

Judging by the popularity of two traveling retrospectives, and plans for a third exhibition in 2010, America is re-discovering one of its most underappreciated and misunderstood artists: Norman Rockwell. With photographs excerpted from a new book by RON SCHICK, DAVID KAMP explores the divide between Rockwell's rocky private life and his sunny small-town iconography, the elaborate studies behind his paintings, and the truth that lies in his idealized vision of his country—resonating more deeply than ever today

Norman Rockwell's

MODEL
BEHAVIOR

Norman Rockwell's
After the Prom (1957),
and, opposite, the
vignette he cast,
composed, and oversaw
the photographing of
beforehand—a planning
stage crucial to Rockwell's
creative process.

Norman
Rockwell

American Dream

T

ake a close look at *Saying Grace*, one of Norman Rockwell's best-known works. In a crowded railway-station diner, an old woman and a little boy bow their heads in prayer before eating. A pair of young men regard them at close range, forced by the diner's busyness to share their table with the pious twosome; only a centerpiece condiment tray separates the parties.

The onlookers' faces betray curiosity, even a slight sense of bemusement, but not a hint of mockery or contempt. Zoom out a bit farther and you'll notice two more observers taking in the scene: a hardened middle-aged man standing off to the left (waiting for a table?) and a seated fellow in the foreground, winding up his meal with coffee and a cigar. Amid all the evident cacophony in the restaurant, these men surely couldn't have been alerted by their ears to the woman's and boy's murmurings; more likely, they caught sight of this strange tableau while idly scanning the room, their heads abruptly stopping mid-swivel, their thoughts somewhere along the lines of "Well, I'll be goddamned."

Much has been made of this image since it first appeared on the cover of *The Saturday Evening Post*, in November 1951. It has been upheld as a brave and righteous affirmation of the need for religious faith in an increasingly godless society. It has been dismissed as a ghastly specimen of sentimental kitsch. Most commonly, though, it has been celebrated as an affecting snapshot of Americans at their best: jumbled together, disparate of background, yet coexisting peacefully.

This last interpretation is exactly what Rockwell, a non-churchgoer, intended as the takeaway from *Saying Grace*. In his view, the painting was not about the woman and boy but about the reaction they engendered. "The people around them were staring, some surprised, some puzzled, some remembering their

Photos excerpted from *Norman Rockwell: Behind the Camera*, by Ron Schick, to be published this month by Little, Brown and Company; © 2009 by the author.



ART
AND CRAFT

Rockwell himself,
posing for his painting
*Norman Rockwell
Visits a Country Editor* (1946).

Opposite:
*Breakfast Table Political
Argument* (1948)—
photo prep and finished
illustration.



