

“American Chronicles: The Art of Norman Rockwell at TAM”

published in Artdish, March 2011

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Norman Rockwell's painting "Discovery", currently on display at the Tacoma Art Museum, depicts a pajama-clad young boy finding a Santa Claus suit and false beard in Dad's bureau drawer, incriminating evidence of the old man's fakery. The picture appeared on the cover of the December 29, 1956 Saturday Evening Post. It's hard at first to get past the boy's facial expression. His eyes are popping out of his head, in a way that irritatingly foreshadows the ubiquitous Macauley Caulkin "Home Alone" publicity shot. However unfortunate this association, the expression is so utterly unconvincing as a portrayal of having one's cherished mythology punctured, that one can't help but think the kid never believed in Santa in the first place. Considering that this is one of many Rockwell paintings that repeatedly revisit the Santa-unmasking narrative over decades, you have to wonder: Is the guy responsible for our vision of the American Myth perhaps telling us we shouldn't be so surprised or upset that it's all made up?

I've always found sunny, idealized, 1950's-style Leave-it-to-Beaver archetypal America intriguing, compelling, and horrifying. I'm far from alone in this, but I have spent more time than most people immersed in its ephemera, interrogating, digesting, cutting up, reconfiguring, and spitting back out endless images from midcentury domestic magazines. Imagine my shock when, after all that, putting together a show of the resulting paintings, I encounter a dealer's misbegotten press release, or an enthusiastic patron, praising what I thought was my scathing critique as a fond, nostalgic look back at a "simpler time".

Once I've found a napkin to clean up the spat-out box wine, I always find a way to blame Norman Rockwell. "Norman Rockwell" has traditionally been the received art-school shorthand for a brand of gooey jingoistic sentimentality. My own self-presumed irony has been mistaken for that Rockwellian sentimentality frequently enough that I'm forced to consider the possibility that I'm actually the one misinterpreting my own work as well as Rockwell's. The resulting existential crisis has prompted me to radically rethink Norman Rockwell and my fraught, debt-ridden relationship to him.

The travelling exhibit, "American Chronicles: The Art of Norman Rockwell", making a stop in Tacoma through May 30, offered me a rare chance to look at the original paintings and evaluate the guy's actual work, rather than the idea or representation of it. I heartily recommend doing the same. On view are 42 paintings, all 323 printed Saturday Evening Post covers, War Bond posters from the 1940's, and an array of sketches and source material, selected from the collection of the Norman Rockwell Museum in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. The paintings include the originals for Post covers, illustrations, and advertisements, as well as his later, civil-rights era work for Look and Life.

Norman Rockwell worked for the Man. The Man, in this case, was an actual man, George Horace Lorimer, the editor of the Saturday Evening Post from 1898 to 1936, and that Man had a stated mission: to forge a unified identity for a young unformed nation teeming with new immigrants, using the stories and pictures he printed in the Post, America's first advertising-supported publication. Rockwell, one of Lorimer's most prolific image men from 1916 on, proved critical to the project's success. His imagery so thoroughly permeated our collective unconscious that long after the Post's demise, one doesn't even have to have seen a Rockwell reproduction to know what "Rockwellian America" refers to. To his fans, his pictures are the embodiment of all that is great about this country. To his detractors, they are a sanitized version of it, capitalism's answer to Soviet propaganda, glossing over the seedy underbelly of American exceptionalism. But Rockwell and his editor never intended to hold up a mirror to America, but rather a model for what we should collectively strive to become. Whether or not you agree that homogeneously-populated small towns where everyone knows one another and harmless hijinx ensue are the something we should be shooting for, is beside the point. Lorimer and his star illustrator Rockwell succeeded admirably at simultaneously establishing the reality of, and nostalgia for, a completely fabricated mythical country.

In his lifetime Rockwell was so successful that he himself became an icon, with a sanitized public image that he neither promoted nor dispelled. The media loved to portray him as a regular guy-next-door, an artist palatable to middle American sensibilities who made nice pictures, as opposed to those freakish alcoholic paint-drippers who made incomprehensible so-called-Art. Unfortunately, the prevailing view in the upper bastions of Art was that incomprehensible alcoholic paint drippers were the real artists, and pipe-smoking, cardigan-sporting creators of accessible figurative imagery were not. Add to this the stigma of being a commercial illustrator, and the man could get no respect in the increasingly rarefied strata of the midcentury art world.

