

Rockwell's America 'terrific' or sentimental?

Woodson's exhibit an affectionate, oft-exaggerated slice of American life

There's no debating the broad popularity of Norman Rockwell's works. His illustrations graced, among other magazines, the cover of *The Saturday Evening Post* 321 times between 1916 and 1963. There's room, however, to question whether the legendary painter and illustrator reflected true American life.

Critics in his lifetime (1894-1978) tended to claim that Rockwell portrayed an America that didn't exist. A deprecatory adjective, "Rockwellesque," was dubbed. Some modern critics find his works overly sweet, idealistic or sentimentalized. Rockwell, consequently, isn't considered a "serious" artist by many.

Others defend Rockwell's work, including modern-day photojournalist Kevin Rivoli, as reflecting a slice of American life, albeit vivid and often exaggerated. Thirty five of his works stand alongside 35 of Rivoli's photos at the Woodson Art Museum's current exhibit, *In Search of Norman Rockwell's America*, which suggests that Rockwell's America did in fact exist. Viewers will find them intriguing, at times whimsical, character-driven, intimate, patriotic and infused with humor.

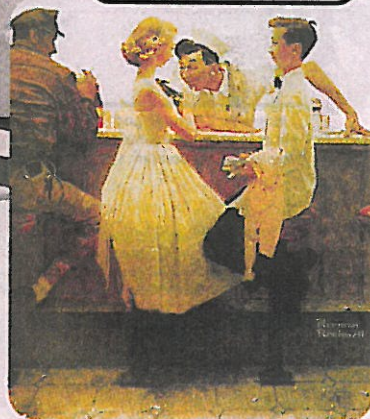
The paintings hanging at the Woodson — a fraction of his 4,000 original works, most of which have been destroyed by fire or are in permanent collections — reflect a man in

love with his country, driven to share the life he sees through the lens of perspective. Most of these works do lack a certain emotional dynamic that one experiences from more powerful pieces of art. Against Rivoli's more journalistic images, it was clear to me that Rockwell's work elicits feelings of simple pleasures with these slice-of-life images — more like rose-colored memories or wishful musings. But you could argue Rockwell aimed for entertainment when the country needed pleasant distractions, given that his career spanned two World Wars, The Great Depression and beyond.

His first breakthrough came at age 18 with his illustrations for Carl Claudy's *Tell Me Why: Stories about Mother Nature*. A year later, he became the art editor for *Boys Life*, published by the Boy Scouts of America. During World War I, he enlisted in the Navy only to be assigned the role of military artist. He would never see action,



Norman Rockwell's "After the Prom," circa 1957 (below) Kevin Rivoli's "Before the Prom," circa 2007 (left)



though his enlistment reflected deep-seated feelings of patriotism, an element oft portrayed in his images.

Rockwell said his goal was to paint real people doing real things, which his audience could identify with, whether it was at home, school, work or church. His favorite picture was of an elderly woman varnishing a picture frame. There's "After the Prom," circa 1957, in which a young man proudly observes his date seated on a café stool showing off her corsage to the server. For humor, look to the boy in 1958 who tended to his sick beagle with a glass bottle of cold remedy and a comfy bed.

In Rivoli's black and white images, we're led to study the subjects, compositions and themes side by side with Rockwell's works. Often there are direct similarities, though with a photograph we're apt to accept the reality of the scene; when we view a Rockwell, we wonder, slightly bemused, how much was embellished, even though some of the scenes were from real-life events. For example, there's 14-year-old Jama Sue Steed with her purebred Guernsey calf in a piece titled, "County Agriculture Agent," circa 1948. Rockwell's team had followed an agriculture agent for days until they came upon the Steed family. The resulting image still reflects an agriculture life that exists here in Marathon County.

"Three Boys Fishing," circa 1937, consists of the boys in swim trunks acting rather carefree in the water with a stringer full of fish, as if they caught them bare-handed. Alongside the painting there's Rivoli's equally carefree image of a boy dangling upside down over a pond, about to break the surface after letting go of a rope.

Rockwell countered his critics by saying he showed "the America I knew and observed to others who might not have noticed." After retiring from *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1963, he changed his focus to journalistic pursuits with themes of social significance, such as "The Problem We All Live With," depicting an African American girl, Ruby Bridges, in a crisp white dress being led to school by four white U.S. deputy marshals past a concrete wall defaced by racial graffiti. A smashed tomato lies against the wall 2 feet away.

Works like this and others suggest Rockwell wasn't blind to the sorrows around him. As the country came of age, so it appears did Rockwell's understanding of what his audience could relate to.

In 1999, *The New Yorker* art critic Peter Schjeldahl said, "Rockwell is terrific. It's become too tedious to pretend he isn't."

In Search of Norman Rockwell's America runs through Jan. 24. Museum hours are 9 am to 4 pm Tues.-Fri., noon to 5 pm Sat.-Sun., closed Mondays and holidays. Free. 845-7010.

Special events and programs

In conjunction with *In Search of Rockwell's America*. Call 845-7010 to register where noted

- **Norman Rockwell Live**, Thurs. 12/3 — Indianapolis-based character actor Sam Harper brings the artist to life in this performance and during a reception to follow. Through questions posed by WPR's Glen Moberg, Harper as Rockwell reveals the life, times and career of the artist. 6 pm, \$5 at the door. Harper also will be in character in the galleries Sat. 12/5, 1-4 pm and Sun. 12/6, 1-3 pm.
- **Holiday Mingle & Jingle**, Sun. 12/6 — A visit with Santa Claus, Norman Rockwell channeled through Sam Harper, caricaturist Bernie Tennis in action, holiday tunes by pianist John Webb, plus kid-friendly art projects and refreshments. 1-3 pm.
- **Holiday comfort**, Tues. 12/8 — Children, teens and adults who have lost a loved one make memorial candleholders and share memories. 1-2:30 pm and 4:30-6 pm. Registration required.
- **Papercuts**, Sat. 12/12 — Learn how to turn paper into ornaments, garlands or works of art. 10 am-noon. \$5 for Woodson members, \$7 non-members. Registration required.
- **Art Buddies** (ages 5-7), Tues. 12/15 and Art Explorers (ages 8-12), Thurs. 12/10 — Create nature-inspired garlands and ornaments. Buddies meet again Tues. 1/12 to create a memory book à la Norman Rockwell, and Explorers meet again Thurs., 1/14 to create a magazine cover-style illustration based on an experience in their life. All 4:30-6 pm. December sessions are free; January sessions cost \$5. Registration required. **CF**

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