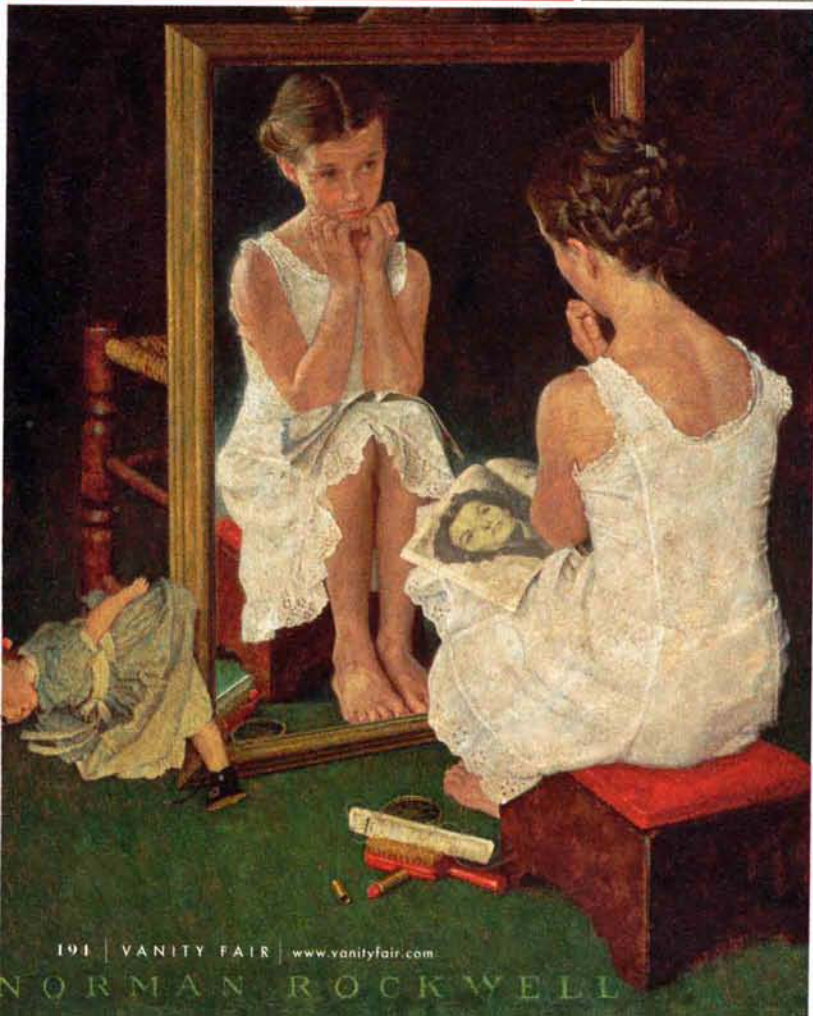
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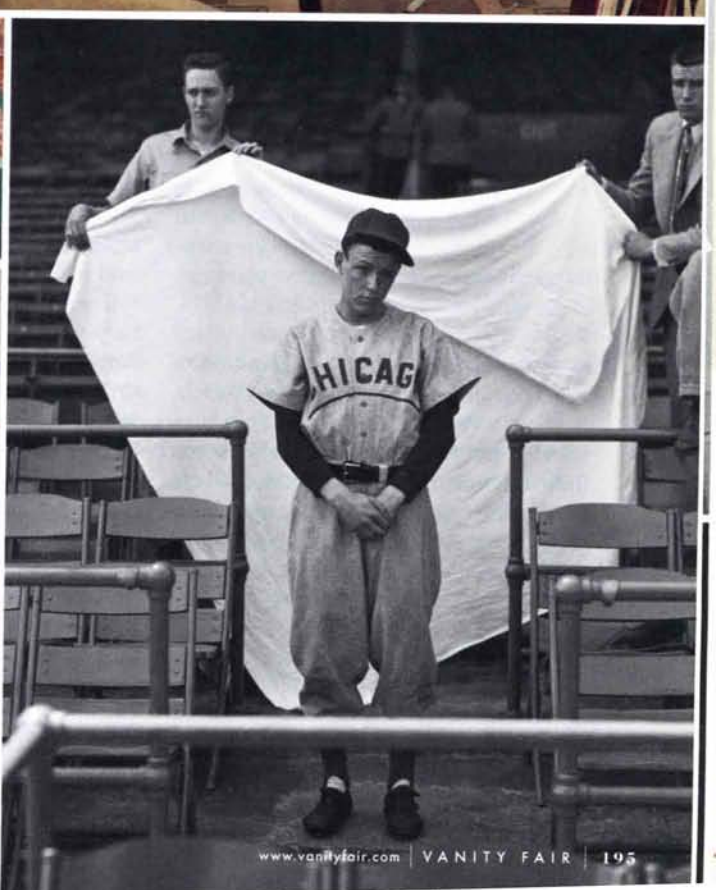
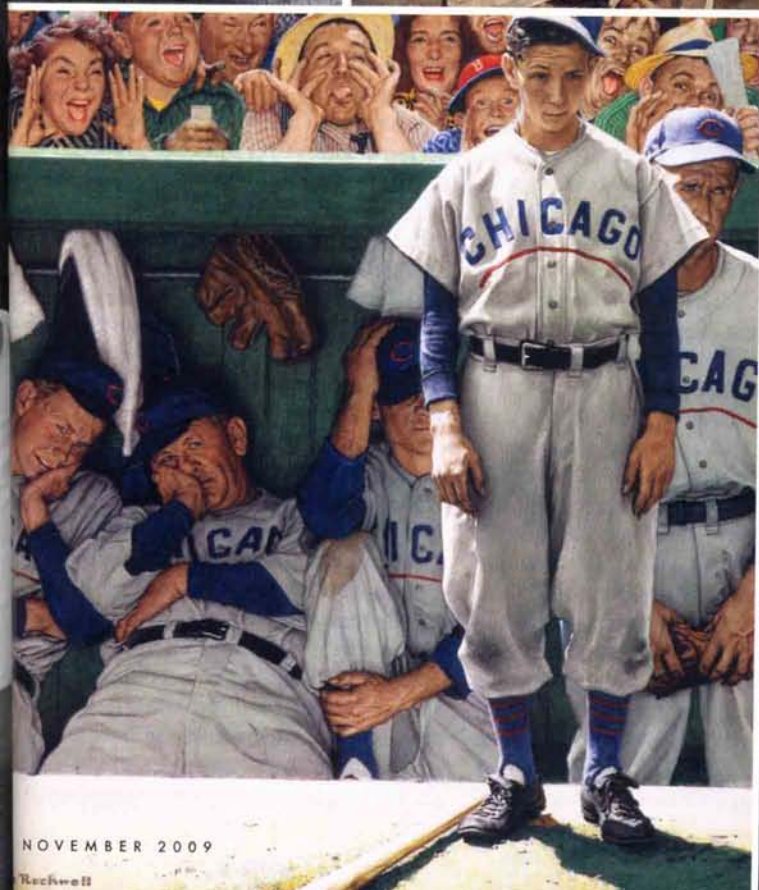


AMERICAN SNAPSHOTS

A collection of *Saturday Evening Post* covers, together with pictures Rockwell staged as he refined each concept (there could be scores of photos for each painting).

Clockwise from top left: *Homecoming Marine* (1945), *Saying Grace* (1951), *The Dugout* (1948), and *Girl at Mirror* (1954).





own lost childhood, but *all respectful*," the artist wrote in his memoir, the italics his.

In a readers' poll conducted in 1955, *Saying Grace* was selected as the most popular of Rockwell's *Post* covers, which would total more than 300 by the time he parted ways with the magazine, eight years later. This was an especially neat trick considering that the theme of *Saying Grace*—tolerance—was not as inherently warm and fuzzy as that of, say, *Doctor and Doll* (1929, the one with the kindly old pediatrician holding a stethoscope to a concerned little girl's dolly), or *Christmas Homecoming* (1948, the one with a college boy, his back to us, being received exuberantly by his extended family).

Rockwell had a knack for the direct hit, the image that would connect with the widest possible audience. The *mise en scène* of *Saying Grace* was cunningly conceived, not only in its arrangement of figures but in its telling details. It mattered that the diner was shabby, that it was raining out-

the nearest L. L. Bean outlet for this crew; everything, Grandma included, seems to have been pulled from a mildewy storage space. The picture's very premise suggests modest means: absent a home pool or a posh weekend place to escape to, this elaborate recreational production on wheels will have to do. And yet the story is essentially one of contentment: of a fulfilling (if frazzling) day out.

