



Norman Rockwell's "The Problem We All Live With" appeared on the cover of *Look* magazine in 1964 and is part of the exhibition "In Search of Norman Rockwell's America" at the Midwest Museum of American Art in Elkhart through Nov. 1. The painting depicts four U.S. Marshals escorting Ruby Bridges to kindergarten on the first day of court-ordered desegregation in New Orleans' public schools in 1960.



Kevin Rivoli pairs Rockwell with his "Remembering Those Who Came Before Me," a portrait of a young black boy kneeling in at Harriet Tubman's grave.

Photo provided KEVIN RIVOLI

The living Rockwell

Photographer finds painter's America still alive

By **ANDREW S. HUGHES**
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For decades, art critics dismissed Norman Rockwell's paintings as too optimistic and idealistic, portraits of an "America that never was and never will be," as one critic put it.

Kevin Rivoli disagrees — and he has the photographs to prove why.

In the book and exhibition "In Search of Norman Rockwell's America," currently on display at Elkhart's Midwest Museum of American Art, Rivoli pairs his own images from his career as a photojournalist with Rockwell's paintings to show that the same sort of everyday, slice-of-life moments Rockwell painted still occur.

"Ultimately, it's the basics of life we all can connect to," Rivoli says by telephone from his home in Auburn, N.Y. "The essentials in our lives that we live through, that we celebrate, that we cherish. Most of us experience these things: your first dog, your first love, family, friends, the birth of your children, getting married. That's what it's all about."

"In Search of Norman Rockwell's America" began to take shape a few years ago while Rivoli and his wife,

Michele, discussed possibilities for a book of his photography.

They remembered a trip they had taken to the Rockwell museum in Stockbridge, Mass., on their honeymoon, and as they looked at Rockwell's paintings in two books they own, they saw the thematic connection between the painter's and the photographer's works.

"Whether you work for the New York Times or a small daily in a small town, you're charged with chronicling life around you," Rivoli says. "Photographers, as well as writers, are basically historians. If you look at somebody's work 50 years from now, you'll get a sense of what life was like."

Although "you realize how important (Rockwell's) work was or is to the fabric of our society" by looking at it in mass, Rivoli says, he and Michele initially encountered resistance to their concept.

"At first, we shopped it as a gallery exhibit and that a book would be spawned from that," he

says. "A couple thought it was too Americana and too upbeat, and this was the International Center for Photography in New York City and the Eastman House. ... Michelle is my wife and manages my affairs and was like, 'You're kidding, right?'"

On exhibit

"In Search of Norman Rockwell's America" continues through Nov. 1 at the Midwest Museum of American Art, 429 S. Main St., Elkhart. Hours are from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesdays through Fridays and 1 to 4 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays. Admission is \$4-\$2. For more information, call (574) 293-6660 or visit the Web site midwestmuseum.us.



Norman Rockwell painted "The Runaway" for the Sept. 20, 1958, cover of The Saturday Evening Post, one of 322 covers he painted for that magazine alone.

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Rockwell: 'Wild art' captures essence

They weren't, but five publishers leapt at the concept, which evolved from a book of Rivoli's photographs with one Rockwell image to represent his work to its current form, 68 pairings of photographs and paintings. Although some of the Rockwell paintings are among his best known, quite a few in the show and book have rarely been seen exhibited or reproduced.

"Whether we know he did it, you've seen it and it's in the back of your mind," Rivoli says about Rockwell's work and style. "I think he has helped us to see and photograph ourselves because these are all the ways we live every day and they become everyday things. ... I'm always looking for the connection between people, the

two old people sitting on the bench, a wisp of smoke coming out of the pipe."

A few of Rivoli's photographs — one of a police officer calming a boy while paramedics tend to his mother after a traffic accident, for example, and paired with Rockwell's iconic "Runaway," which shows a police officer talking to a runaway boy at a lunch counter — come from news stories he covered while working for newspapers in upstate New York since 1988.

