

The following article is on the exhibition *Norman Rockwell's America*, organized and curated by the National Museum of American Illustration, which debuted at London's famed Dulwich Picture Gallery in December 2011 as part of Dulwich's 200th Anniversary Celebration. It was the first exhibition ever of Rockwell's work in the United Kingdom, and drew record setting attendance.

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Rockwell of Ages

By Paul Johnson from the December/January issue

Norman Rockwell's America wowed England this year.

The best exhibition held in London in 2011 was at the Dulwich Picture Gallery and featured the works of Norman Rockwell. The show was also at the National Museum of American Illustration in Newport, Rhode Island, but for those who missed it, the splendid catalogue, *Norman Rockwell's America ... In England*, by Judy Goffman Cutler and Laurence S. Cutler, is an excellent substitute and will make a welcome Christmas present.

Norman Rockwell (1894–1978) is one of those rare artists who have an immediate, intimate, and special relationship with the public. He does not need any explaining, justifying, or theorizing. What he does is obvious and the virtues it displays are overwhelmingly apparent. He showed how ordinary Americans lived, worked, laughed, and worried, had fun and argued, learned and enjoyed themselves, in peace and war, in the second quarter of the 20th century, in authentic detail and with dazzling accuracy in hundreds of covers for the *Saturday Evening Post*. His was perhaps the most sustained and successful exercise in social realism in the whole history of art, remarkable alike for superb craftsmanship, unflinching honesty, and invariable consistency.

Of course the art critics hated him, and still do. He left them with no function to perform. He spoke directly to the public, and readers responded with enthusiasm. He is as popular now as ever ...*

Art critics try to dismiss Rockwell as a “mere illustrator.” But you could say the same about the Limbourg brothers who created that masterpiece of the 15th century, the *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, or the great Dutch genre painters of the 17th century like Pieter de Hooch, Vermeer, or Gerard Dou, or those splendid Victorians like Maddox Brown or W.P. Frith.

Rockwell dealt in truth and reality. His figures actually existed and he made them live in a way no photograph can ever quite do. In centuries to come people will turn to him to know exactly what the Americans of his time looked like and how they behaved. No doubt his prices will rise accordingly, and indeed in 50 years' time his pictures will no longer be on the market: they will all be in public collections.

There is another reason why Rockwell appeals. He portrayed an America which was democratic, freedom-loving, egalitarian, enterprising, and dynamic, which was sure of itself and its aims, and believed in its destiny. This was not the doubting, nervous, fearful, neurotic America we sometimes see today, with its racially hyphenated complexes and its pessimism about the future. Rockwell's America was the creation of the melting pot, enjoying the legacy of Lincoln, the ebullience of Theodore Roosevelt, the vision of Woodrow Wilson, and the canny frugality of Coolidge. It was an enormously productive, fruitful, varied, and creative society and Rockwell painted its portrait and prosopography. All this gives him some claim to be considered the finest American artist of the 20th century, and this exciting little volume, price \$35, is the perfect introduction to his work.

About the Author

Paul Johnson is the author most recently of *Churchill* (Viking). His books include *Modern Times*, *Intellectuals*, and *A History of the American People*.

* Paragraph condensed by NMAI due to space limitations
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