The newfound resonance of Rockwell's art has not been lost on those keen to uphold his legacy. A traveling retrospective of his career, "American Chronicles: The Art of Norman Rockwell," has been pulling in crowds at every museum it has visited—most recently, over the springtime, at the Detroit Institute of Arts, in a city especially racked with longing for better days. "American Chronicles" just spent the summer at its home base, the Norman Rockwell Museum, in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, which this year is celebrating its 40th anniversary,

himself acted out the old woman's solemn pose for his model's benefit; that he had brought Horn & Hardart Automat tables and chairs into his studio for the occasion; that one of the two young toughs eyeballing the grace sayers was played by the artist's eldest son, Jarvis; that Rockwell posed two chubby Maytag-repairman types as an alternate to the two young toughs; and that he ventured far afield from his New England studio for multiple reference photos of a dreary rail yard (in Rensselaer, New York) just to make sure he got the details at the very back of the painting right.

In his own behind-the-scenes book from 1949, *How I Make a Picture*—Rockwell always referred to his works as "pictures," like a movie director, rather than "illustrations" or "paintings"—he documented an exhaustive creative "system" in which photography was only the midpoint. First came brainstorming and a rough pencil sketch, then the casting of the models and the hir-

It's jarring to hear him speak in interviews: "I

side, and that the rail yard visible through the window was drab and sooty, the kind endemic to a mid-level industrial city where life wasn't easy but the locals were good folk. For Americans still recuperating from the strains and privations of World War II, it was natural to react to the *Post*'s cover by thinking, *I know that place*.

What Is an American?

As it happens, that place looks more familiar now than it might have just a few years ago—and it looks more inviting too. In our current climate of remorseful post-affluence—in our collective pondering of the question "What were we *thinking*?"—Rockwell's painted vignettes draw us back to the quotidian, dialed-down pleasures of American life before it got so out of whack.

His *Going and Coming* (1947), a two-panel portrait of a family en route to and from a summertime trip to a lake, is a veritable primer on the lost art of unostentatious living. An ancient sedan—no doubt the only car the family owns—is loaded up with Dad, Mom, four young kids, the family dog, and dour old Grandma in the back. Lashed to the roof are a weathered rowboat (with its name, SKIPPY, on the hull), its oars, and a tatty beach umbrella. Some folding chairs are tenuously roped to the car's side, and a fishing pole sticks out a window. No on-site rentals or impulse purchases from

and the exhibition moves on to the Museum of Art in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, on November 14. Meanwhile, a second traveling retrospective, "Norman Rockwell: American Imagist," is making the rounds under the auspices of the National Museum of American Illustration (which is in Newport, Rhode Island), and the Smithsonian Institution is planning yet another major Rockwell exhibition, for 2010, this one built around the private collections of Steven Spielberg and George Lucas.

Then there is *Norman Rockwell: Behind the Camera*, a wonderful new book by Ron Schick (photos from which accompany this article) that lifts the curtain on Rockwell's working methods, revealing how profoundly labor-intensive and thoughtfully imagined they were. From the mid-1930s onward, Rockwell orchestrated elaborate photo shoots of his models in various poses and setups, resulting in images that, though they were meant only to be studies, are compelling in their own right.

Next month, in conjunction with the book's publication, the Rockwell Museum will unveil ProjectNORMAN, a new section of its Web site (nrm.org) that will allow users to view the more than 18,000 photographs that Schick has sifted through, all newly digitized and catalogued according to their "parent" painting. Select *Saying Grace*, for example, and you'll be able to see that Rockwell had considered including a little girl as well as a little boy; that he

ing of costumes and props, then the process of coaxing the right poses out of the models (*Norman Rockwell: Behind the Camera* is rife with priceless shots of the artist pulling faces and hamming it up to demonstrate the effect he wants), then the snapping of the photo, then the composition of a fully detailed charcoal sketch, then a painted color sketch that was the exact size of the picture as it would be reproduced (for instance, the size of a *Post* cover), and then, and only then, the final painting.

The complexity of Rockwell's process belies the "simplicity" often ascribed to his finished products. But then, this is an artist with a history of being patronized, mischaracterized, and dismissed as "merely" an illustrator whose pictures, which were intended for mass reproduction, cannot stand on their own as paintings. The last time the Rockwell Museum mounted a big traveling retrospective, its arrival at New York's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in late 2001—two months after 9/11—was taken as a sign of the apocalypse by a *Village Voice* critic named Jerry Saltz, who castigated the Guggenheim for "trashing the reputation won for it by generations of artists" by allowing of Norm's literalist canvases to hang on its curvy walls. Quoting *Flash Art* American editor Massimiliano Gioni, Saltz wrote: "For the art world to fall for this simple vision now—especially now—is... like confessing in public that deep down inside we are, after all, right-wing. ... It's simply reactionary. It scares me."

Yet Rockwell was no more a man of simple vision than he was the house artist of the right wing. While his approach was calculatedly upbeat, it was never shallow or jingoistic, and his work, taken as a whole, is a remarkably thoughtful and multifaceted engagement with the question "What does it mean to be an American?" This was implicitly the case in his *Post* years, when he was painting soldiers and schoolgirls and old codgers playing musical instruments in the back room of a barbershop, and it became explicit in his later period at *Look* magazine, when he forsook the genial apoliticism of his earlier career for an embrace of J.F.K.-style New Frontiersmanship, devoting himself to pictures about the civil-rights movement, the Peace Corps, and the United Nations.