Most of Rivoli's photographs, however, originated as "wild art" — a genre of features photography that isn't tied to news stories and that tends to be upbeat and occur because a photographer happens upon a visually interesting scene.

"The book really is about not only Rockwell and the America that he painted, but it's about embracing simple moments," Rivoli says. "Generally, the news that we cover isn't good news. It's bad news, and we tend to forget these beautiful moments in our lives and the traditions that we celebrate. When



Photo provided/KEVIN RIVOLI

Kevin Rivoli's "Officer Lumb" pairs well with Rockwell's "Runaway" with its portrait of a police officer calming a young boy while paramedics tend to his mother after a traffic accident. Both images are on exhibit as part of "In Search of Norman Rockwell's America" through Nov. 1 at the Midwest Museum of American Art in Elkhart.

photographers go out looking for wild art, that's what they're looking for."

Although some of the photographs and paintings in "In Search of Norman Rockwell's America" bear an uncanny resemblance in both subject and theme (a forlorn-looking ticket booth, for example), others rely more on theme or tone to create their sense of being complementary colors — Rockwell's "The Problem We All Live With," a cover for Look magazine from the

1960s that depicts four U.S. marshals escorting Ruby Bridges to kindergarten on the first day of court-ordered desegregation in New Orleans' public schools in 1960 is paired, for example, with Rivoli's "Remembering Those Who Came Before Me," a portrait of a young black boy kneeling in contemplation at Harriet Tubman's grave.

"I was kind of collecting these images over the last 18 years, not working in parallel with Rockwell,

but I was obviously influenced by him, as well by other photographers and editors," Rivoli says. "I didn't get a Rockwell and say, 'OK, I've got to go get a barbershop picture or a picture with a kid and a dog in it.'"

Aside from his own "Triple Self-Portrait" to pair with Rockwell's painting of that title, Rivoli, who has been a freelance photographer for the Associated Press, New York Times and USA Today since 2000, didn't stage any of the images he includes in the book and exhibition.

Besides, he didn't want to create reproductions.

"If I were to try to mimic every one of them, I would have to stage it, and that's not the purpose of the book," he says. "The purpose of the book is to show that what Rockwell painted 40, 50 years ago is still here today. They may look a little different, but the essence is the same, and they are the way we live and celebrate our lives."

Museum contributes to Rockwell exhibit

Aside from its images of everyday life, "In Search of Norman Rockwell's America" has a particular hometown flavor to it while it's in Elkhart: The Midwest Museum of American Art lent 10 of its Rockwell lithographs to the exhibition in exchange for International Arts & Artists waiving its \$50,000 rental fee.

"In terms of the economy, it helps us immensely," Midwest Museum director Jane Burns says. "In the eyes of the museum world, I think it elevates us to a position we have not had before, recognition by some institutions that there's a little old museum that puts on some mighty exhibitions. I guess it helps with our own local membership. They still believe we're viable even in this time of museums closing and budget slashing and cutting staff."

The Midwest Museum owns 68 Rockwell lithographs and one original oil painting, "No Credit Given," from 1917.

Up since Aug. 21, "In Search of Norman Rockwell," Burns says, has been equal in attendance to an exhibition of Linda McCartney's photography that holds the museum's record.

In addition to local residents, Burns says, the exhibition has drawn tourists from Germany, Austria, Syria and New Zealand who saw it advertised on the Internet and who were going to be near Elkhart anyway.

Other visitors have been residents of Illinois who have made a special trip to the museum to see the exhibition, which will be on the road for three years at museums around the country and in Japan.

"Many people from Chicago have driven down, so I would think it's a boon to the city," Burns says. "All of a sudden we have three new restaurants within a block, and they're using them. ... They all think we're such a bargain fee because we're \$4. We were told by International Arts and Artists that most museums decided to charge a special admission of \$14 and we said we couldn't do that because the economy is so bad. The only thing we did different is not have our free Sundays for this."