

# The illustrations of Norman Rockwell's 20th century America at Dulwich Picture Gallery

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



*No Christmas Problem Now - Santa With a Parker Pen  
(1929)*

© The National Museum of American Illustration, Newport,  
RI, USA, and the American Illustrators Gallery, NYC

***Exhibition: Norman Rockwell's America, Dulwich Picture  
Gallery, London, until March 27 2011***

At the start of the 20th century America faced hard times with World War

One, the Wall Street Crash, 1929 and the Great Depression of the 1930s. In this turbulent period, culture and art was hit a peak, and painter Norman Rockwell was one of the artists to depict the eventful periods of American lifestyle and the nation's thoughts through his work.

The rising cover illustrator's singular, folksy style told stories of everyday life during key moments in history including both World Wars. Rockwell's work required no explanation, his covers telling whole stories. His ability to paint topical messages landed him a job at popular magazine The Saturday Evening Post.

This show displays all 323 vintage covers Rockwell created for the Post, alongside his iconic illustrations for advertisements, magazines and books.

An extremely patriotic painter, Rockwell once said he was "showing the America I knew and observed to others who might not have noticed." His first works to his last painting, in 1967, are charted along the way.

In his early days children were incorporated into most of his work, and the ongoing adventures and misfortunes of Cousin Reginald was a popular theme during his time at Country Gentlemen magazine.

His 1917 cover, Cousin Reginald Plays Pirates shows a young city boy and his mischievous relatives, Chuck Peterkin and the Doolittle brothers.

Rockwell's contemporaries were focused on painting the soldiers fighting in World War One, but he liked to illustrate overlooked members of society. In Till the Boys Come Home (1918), four melancholy ladies are sat knitting to distract themselves as their loved ones head off to war.

A letter on the floor represents the difficulties families would have experienced as they struggled to communicate with their relatives and find out the latest news – each detail in his painting is significant.

In 1934 he painted an African American boy chatting with a wealthy white lady in Woman in Riding Habit Fallen off Horse. It was a controversial move, but it gave him a sense of freedom from artistic boundaries. During the 1940s, new Post editor told Rockwell to "go for it".

With the onset of World War Two Rockwell painted Rosie the Riveter (1943), which became an iconic image for women's rights. His follow-up painting, Miss Liberty (1943), was of a woman carrying symbols of men's jobs which were once considered unrealistic for women.

The public turned to the covers of Post magazine as guidance during the fabulous 1950s. As headlines spoke of worldwide problems, Rockwell's covers were still depicting America in a positive light – his cover, Boy Graduate (1959), shows a student against the background of these news reports looking optimistic.

By the 1960s, artists were experimenting with Op art and Pop art and in The Connoisseur (1962) Rockwell depicts a gentlemen contemplating a Jackson-Pollock Abstract piece in a museum.

It is clear that he was taking a stab at ever-evolving new art forms and, as the Post moved more towards celebrity culture, Rockwell finally left and moved to Look magazine to deal with political and social issues.

The exhibition shows the chronology of Rockwell's path to becoming a national figure. The artist became a household name because he knew that America craved more than just entertainment – it wanted to see the story of its people.

Rockwell knew this, and that is why he had such a successful career as a cover illustrator for the nation's favourite magazine.

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

- Dulwich Picture Gallery

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