You could make the argument, in fact, that Barack Obama is the perfect bridge between these two Rockwell eras: a gangly, jug-eared solid-citizen type with a formi-

have been conditioned to treat Rockwell—*He's good in a corny, backward, non-art sort of way*—is giving way to outright admiration. As Stephanie Plunkett, the chief curator of the Norman Rockwell Museum, says, "There are a lot more people who feel totally comfortable with liking Norman Rockwell." And there's nothing reactionary or scary about that at all.

"I Wasn't a Country Boy"

Rockwell would have been the first to tell you that the pictures he painted were not meant to be taken as a documentary history of American life during his time on earth, and least of all as a record of *his* life. He was a realist in technique, but not in ethos. "The view of life I communicate in my pictures excludes the sordid and ugly. I paint life as I would like it to be," he wrote in 1960, in his book *My Adventures*

sordidness, the filth, the drunks" and an incident that forever spooked him, in which he witnessed an inebriated vagrant woman beating her male companion to a pulp in a vacant lot. His family moved for a spell to the village of Mamaroneck, in suburban Westchester County, but then returned to the city, this time to a boardinghouse, because his by then far-gone mother could no longer abide housework. The boarders with whom the adolescent Rockwell was forced to take his meals, a motley collection of frowsy malcontents and shady transients, were almost as traumatizing to him as the vacant-lot vagrants.

However, Rockwell had nothing but pleasant memories of the modest vacations his family went on in his early childhood, which were spent upstate on farms whose owners took in summer boarders to earn a little extra money. While the adult guests simply played croquet or sat on porches breathing in the country air, the children befriended their

was born on a-Hundred-and-Thoid and Amsterdam."

dable wife, two adorable girls, a dog, and a live-in mother-in-law (all these things being leitmotifs in Rockwell's work, the jug ears especially) ... who also happens to be the first black American president. While the Obamas are a bit too polished and urbane to take the places of the *Going and Coming* family in their clapped-out jalopy, it's not hard to transpose the First Family into *Easter Morning* (1959), in which a suburban dad, still in his pajamas, slumps sheepishly in a wing chair with a cigarette and the Sunday paper while his immaculately dressed wife and children march primly off to church.

A fresh look at Rockwell's work in the context of our times, in which we face many of the same circumstances that he painted through—war, economic hardship, cultural and racial divides—reveals a smarter and shrewder artist than a lot of us have given him credit for being. It also yields further rewards, such as an appreciation of his compositional brilliance (witness the old-codger jam session from 1950, *Shuffle-ton's Barbershop*, in which a shaft of backroom light illuminates the whole painting, 80 percent of which is taken up by the unoccupied but cluttered front room) and of his acuity as a storyteller (witness *Saying Grace*, whose action-packed single panel suggests at least half a dozen more plotlines beyond the central one).

It has taken a while, but the nose-holding ambivalence with which educated people

as an *Illustrator*. To miss this distinction, to take Rockwell's paintings absolutely literally as "America the way it was," is as misbegotten as taking the Bible absolutely literally. (And it's usually done by the same people.)

Rockwell did not himself have a remotely Rockwell-esque childhood. Though his tweedy self-presentation as an adult suggested a man raised in hardy, ascetic small-town New England with maple syrup running through his veins, he was, in actuality, a product of New York City. It's jarring to hear him speak in old TV interviews, to reconcile that chinless, David Souter-ish face with the gravelly voice that declares, "I was born on a-Hundred-and-Thoid and Amsterdam Avenue." But he was indeed a child of Manhattan's Upper West Side, born there in 1894 and raised in a series of apartments as the younger son of a downwardly mobile couple. His father, Waring, was the office manager at a textile firm, and his mother, Nancy, was an invalid and probable hypochondriac. Neither of them had much time for Norman and his older brother, Jarvis (not to be confused with the son Rockwell would later give that name), and Rockwell flatly stated later in his life that he was never close to his parents, nor could he even remember much about them.

While young Norman got up to the same high jinks as other city kids at the turn of the century—climbing telegraph poles, playing on stoops—neither at the time nor in retrospect did he find urban life idyllic. What he remembered, he said, were "the

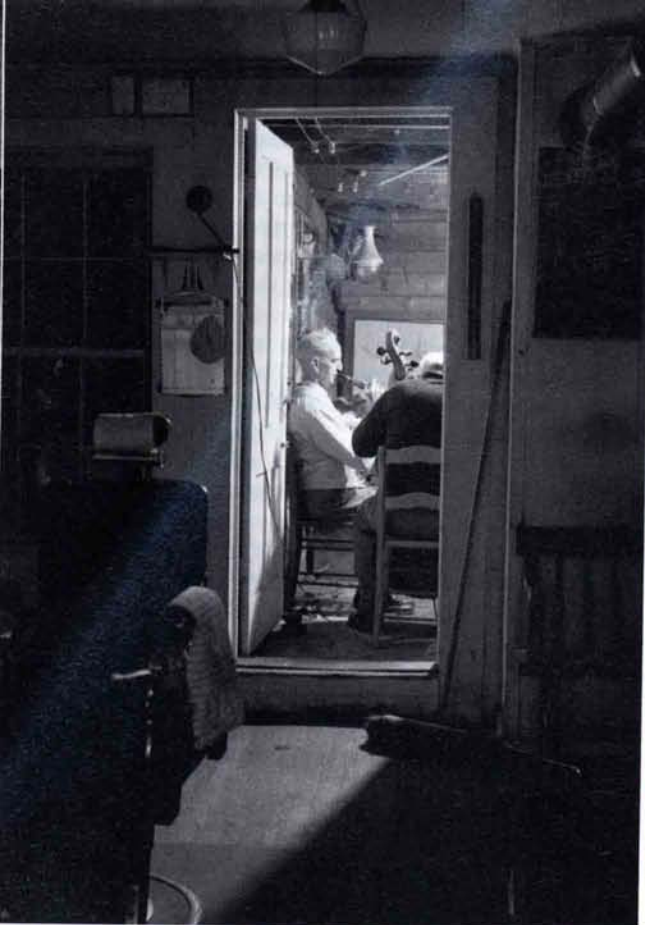
farm-boy and farm-girl counterparts and embarked on a whirlwind tour of bucolia's greatest hits: helping out with the milking, riding and grooming the horses, splashing in swimming holes, fishing for bullheads, and trapping turtles and frogs.

