlined by Franklin D Roosevelt, in defence of which America was joining in the Second World War.

It took Rockwell seven months to create the four oil paintings, using Arlington residents as models: Freedom From Want, showing the laden Thanksgiving table; Freedom of Speech, showing the stranger speaking at the town meeting; Freedom of Worship, with its worn New England faces absorbed in prayer; and Freedom From Fear, with a couple gazing at their sleeping children.

When Rockwell took the paintings to Washington's Office of War Information, he received an indifferent response. The government was planning to use "real" artists in their propaganda efforts, rather than commercial artists as they had during the First World War. Yet the imagery produced by Left-wing artists, such as Ben Shahn's Lidice Poster – showing the hooded victim of a Nazi atrocity – proved almost meaningless to the American public. When Rockwell's Four Freedoms were eventually published in the Saturday Evening Post, there were millions of requests for reprints.

Reproduced in post offices, schools, clubs and railway stations across America, their success was a powerful example of a peculiarly American approach to external conflict: the idea that it is what is being defended that counts, what is being fought about and against is almost irrelevant. Rather than showing the horrors besetting Europe, Rockwell portrays Middle American life in near religious terms.

On his remarriage after his wife Mary's death from a heart attack in 1953, Rockwell began to address some of America's more perplexing aspects. Supporting Kennedy against Nixon, he tackled the subject of civil rights in The Problem We All Live With, showing a young African-American girl escorted to school in New Orleans by a group of US marshals. Rockwell brilliantly emphasises the girl's courage and vulnerability by cropping the marshals' towering figures at shoulder height. Yet this image of the Sixties remains grounded in 19th-century pictorial convention.

While professing to be nothing more than an illustrator, Rockwell craved acclaim as an artist. If the new Dulwich exhibition goes some way towards accommodating this notion, hanging his pictures alongside works by Rembrandt and Gerrit Dou for stylistic reference, such comparisons merely reinforce the fact that he is a Victorian illustrator hanging on in the era of Auschwitz and rock'n'roll. The homely conservatism of his style may have been as much a factor in his appeal as his folksy subject matter, but his skill and fluency with brush and pencil are very much what you'd expect from a commercial artist of his time.

As art, Rockwell is kitsch, but as illustration he is pure genius. One of the last images in the Dulwich exhibition, The Right to Know from 1968, demonstrates the essential generosity of Rockwell's vision. Among those caught in the near mystical glow of the American Constitution's enshrinement of the right to knowledge are a single mother with a child, an African-American family and a young hippy couple – captured with a lot more acuity than you'd expect from a 74-year-old.

Rockwell admitted that he painted things not as they are but "as I would like them to be" – and that clearly included a great deal more than the small-town Middle America with which his name is associated.

Norman Rockwell's America is at Dulwich Picture Gallery, London SE21 (020 8693 5254), from Dec 15 until March 27