It's something of a cliché to have an epiphany when confronting the original works of art one has previously seen only in reproduction, but on viewing this show, I was immediately struck by the physical, tactile quality of the paintings. In this case it was genuinely surprising, since most of the work was created solely for reproduction. Some of the Post-cover-destined paintings are painted flatly as one would expect for an illustration, but many have an underlying surface texture, like plaster, that has nothing to do with the imagery. Other textures are reliefs of the depicted items, fuzzy slippers, blobs of paint, rough-hewn exterior walls. Clothing is especially lovingly rendered. Brushstrokes follow the line of a collar and sleeves, jumping off the surface of the canvas, moving with the character, and becoming characters in their own right. Having the actual magazine covers (many with mailing labels from various Middle-American towns still attached)

hanging together in the adjacent room, allows one to compare the two. As I went from the magazine reproductions back to the paintings, I found that the frequent sappiness for which Rockwell is often dismissed is the most salient characteristic in the reproductions, and remarkably transcended in the original paintings.

Norman Rockwell, unlike his small-town public persona, was born and raised in New York City, attended bohemian Jazz-age parties with F. Scott Fitzgerald while a certain paint-dripper was still in knee-breeches, had an open relationship with his first wife, took his second to Europe for an abortion, married three times in all, struggled with depression, and liked modern art. The disparity between his public image and the reality of his private life coincided with disparity between the ideal America he was hired to portray and the flawed reality of racism and inequality to which he was not blind. His most inventive paintings perhaps belie this conflict, portraying people confronting some form of self-representation, critiquing the process of idealization, and recognizing its artificiality even as he celebrates it.

"Girl Reading the Post" (1941) is a pleasurable example of the self-critiquing Rockwell. A centered, frontal image of a teenaged girl sitting on a rattan bench, the bench and the painted horizontal lines of the Post logo divide the canvas vertically into thirds. The girl is wearing a yellow sweater-set, fuzzy gloves, a plaid skirt, yellow socks and saddle shoes, all richly rendered in thick paint. The girl's head, concealed by issue of the Post she is reading, projects into the painted title of the magazine at the top of the page. On the painted magazine's cover is a close-up portrait of a glamorous movie star, whose head and shoulders line up with and continue those of the girl, creating the illusion that the head of the woman is the head of the girl. It seems on the surface to be gently poking fun at the aspirations of the young and their attempts to become adults, except that the viewer would, like the girl, also be reading the Saturday Evening Post, comparing idealized images to our own awkward selves, trying to maintain the illusion that we are all that our image promises. Similarly, "Girl at Mirror" (1954) has us peering over the shoulder of a young girl as she compares her reflection to the movie star in the magazine on her lap. This time we're implicated in the comparison because the mirror is angled in such a manner that we could be looking at ourselves. Ah, America, he seems to say, the perpetual awkward, preening, insecure adolescent.

"The Art Critic" (1955) likewise plays with several levels of representation, as well as adolescence. Its backstory is a little weird, as the model for the boy was Rockwell's son Peter, who is shown peering with a magnifying glass at the cleavage of a painted portrait of a woman, who happened to be modeled by the poor guy's mother. (No creepiness there.) The boy, loaded down with the accoutrements of an aspiring painter, is examining the painting with an ostensibly aesthetic interest, but he's clearly aiming the glass at her décolletage. The joke is

heightened by her saucy glance back at him, and by the disapproving glances of the Dutch burghers in another nearby painting. The three representational teams – boy, painted woman, painted Dutchmen – would form a closed circle of looking, excluding the viewer, except that a reproduction of the painting of the woman looks straight back at us from a magazine in the boy's other hand, implicating us in the all-around rampant voyeurism that's going on, and reminding us that we are just viewers of twice-recycled images.

What Rockwell did best was to tell stories to and about ordinary people. In doing so he sometimes fell into the trap of sentimentalizing them, which is particularly painfully evident in paintings like "Day in the Life of a Young Girl," in which the sap flows freely, as the comic-book-style layout leaves the sentimental depictions unanchored by any concrete physical space. But at his best, he was an exquisite practitioner of the art of telling a complete, readable, watchable story in a flat box of pictorial space, which is much, much harder than it looks. In the process, he drew on such disparate sources as old Dutch Masters, Japanese prints, and Picasso.