These summer escapes made a deep impression on Rockwell, blurring into "an image of sheer blissfulness" that never left his mind. He ascribed to the country a magical ability to rewire his brain and make him, temporarily at least, a better person: "In the city we kids delighted to go up on the roof of our apartment house and spit down on the passers-by in the street below. But we never did things like that in the country. The clean air, the green fields, the thousand and one things to do ... got somehow into us and changed our personalities as much as the sun changed the color of our skins."

Reflecting on the lasting impact of those vacations some 50-odd years after he'd taken them, Rockwell wrote in his memoir:

I sometimes think we paint to fulfill ourselves and our lives, to supply the things we want and don't have. ...

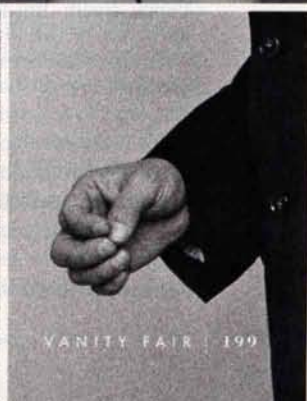
Maybe as I grew up and found that the world wasn't the perfectly pleasant place I had thought it to be I unconsciously decided that, even if it wasn't an ideal world, it should be and so painted only the ideal aspects of it—pictures in which there were no drunken slatterns or self-centered mothers, in which, on the contrary, there were only Foxy Grandpas who played baseball with the kids and boys [who] fished from





THE RADICAL

In his later years Rockwell began moving away from familiar themes exemplified (*opposite*) by *Shuffleton's Barbershop* (1950) and *The Runaway* (1958). His 1964 painting *The Problem We All Live With* evoked the integration of an all-white school in New Orleans.





logs and got up circuses in the back yard....

The summers I spent in the country as a child became part of this idealized view of life. Those summers seemed blissful, sort of a happy dream. But I wasn't a country boy, I didn't really live that kind of life. Except (heads up, here comes the point of the whole digression) later on in my paintings.

This is the essence of the whole Norman Rockwell ethos. From a fleeting experience of life at the closest it would ever get to perfect, he extrapolated an entire world. It was an atypical world for an artist to inhabit, since it focused on the positive to the near

exclusion of the negative—an inversion of the outlook favored by the art-crit hegemony of his day, which tended to be more kindly disposed toward artists whose work depicted the turbulence and pain of the human condition. But if it was perfectly valid for the brilliant Norwegian miserabilist Edvard Munch to profess, "For as long as I can remember, I have suffered from a deep feeling of anxiety, which I have tried to express in my art"—with no penalty due for failing to look on the bright side of life—then it was no less valid for Rockwell to infuse *his* art with all the feelings wrought by his "happy dream."

Rising to the Top

The other saving grace of Rockwell's youth, along with his summer trips upstate, was his artistic ability. From an early age, he had impressed his friends with his knack for drawing. He also harbored deep hero worship for the great illustrators of the adventure books he read, chief among them Howard Pyle (1853–1911), whose vivid, historically faithful pictures of swashbuckling pirates and Arthurian knights had made him a nationally known



figure. In those days, illustrators occupied a more exalted place in the United States than they do now, roughly analogous to today's star photographers, with perhaps a smidgen of *auteur*-director status thrown in. It wasn't eccentric for a young boy to dream of becoming the next Howard Pyle—indeed, Pyle ran his own school of illustration in Pennsylvania, with N. C. Wyeth among his star pupils—and Rockwell, as soon as he

TOUR DE FARCE

The Gossips (above), Rockwell's classic 1948 Saturday Evening Post cover, and (opposite) the photo collage that preceded it. Rockwell made himself the last male character.

was old enough, abandoned high school for art school, enrolling at the Art Students League of New York.

For all his chronic self-deprecation and genuine niceness—that “sort of ‘Oh gosh’ flavor,” as one of his *Saturday Evening Post* editors, Ben Hibbs, later put it—Rockwell was a determined and doggedly competitive kid who knew he was good. At the Art Students League, he quickly rose to the top of the anatomy-and-

life-drawing class taught by the estimable artist and instructor George B. Bridgman, who literally wrote the book on the subject (*Constructive Anatomy*, still in print). Thereafter, Rockwell never really endured anything like professional struggle. By 1913, before he was out of his teens, he had landed the position of art director of *Boys' Life*, the Scouting magazine, in which capacity he earned \$50 a month and was allowed to give himself assignments. Just three years later, when he was 22 years old, he placed his first *Post* cover.

