

THE ARTS

In search of Norman Rockwell's America

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Between illustrator Norman Rockwell and photographer Kevin Rivoli, the whole 20th-century American experience gets covered in the current exhibit at the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art.



"Can't Wait" by Norman Rockwell

"In Search of Norman Rockwell's America" is a collection of 35 black and white photographs by Rivoli paired with Rockwell's original paintings, drawings and limited-edition prints.

Rockwell, who was born in 1894 and died in 1978, became art editor for *Boys' Life* in 1913, beginning a career illustrating for the covers of *Boys' Life* and the *Saturday Evening Post* for decades.

An avid Rockwell fan, Rivoli, 49, is a photojournalist who has long admired Rockwell's work. Most of his photographs are from the last quarter of the 20th century.

"Over a period of many years, Rivoli came to see in his

work a resonance between the photographs that he took and the images that Rockwell produced," said

Maureen Thomas-Zaremba, curator of education at the Ringling, on a recent walk-through of the exhibition, which is on display through April 25.

"They both focus on these slices of life. Both of them celebrated mostly the quieter, calmer moments rather than the big, spectacular events," she said. "You see a lot of great resonance between the themes in the work, which I think speaks to the idea that a lot of them are moments that we've all experienced."



"Off to War" by Kevin Rivoli

Rivoli, who lives in Auburn, N.Y., with his wife, Michele, and twin sons, Jack and Nick, said the exhibit started as a book that he and Michele began working on in the 1990s.

"The concept goes a long time back where my wife and I went to the Norman Rockwell Museum back in the 1990s," he said. "All this Rockwell stuff was really great, but the critics didn't think the America Rockwell painted really existed. I thought, this is ridiculous. "

Rivoli had been collecting images from his own archives of slices of American life with an idea of eventually compiling a book. When he recognized the similarities of themes between his and Rockwell's work, the theme for the book quickly developed. Michele Rivoli, a former newspaper reporter, started looking for Rockwell images online.

"We find out this goes with this, this goes with that," said Rivoli. "The next thing you know, we've got 68 pairings."

The exhibit pairs Rockwell's "Soda Jerk" with Rivoli's "Ice Cream Parlor;" Rockwell's "After the Prom" with Rivoli's "Before the Prom," and Rockwell's "The Problem We All Live With" with Rivoli's "Remembering Those Who Came Before Me." "The Problem We All Live With" depicts Ruby Bridges, the 6-year-old black child in New Orleans who was the first to attend a white school when desegregation was ordered by the courts. Flanked by four U.S. marshals, the little girl carries two books and a ruler under her arm and walks straight-backed and proud in a white dress and white sneakers and anklets.

"This is such a powerful image," said Thomas-Zaremba. "The way he's isolated her; the dignity and the courage are so amazing."

Rivoli's companion photo shows a little boy kneeling at the headstone of Harriet Tubman.

"People make an annual pilgrimage to Harriet Tubman's gravesite," said Thomas-Zaremba. "His title, 'Remembering Those Who Came Before Me,' so much builds on what Ruby Bridges did, and Harriet Tubman before her. This is a very still, solemn moment."

Rockwell's paintings were often done from photographs that he carefully staged in his studio, complete with sets and props.

"A quarter inch would make a difference in how someone's foot was placed," said Thomas-Zaremba.

The photographs also helped Rockwell's subjects pose with the sometimes exaggerated facial expressions and in the physical postures he wanted for the paintings.

"With a photograph he could capture that," she said.

Rivoli, on the other hand, is a photojournalist who aims to capture a moment of real life, not staging the images.

"Rivoli's photographs are very much snapshots of life," she said, "They're not intimidating, they're really accessible, and they really apply that whole idea of a slice of life."

The museum has invited patrons to submit their own "slice of life" snapshots, which can be viewed in an activities room at the museum.