

Norman Rockwell

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Norman Rockwell is probably the most popular and well known artist the United States has ever seen. He chronicled American history through many difficult times in its history such as both world wars, the Cold War, the Vietnam War, and the civil rights movement. He depicted the famous and influential as well as the ordinary citizen, although it had been his depictions of everyday people that eventually made him famous.

In most of his work, Rockwell made ordinary scenes such as playing a game of marbles (see *Marble Champion*) something extraordinary and beautiful. His paintings were simple, they had not been created to make a statement or to appeal to the enlightened mind, their purpose was to be made into ads, illustrations, or magazine covers.

In 1908 Rockwell began formal arts training at the age of fourteen at the Chase School of Fine and Applied Arts. He started out going just a few days out of the week while continuing his education at a regular public school at the same time. During the middle of his sophomore year in high school however, Rockwell decided to drop out of public school altogether to become a full time student at the National Academy School. This school proved to be too stifling and ridged for Rockwell and he left it for the Arts Student League, a more exciting and liberal school.

Even at a young age Rockwell dreamed of having his work shown on the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*, a popular weekly magazine of his time that would eventually make him famous. In 1916 at the age of 22, he finally achieved that dream. During his lifetime, Rockwell would produce over 320 covers for the *Post* in his 47 year long relationship with the magazine. It is estimated that around four million people saw these covers, and over time Rockwell's work began to gather some popular power (Marling, Karal Ann, [Norman Rockwell](#)).

Over time, the majority of America began to see themselves in Rockwell's paintings, in his depictions of everyday people doing everyday things. Through these depictions he was promoting the 'feel good' emotional state of a society that was experiencing massive changes like the Great Depression and the world wars. His paintings portrayed a world where these things had no real effect, he depicted a

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believable life that seemingly anyone could live. His images instilled a hope that anyone could achieve the American Dream.

Adults in particular loved Rockwell's work, it allowed them to turn back time and indulge themselves in lost innocence because his illustrations never seemed to be complex, did not force the viewer to think, reflect on themselves, or even think about the world outside their living room. Rockwell had been rather gifted in creating images that allowed the American society as a whole to engage in denial of the world around them. "He fueled our ingrained habit of denying what we know but don't want to know." (Halpern, p. 26).

But even Rockwell himself was under no illusion of the nature of his art, he wanted to paint the ideal world he had never been able to experience (Halpern, p. 26) There were no whores, drunks, abuse, depression, and no one was mentally ill like his wife, and no one was sick. Rockwell confessed that he simply wanted to be well liked, and liked he was. Rockwell's audience was enormous, larger than any artist before him, in 1945 statisticians estimated that "a gratifying total of one billion six hundred million persons look at a given Norman Rockwell Boy Scout calendar on a given day." (Buechner, p. 53) It was because of this huge audience that it was imperative that Rockwell appeal to all of them. He needed to be able to reach into people's souls and reach them on a personal level, but he must never offend; his audience was simply too large and if an image was even slightly offensive, Rockwell would lose thousands of his viewers. He, as well as the Saturday Evening Post, could not afford such a drop and expect to survive, therefore all personal opinions and preferences had to be muted and tucked away.

Norman Rockwell had a very odd yet interesting system for the development of his paintings. They consisted of a series of steps, the first being a loose sketch usually done on a napkin in a restaurant or wherever the idea came to him; this was mainly used to serve as a reminder of the image and idea. Second he would go through extensive lengths to gather the perfect models, costumes and props. Everything had to be the perfect model for his scene since Rockwell simply copied exactly what he saw for the most part, if a prop or costume was off, so would be his painting. After the gathering of the props, models and costumes he would begin a very detailed drawing in black and