The *Post* was at the time the leading

weekly magazine in America. Its editor was George Horace Lorimer, a square-jawed avatar of traditional family values who, since taking over the publication in 1899, had transformed it from a sleepy, money-losing vestige of the 19th century into a middlebrow powerhouse, avidly read for its illustrated fiction, light features, and innocuous humor. Screwing up his courage in March of 1916, Rockwell toted some of his paintings and sketches to Penn Station and took a train down to Philadelphia, where the offices of Curtis Publishing, the *Post's* parent company, were located. He had no appointment, but the magazine's art director, Walter Dower, agreed to look at the young artist's work, liked what he saw, and showed it to the boss. Lorimer purchased two finished paintings on the spot. One of them, *Boy with Baby Carriage*—depicting a youth dressed for church, grumpily pushing along an infant sibling in a pram while being razed by two friends in baseball uniforms—was Rockwell's *Post* debut, published on May 20 of that year.

Up to that point, the *Post's* leading cover artist had been J. C. Leyendecker, another of Rockwell's illustrator idols. Twenty years Rockwell's senior, Leyendecker was the Bruce Weber of his day, equally adept at sparkingly wholesome scenes of Americana and glorious, nearly deific renderings of supplely muscled Ivy League-jock types. (Whether intentionally so or not, Leyendecker's summer-cover

erian England. Yet over time he developed a sensibility quite apart from Leyendecker's, even as the two men became friends and neighbors in the Westchester commuter town of New Rochelle, then the home of a number of illustrators and cartoonists.

Whereas Leyendecker's football players filled out their uniforms like superheroes and had manly Cary Grant side partings, the teenage subject of Rockwell's *Football Hero* (1938) was too skinny for his uniform, wore his hair in a mussed, utilitarian buzz cut, had two adhesive bandages on his face, and seemed flustered by the cheerleader pressing her hands against his chest as she sewed a varsity letter onto his jersey. Leyendecker's gift was for the grabby, seductive, burnished-to-a-fare-thee-well image; Rockwell's, it transpired, was for the everyday scene with narrative ballast and the common touch.

As the years progressed, the public came to appreciate the latter over the former. In their 2008 monograph on Leyendecker, Laurence S. Cutler and Judy Goffman Cutler, the founders of the National Museum of American Illustration, suggest that Rockwell had something of a *Single White Female* complex about the elder artist, moving near him, befriending him, pumping him for contacts in the biz (which "the shy Leyendecker... naïvely revealed"), and "ultimately supplant[ing] his idol as the best-known cover artist for the *Saturday Evening Post*." Whether or not Rockwell was really so coldly mercenary, he did indeed eclipse Leyendecker. By 1942, the year the *Post* abandoned its hand-lettered, cover-spanning italicized logo underscored by two thick lines in favor of a plainer typeset

empty Roaring 20s existence, cocktailin' on the social circuit and falling into the beds of extramarital lovers with each other's tacit approval. After he and O'Connor divorced, Rockwell visited friends in Southern California and fell for another pretty young schoolteacher, an Alhambra girl named Mary Barstow. Norman and Mary married in 1930, and by the time of the move to Arlington they had three sons—Jarvis, Tom, and Peter—and Norman found himself hankering for "sweet pastoral peace."

The Vermont years, which lasted until 1953, are the sweet spot in the Rockwell canon, the period that gave us his most richly narrative work, including *Saying Grace*, *Going and Coming*, *Shuffleton's Barbershop*, *Christmas Homecoming*, and his "Four Freedoms" series from 1943 (*Freedom of Speech*, *Freedom of Worship*, *Freedom from Want*, and *Freedom from Fear*), a traveling tour of which raised more than \$100 million in U.S. war bonds.

Something about Vermont set Rockwell's mind whizzing and further sharpened his observational and storytelling skills. Every last detail of Rob Shuffleton's barbershop in East Arlington animated him: "where Rob hung his combs, his rusty old clippers, the way the light fell across the magazine rack, his moth-eaten push broom leaning against the display cases of candy and ammunition, the cracked leather seat of the barber chair with the stuffing poking through along the edges over the nickel-plated frame." Bob Benedict's grubby auto-repair shop was similarly irresistible and so became the setting for *Homecoming*

Rockwell's "life as I would like it to be"—everyday

portraits of lifeguards and rowers were stunningly subversive: unabashed homoeroticism slipped right under Lorimer's—and America's—nose.) A master iconographer when Rockwell was still in short pants, Leyendecker had created the first sex symbol in print advertising, the Arrow Collar Man (modeled on his live-in companion, a Canadian hunk named Charles Beach), and had invented the popular image of Baby New Year, the bare-naked cherub whose annual appearance on the *Post's* cover heralded the departure of one year and the arrival of the next.

Rockwell's early work for the *Post*, and for such other clients as *Country Gentleman* and *Ladies' Home Journal*, was conspicuously derivative of Leyendecker's—gamboling boys, girls with big ribbons in their hair, merrie Yuletide scenes out of Victo-

logo shunted to the top left, Leyendecker's day was all but done, and he died in 1951 a virtually forgotten man. (Though it must be said that Rockwell was one of the five people who turned up at his funeral. The others, in Rockwell's recollection, were Leyendecker's sister, Augusta; his companion, Beach; and a cousin who came with her husband.)