While he excelled at telling pedestrian stories about normal people, he often fell flat when he tried to tell Big Stories about Important Stuff. Like many artists before him, he felt confined by the genre-painting ghetto to which he'd been consigned, and longed to tackle more serious issues. "The Problem We All Live With", his 1964 tribute to the Civil Rights struggle for Look, depicts the young Ruby Bridges walking to her newly-desegregated school, flanked by four armed federal marshals. It's adeptly composed and painted, with the girl depicted in profile, maintaining her dignity framed by the radically-cropped marshals against a thick, textured urban wall stained with a single thrown tomato. But although the story is told sympathetically, with the point of view at her eye-level, we are not invited in on the same intimate level as we are to his "ordinary" paintings. We're being asked instead to contemplate a Big Moment, and the impact is more intellectual than emotional. Hanging beside "Problem" is the 1946 "Boy in a Dining Car" and the contrast in the two pictures' emotional impact is apparent. In "Dining Car", Rockwell, forced to work within the Post's draconian requirement that he portray African Americans only as servants, subverts the imposed restriction by humanizing the black waiter, and brings him close to and the equal of the viewer by sharing a sympathetic, bemused glance at the young, oblivious customer.

In some ways all painters are pitchmen, or -women, and all paintings advertisements. Rockwell's best paintings were advertisements for the American ideal that showed, not told, us what we could be, a nation composed of heroically ordinary individuals. Less successful as both paintings and advertisements were his "Four Freedoms", painted for the War Office in the 1940's and shown only in poster form in this exhibit. "Freedom from Want" (the much-reproduced

Thanksgiving painting) utilizes one of his signature "come on in" perspective constructions, and as a result is the only one of the four with some life to it. The other three images, however, are rather stilted and generalized, and pale beside his own 1924 advertisement, "If Wisdom Teeth Could Talk They'd Say Use Colgate's", exhibited in the original. In this painting, a little boy sits on the floor at an old man's feet, presumably listening to a story of bygone days. Along the right-hand side of the composition is a Vermeer-like slice of open door that affords a glimpse into the room beyond. As advertising, it's way ahead of its time, in that it is entirely free of references to toothpaste, teeth, mouths, dentists, toothbrushes or even running water. It works as contemporary advertising does, by evoking nostalgia ("Remember the old days when we used to sit around listening to Gramps tell stories about the old days?"), manipulating the emotions of the viewer, and letting them make the connection with the product themselves. In its own way, it says "buy toothpaste!" much louder than "Freedom of Speech" says "Buy War Bonds". His heart may have been in the war effort and the civil rights movement, but commerce got all the interesting stuff.

As another example, one can compare the four small portraits of cornflake-munching children with, say, the boring dead presidents across the room, and it's obvious how much more inspired he was by the commonplace than by the big and important. I found the kids, painted for Kellogg's ads, completely riveting, glowing cherubic munchkins worthy of Franz Hals. I felt I was witnessing the exact moment when mass-media advertising was taking over the function of chronicling, reflecting, and idealizing humanity after high art had abandoned it. I also felt I was confronting not only my own artistic antecedents, the source material behind my source material, but also the direct ancestors of Andy Warhol's soup cans. Centered on small square white canvases, the cornflake children were simply there, being themselves, being paintings, oblivious to their role hawking processed breakfast foods to America, a rebuke to any of us who think we're being clever by recycling advertising back into art.

Iconic advertising tableau of the 1950's are the direct descendants of Rockwell's America. As Rockwell's long career unfolded in the real world, in the alternate universe of American mythology his ideal small town became the suburbs, but the kids were still wearing frilly dresses and cowboy outfits, while harmless antics continued gently to ensue. The same iconography that was teaching America to be America was later teaching America how to buy stuff and to identify themselves with that stuff. The nostalgia that Rockwell's Post images evoked to sell ideas proved just as adept at selling products.

Seeing this show, with its juxtaposition of oil paintings of varying success and interest, commissioned and conceived for myriad persuasive purposes, made clear to me how fuzzy the line is between any idealization and the ironic reuse of the same. Both tap into underlying veins of nostalgia, even when their purpose is

to unmask Santa Claus. The very act of portraying the American ideal, even in satire, is to participate in it, and also, given its utterly manufactured, self-referential origins, to have a hand in its continued creation. And love him or hate him, without Norman Rockwell the master craftsman, Americana as we know it would not exist for subsequent Americans either to emulate or to revile.

Girl at Mirror, Norman Rockwell, 1954

Oil on canvas, 31 ½" x 29 ½"

Cover illustration for *The Saturday Evening Post*, March 5, 1954

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From the permanent collection of Norman Rockwell Museum