

A Brief Biography

Without thinking too much about it in specific terms, I was showing the America I knew and observed to others who might not have noticed.

—Norman Rockwell

Born in New York City in 1894, Norman Rockwell always wanted to be an artist. At age 14, Rockwell enrolled in art classes at The New York School of Art (formerly The Chase School of Art). Two years later, in 1910, he left high school to study art at The National Academy of Design. He soon transferred to The Art Students League, where he studied with Thomas Fogarty and George Bridgman. Fogarty's instruction in illustration prepared Rockwell for his first commercial commissions. From Bridgman, Rockwell learned the technical skills on which he relied throughout his long career.

Rockwell found success early. He painted his first commission of four Christmas cards before his sixteenth birthday. While still in his teens, he was hired as art director of *Boys' Life*, the official publication of the Boy Scouts of America, and began a successful freelance career illustrating a variety of young people's publications.

At age 21, Rockwell's family moved to New Rochelle, New York, a community whose residents included such famous illustrators as J.C. and Frank Leyendecker and Howard Chandler Christy. There, Rockwell set up a studio with the cartoonist Clyde Forsythe and produced work for such magazines as *Life*, *Literary Digest*, and *Country Gentleman*. In 1916, the 22-year-old Rockwell painted his first cover for *The Saturday Evening Post*, the magazine considered by Rockwell to be the "greatest show window in America." Over the next 47 years, another 321 Rockwell covers would appear on the cover of the *Post*. Also in 1916, Rockwell married Irene O'Connor; they divorced in 1930.

The 1930s and 1940s are generally

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Norman Rockwell Looking at Work



Norman Rockwell with Golden Rule

considered to be the most fruitful decades of Rockwell's career. In 1930 he married Mary Barstow, a schoolteacher, and the couple had three sons, Jarvis, Thomas, and Peter. The family moved to Arlington, Vermont, in 1939, and Rockwell's work began to reflect small-town American life.

In 1943, inspired by President Franklin Roosevelt's address to Congress, Rockwell painted the *Four Freedoms* paintings. They were reproduced in four consecutive issues of *The Saturday Evening Post* with essays by contemporary writers. Rockwell's interpretations of *Freedom of Speech*, *Freedom to Worship*, *Freedom from Want*, and *Freedom from Fear* proved to be enormously popular. The works toured the United States in an exhibition that was jointly sponsored by the *Post* and the U.S. Treasury Department and, through the sale of war bonds, raised more than \$130 million for the war effort.

Although the *Four Freedoms* series was a great success, 1943 also brought Rockwell an enormous loss. A fire destroyed his Arlington studio as well as numerous paintings and his collection of historical costumes and props.

In 1953, the Rockwell family moved from Arlington, Vermont, to Stockbridge, Massachusetts. Six years later, Mary Barstow Rockwell died unexpectedly. In collaboration with his son Thomas, Rockwell published his autobiography, *My Adventures as an Illustrator*, in 1960. *The Saturday Evening Post* carried excerpts from the best-selling book in eight consecutive issues, with Rockwell's *Triple Self-Portrait* on the cover of the first.

In 1961, Rockwell married Molly Punderson, a retired teacher. Two years later, he ended his 47-year association with *The Saturday Evening Post* and began to work for *Look* magazine. During his 10-year association with *Look*, Rockwell painted pictures illustrating some of his deepest concerns and interests, including civil rights, America's war on poverty, and the exploration of space.

In 1973, Rockwell established a trust to

preserve his artistic legacy by placing his works in the custodianship of the Old Corner House Stockbridge Historical Society, later to become Norman Rockwell Museum at Stockbridge. The trust now forms the core of the Museum's permanent collections. In 1976, in failing health, Rockwell became concerned about the future of his studio. He arranged to have his studio and its contents added to the trust. In 1977, Rockwell received the nation's highest civilian honor, the Presidential Medal.

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Norman Rockwell and Illustration

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Beyond the legendary status that he had already achieved nearly four decades before his death in 1978, Norman Rockwell was a remarkable painter, a gifted storyteller, and a masterful technician who conveyed a distinct, personal message. Rockwell created images that described universal human experiences within a particularly American context. His ability to reveal the deeper meaning in commonplace situations captivates audiences to this day.

Rockwell's impact on popular culture and his influence on generations of American illustrators was enormous. Working in the tradition of such great illustrator storytellers as Howard Pyle and N.C. Wyeth, Rockwell set the standard for commercial artists who used narrative realism to illustrate books, magazines, and advertisements from the 1920s to the 1950s. A seminal figure in the evolution of American illustration, his work spawned a shift by the next generation of illustrators and designers, who embraced a modernist aesthetic.

The illustration marketplace has undergone a major change since Rockwell's time. While no longer the primary visual mechanism of mass media, illustration still serves to stimulate the intellect and emotions and speak to the joys and challenges of our world. Credit this to the inspirational work of illustrators following in Rockwell's footsteps and those taking the art form in bold new directions. At this unique turning point in the continuum of illustration, Rockwell's artistic accomplishments stand out as an important link from the outstanding visual communicators of the past to those of today.

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Norman Rockwell accepting the first Society of Illustrators Hall of Fame Award in 1958 from former Society President Harry Carter.
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Have the kids make their own Saturday Evening Post. Ask two or three kids in class to pose while the rest draw them doing something that pertains to a day in their life. Their illustrations should tell a story. Have the kids really think through the process. Display the final pieces in class or on the bulletin board in the hallways.

***THE SATURDAY
EVENING POST***