The Sweet Spot

In 1939, Rockwell moved from New Rochelle to the rural township of Arlington, Vermont, eager to put a complicated chapter of his life behind him. Not long after he'd sold his first *Post* cover, he had impetuously married a pretty young schoolteacher named Irene O'Connor. The union lasted nearly 14 years but was loveless, if relatively uncontentious. The Rockwells lived a blithe,

Marine (1945), in which a young mechanic, just returned from the Pacific theater, sets himself down on a crate and recounts his war experiences to a rapt audience of fellow employees, two boys, and a cop. (The *Marine* and the auto-shop guys were the real deal, the cop was played by the Arlington town clerk, and the boys were Jarvis and Peter.)

Rockwell's "life as I would like it to be" took firm shape as a plausible ideal—not a fantastical world like C. S. Lewis's Narnia or Walt Disney's Magic Kingdom, but a place that looked just like everyday America, only nicer. Crucial to its appeal (and instructive to us now) is how accessible and wealth-free this place was. The dogs were invariably mutts, the restaurants usually diners, the kitchens familiarly cramped, and the people decidedly unmodelish in

appearance: knob-nosed, jut-jawed, jug-eared, cowlicked, excessively freckled, awkward of posture. Even if someone was bona fide attractive, he or she was never forbiddingly so.

Rockwell's best model from this period, the impishly expressive little Mary Whalen, went through the paces of girlhood as parents hoped their own daughters would: intrepid enough to spend a day swimming, biking, going to the movies, and attending a birthday party (*Day in the Life of a Little Girl*, 1952), rascally and tough enough to get a charge out of a shiner earned in a classroom fistfight (*Girl with Black Eye*, 1953), and tender enough to be conflicted about incipient puberty (the extraordinary *Girl at Mirror*, 1954, begun in Arlington but completed and published after Rockwell moved to Stockbridge).

From where we stand today, the appeal of these pictures transcends nostalgia or any wishful thinking that we can teleport "back" into scenes that were exhaustively posed and staged in the first place. It's the thought behind them that counts: What does it mean to be an American? What virtues are ours to uphold? What are we like in our best moments? For Rockwell, the answers to these questions lay in the idea, as he put it, "that everybody has a responsibility to everybody else." His pictures were about family, friendships, community, and society. Solo scenes were rare, and individual self-interest was anathema. To the concept of "the town," he devoted himself as zealously as a groom does to a bride: for better (the workman saying his

Disturbing Masterpiece

Peter Rockwell, now a sculptor who lives in Italy, is emphatic in urging Rockwell fans "never to confuse an artist with his art," especially in his father's case. But he advises a long look at *Triple Self-Portrait*, a high-water mark of his father's Stockbridge period, painted in late 1959 and published on the *Post*'s cover early the following year. The artist, with his back to us, leans to his left to take a gander at himself in the mirror while partway through painting his face on a large canvas (onto which are tacked small reproductions of self-portraits by Rembrandt, van Gogh, Dürer, and Picasso). While Norman the painter, as seen in the mirror, is grayed and vaguely glum of expression, with his pipe sagging downward from his lips and his eyes blanked out by the reflected glare of sunlight on his glasses, Norman the painted is chipper and lovable, with the pipe jutting upward and a glint in his (unobscured) eyes.

"In some ways it's his most mature painting," says Peter. "You can see what he's doing in the painting within the painting is an idealized version of himself, in stark contrast to the reality." Norman Rockwell reveals himself to be a "closet intellectual" (in his son's words) who, like the Post-Impressionist van Gogh or the Cubist-period Picasso, is fully aware that he is working on several levels—the real, the ideal, and the state of interplay between the two.

Still, it seems like just a light, playful exercise until you learn that Rockwell painted *Triple Self-Portrait* shortly after his wife died,

naïf. He couldn't think maturely enough to realize that, because of the success and size of his career, he needed to hire an accountant, a manager, and a secretary. So all that fell to my mother, and it was too much."

Rockwell was sincere in his desire to get his wife help but perplexed by the situation, emotionally ill-equipped to handle it. Mary's death was a shock—and an impetus to change his ways. So, too, was his subsequent marriage, in 1961, to Molly Punder, a Stockbridge woman who had retired from her job teaching English and history at the Milton Academy, a boarding school outside of Boston. (A serial teacher-marrier, Rockwell clearly wanted the women in his life to have all the answers.)

This was the happiest of Rockwell's three marriages, seeing him out until his death, in 1978. Molly, of liberal and activist bent, urged her husband to take on the issues of the day, a mission supported by his new editors at *Look*, to which he decamped in 1963 after the *Post* had begun its slide into irrelevance. While Rockwell never plunged headlong into the messiness of the hippie and anti-war movements—the closest he ever got to painting a contemporarily long-haired male was his inclusion of Ringo Starr in a 1966 illustration for a *McCall's* short story about a lonely girl who fantasizes about celebrities—he was inspired by the civil-rights movement.

His very first illustration for *Look*, published in January 1964, was *The Problem We All Live With*, based on the real-life story of Ruby Bridges, a six-year-old girl who, in 1960, had become the first African-American child to integrate an all-white school in New

America, only nicer—is a place surprisingly free of wealth.

piece at a town meeting in *Freedom of Speech*) and for worse (the 15 nosy Yankees through whom a scandalous rumor circulates in 1948's very funny *The Gossips*), but never with any doubt in the sacredness of the institution.

