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Illustrating Examples

A London show of Norman Rockwell's work confirms him as a giant of American art

January 5 2011 12:01AM

Because Norman Rockwell's pictures seem to celebrate American life, because they are inhabited by schoolboys and grey-haired grannies, because they are set in diners and drugstores, because he painted Middle America in the middle of the 20th century, before Kennedy's assassination and Vietnam stirred cynicism into the American Dream, he is sometimes caricatured as the man who not only painted America but who also mythologised it.

An exhibition in London, the first show of Rockwell's original works to come to this country, now illustrates why he is rightly regarded among the giants of 20th-century American art.

It is not just that, like Andy Warhol, Rockwell took icons of everyday American life and lent them a mythic quality; or even that his pictures depict the virtues of tolerance and family and fair play. It was that his compositional brilliance was so acute that he could tell stories in a single image.

The knowingness of his *Triple Self-Portrait* — he paints himself studying his reflection in a mirror, a pipe drooping from his mouth, while his canvas depicts an idealised version of himself, his clenched pipe pointing chirpily upwards — seeps through all Rockwell's art. Viewers look at his images as if peeking at a scene through parted curtains, glimpsing an idealised version of themselves: they are both observer and subject. The sharpness of his vision, the potency of his storytelling, still shape the way that America paints itself. Every closing tableau in *Mad Men* could be a Rockwell illustration.

Rockwell said that he painted life not as it is but "as I would like it to be". Yet his portrait of America was no fantasy. Art, Picasso said, is a lie that makes you realise the truth. Few painters told lies that resonated more authentically than Rockwell's.

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