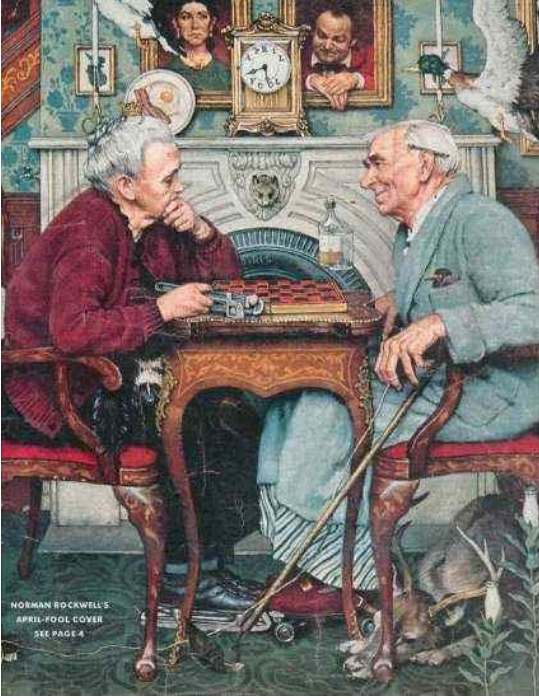
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white. This is the stage where Rockwell would solve as many technical issues as possible so he could devote all of his attention on his final stage, the color and texture development. Rockwell's use of photorealistic color is probably the thing he is most well known for; he spent a considerable amount of his time developing the perfect color for everything, even though no one would be seeing the original piece, but a muddier paper copy. (Buechner, p. 17-18)

Portraits made by Rockwell were produced with exactly the same formula as his other illustrations, but this method allowed his portraits to seem set in stone, one would assume that the painting is a perfect replica of the sitter because of his excellent drawing skills as well as his highly developed use of color. Rockwell did not create many traditional portraits; quite often he did not have the actual sitter before him and had to use a photograph therefore having to infer the true color of the skin due to the lack of color saturation in photographs from the 50s and 60s. Rockwell painted many of the United States presidents, like Dwight D. Eisenhower, but these were done from the photographs. These images of presidents were really the only paintings (I had) found that maintain the appearance of a portrait, mainly busts done with a simple background of next to nothing. The empty background is not traditional, but the crop of the presidents's images are. So, even when Rockwell was attempting traditional portraiture, his lacking backgrounds and symbols of status leave him lacking.

Because of Rockwell's photo quality images, he had firm expectations laid upon him that everything in his images must be perfectly accurate, if even a door was opened facing the wrong direction, letters of complaint would flood the Post's editor's mailbox chiding Rockwell's mistake (Buechner, Thomas S., Norman Rockwell: Artist and Illustrator). As a response to this, Rockwell created a series of April Fools paintings such as the following where almost nothing makes sense.

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It was this photo quality that both drew in his fans and repelled his fellow artists. Many consider him to simply be a copy machine, spitting out what he sees; which is true in a way. It is in his composition, the composition that he creates, that his true artistic quality can be seen. Rockwell told stories through his paintings, stories that have the amazing power to evoke old sunny memories from his viewers' past or to illuminate a common idealized American story of a boy coming back from war a man (see Homecoming Marine) or a young girl attempting to transcend her adolescence (see Girl at Mirror) with her mother's lipstick. Many of his paintings not only bring up memories, but they often have the power to instill a sense of pride in country, history and heritage (Marling, Karal Ann, Norman Rockwell). Rockwell did amazing things for the American pride, he transformed the country into a beautiful place where people were happy, communities flourished and the average American continued to achieve the American Dream.

In 1963 Rockwell finally ended his career with the Saturday Evening Post. During the 60s Rockwell had committed himself to strong political causes like desegregation and social justice, this dedication clashed with the conservative rules and censorship set by the Saturday Evening Post so Rockwell quit. One of his more famous paintings, The

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Problem We All Live With, was the result of Rockwell finally breaking out of his conservative shell. (Buechner, Thomas S., Norman Rockwell: Artist and Illustrator)



This is a depiction of a real little girl as she is being escorted by federal marshals to enforce the state-ordered desegregation of the New Orleans public schools. She is just barely being guarded from the hostile white mob that exists outside the painting where the viewer stands. The end of Rockwell's career was spent outside his traditional happy-go-lucky theme he was forced to stick to while working for the Saturday Evening Post, and he was finally able to depict scenes he wanted to depict, no one dictated them to him anymore, and he was able to finally put his own passions and opinions into his work.