As we soul-search our way out of a troubled epoch, Rockwell's vignettes offer succor and food for thought. The striking thing about *Christmas Homecoming*, for example, is its absence of the usual advertiser-friendly trappings (gaudy decorations, stockings hung over a fireplace, gingerbread houses, new toys, snow, Santa) and the joy taken in the actual homecoming: Mother (Mary Rockwell) swallows up her son (Jarvis) in a hug while a further 16 people (including Norman, Tom, Peter, and—why not?—Grandma Moses) await their turn.

unexpectedly, of heart failure, when she was just 51 years old. For all the considerable thought he put into his pictures for the American people, Rockwell was neglectful on the home front. What precipitated the family's move from Vermont to Stockbridge in 1953 was the fact that the Massachusetts town was (and remains) the home of the Austen Riggs Center, a psychiatric-care facility. The pressure and burden of not only being Mrs. Norman Rockwell but managing all his business affairs took its toll on Mary, sending her into a tailspin of alcoholism and depression. By moving closer to Austen Riggs, Mary could get intensive treatment, and Rockwell, too, went to a therapist.

"He was not necessarily a very good father or husband—a workaholic who never took vacations, so he never took us on vacations," says Peter Rockwell. "He was also a

Orleans. It was a radical departure from the Rockwell that America knew and loved: an uncompromisingly disturbing scene of a pigtailed little innocent in a white dress walking straight ahead, preceded and trailed by pairs of faceless federal marshals (their bodies cropped off at shoulder height to emphasize the girl's ultimate aloneness), all set against a backdrop of an institutional concrete wall defaced with a graffito of the word NIGGER and the gory splatter of a tomato that someone has hurled the girl's way.

For a man who in the 1930s had been too timid to challenge George Horace Lorimer's edict that black people could be depicted only in service-industry jobs (a policy that Leyendecker, incidentally, had been courageous enough to flout), this was a belated and powerful acknowledgment of a part of American life that he had long ig-

nored. It was also his last truly great, masterful piece of narrative painting.

Rockwell's passion for the subject came through in his brushwork; the finished art packs a wallop at its full 36 by 58 inches at the Rockwell Museum, the juice streaks and viscera of the tomato suggesting the horrible fate of previous generations of African-Americans. (Project NORMAN will let you look at the multiple photo studies Rockwell undertook to get this effect right.) In the years to follow, Rockwell would produce more fine work in this vein—such as *New Kids in the Neighborhood* (1967), which captures the pregnant pause before three white children initiate conversation with two black children whose family's belongings are in the process of being unloaded from a moving truck—but he would never scale such heights again.

Beyond the Myth

By the 1970s and 80s, Rockwell's imagery had become so ingrained in American popular culture that it was, at best, taken for granted, and, at worst, dismissed, ridiculed, and flat-out denigrated. To an extent, this couldn't be helped: it was one thing to experience Rockwell's *Post* covers in real time as they came out on newsstands, to really feel their impact, and quite another to be sitting impatiently in a pediatrician's office, waiting for your name to be called while staring for the umpteenth time at a sun-faded, sputum-plotted reproduction of *Before the Shot* (1958)—one of Rockwell's hokier efforts, in which a little boy is shown lowering his trousers and studying his doctor's framed diploma while the good doc preps an enormous syringe.

To baby-boomers who had been reared on Rockwell and then grown into frisky, cynical young adults, he was ripe for parody—not an enemy, necessarily, but a great big American square with “a style and ethos just begging to be polluted,” in the words of the writer and humorist Tony Hendra, a contributor to the satirical *National Lampoon* from its inception, in 1970, and its co-editor in chief from 1975 to 1978. Many times in the 70s—including no fewer than eight times in 1979 alone—the *Lampoon* ran covers mocking the style of the man they called “Normal” Rockwell, inevitably to naughty effect (e.g., a “whole-some” baseball scene in which the male catcher is too busy ogling a female batter's pendulous breasts to notice the ball speeding toward his head).

But with time and perspective has come appreciation, both from such boomer

standard-bearers as Steven Spielberg, who has expressed his admiration for Rockwell's “portraits of America and Americans without cynicism,” and such art-world figures as the curator and art historian Robert Rosenblum, a late-in-life convert who, seven years before his 2006 death, wrote, “Now that the battle for modern art has ended in a triumph that took place in another century, the twentieth, Rockwell's work may become an indispensable part of art history. The sneering, puritanical condescension with which he was once viewed by serious art lovers can be swiftly turned into pleasure.”

Even an enthusiast like Rosenblum, though, felt the need to call Rockwell a “myth-maker.” Likewise, Peter Rockwell is adamant that what his father painted was “a world that never existed.” But don't these views sell both Norman Rockwell and the American people a little short? For one thing, as *Triple Self-Portrait* shows, this was a smart, crafty artist, not a softheaded

gent who painted simple pictures. He may have traded in a sweetened, idealized version of American life, but, compared with the forms of heightened reality to which we've been exposed of late—“real” housewives, “fortunes” built on Ponzi schemes, “wealth” built on borrowing—his was rather more noble and credible.

More important, it's simply not true that the America of Rockwell's pictures is mythical. The visions of tolerance, fortitude, and decency in *Saying Grace*, *The Problem We All Live With*, and *Marine Homecoming* may not be scenes of the everyday, but nor are they the stuff of fantasy, no more so than Rockwell's blissful and formative childhood summers were. What these scenes show us are Americans at their best—the better versions of our usual selves that, while only ever fleetingly realized, are nonetheless real. □

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VIDEO:
DAVID KAMP
AND ROSS
MACDONALD
ASSESS
ROCKWELL'S
LEGACY.



Rockwell is
working on several
levels—the real,
the ideal, and the interplay
in between.

CLOSET
INTELLECTUAL?

In *Triple Self-Portrait* (1959) Rockwell reveals himself to be clear-eyed about his illusions. "In some ways it's his most mature painting," says Rockwell's son Peter.

