



# CALIFORNIA ART CLUB NEWSLETTER

*Documenting California's Traditional Arts Heritage Since 1909*

## Norman Rockwell's Paintings of Character

*by Michael Zakian*

**A**LTHOUGH **NORMAN ROCKWELL** (1894–1978) DIED THIRTY-FIVE years ago, his work continues to grow in popularity. In 1999 the **High Museum of Art** in Atlanta organized a travelling retrospective *Norman Rockwell: Pictures for the American People* that drew huge crowds when it toured across the nation for three years. The exhibition made waves in the art world when it concluded its tour in 2002 at the **Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum** in New York City, a museum dedicated to modernism and non-objective abstraction. Many saw this as Rockwell's triumph within the high-brow. More recently *Telling Stories: Norman Rockwell from the Collections of George Lucas and Steven Spielberg* attracted large numbers of people when it was shown at the **Smithsonian American Art Museum** in 2010.

What is it about Norman Rockwell's paintings that are so appealing—and so quintessentially American? One of the essential elements of his art is his powerful emphasis on human character. While other artists in his time also painted people, Rockwell was able to capture personalities with a rare insight into the human condition. He possessed the ability to perceive and render the subtle qualities that define us as separate and unique individuals. His art celebrates our individuality and in so doing, simultaneously asserts our commonality, honouring our identity as free American citizens.

This sensibility was the driving force behind paintings such as *Christmas Homecoming* (1948). Created in the wake of World War II, a time when many young men were away from home and in dangerous circumstances, it celebrates the simple joys of reuniting with family and community. Rockwell does not bother to show us the face of the person who is being greeted. He did not need to. He conveys the essence of his story and message through the reactions of those who are welcoming this anonymous traveller home for Christmas.

He took great pains to include as broad a cross-section of people as he could within this group. They range dramatically from the very young to the very old, and cover an astonishing array of personality types. In their faces we can see ecstatic joy as well as



*Christmas Homecoming*, 1948

Oil on canvas 35 1/2" × 33 1/2"

Cover illustration for "The Saturday Evening Post," December 25, 1948

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Norman Rockwell Museum Collections

gentle smiles, outright enthusiasm and inner satisfaction. Rockwell succeeds in the straightforward honesty of his renderings. He does not idealize his individuals, but reveals them as real flesh-and-blood people, warts and all. Since they are shown as average, everyday citizens, viewers from all walks of life can readily identify with them—and in here lies the secret of Rockwell's broad and continuing appeal.

Capturing honesty is rarely a simple matter. In fact, Rockwell took great pains and went to extreme lengths to find and paint "real" people expressing "real" emotions. Occasionally Rockwell hired professional art models, but more often

he chose to base his figures on people he actually knew—his neighbours. As he explained, the people in his community "are just naturally good actors, not at being somebody else...but at being themselves. Nearly everyone seems to be a perfect model. These people have worked hard and their understanding of the fundamentals of life is reflected in their faces. That is what I like to paint. The more trouble they have had, the more interesting their faces."

**W**HAT INTERESTED ROCKWELL were discernible signs of experience. In the towns and rural communities where Rockwell preferred

to live, people led simple, honest lives. Although they were part of the twentieth century and are shown with modern inventions such as cars and telephones, their habits and attitudes reflected the simpler values of the nineteenth century. They lived in close-knit communities at a time when everyone on a given street knew each other's names. This intimacy amongst the people he painted helped give his paintings an infectious familiarity. Viewers feel as if they know people like the ones Rockwell painted, making the art seem to be a fundamental part of their lives.

Many of Rockwell's peers tried to duplicate his style. While other illustrators could succeed in mimicking the outward features of his paintings they rarely succeeded in capturing the inner core that made his works so special. Rockwell was a brilliant technician who excelled at whatever he chose to depict. But what truly separated his work from that of his many imitators was the complexity of emotions he so eloquently captured.

One of his most touching canvases in the exhibition is *Girl at Mirror* (1954) which shows a young girl looking at herself wistfully before a mirror. The message of the painting becomes clear once the viewer notices that she has a magazine with a photo of a glamorous movie star on her lap. Her face shows the doubts and uncertainties of early adolescence. This girl is on the brink of becoming a woman. She is worried whether she will grow up to be as beautiful. Her questions are universal and are shared by everyone who has experienced the awkward transition from childhood to adult. In paintings such as this Rockwell succeeded in capturing complicated, involved, and endearing emotions.



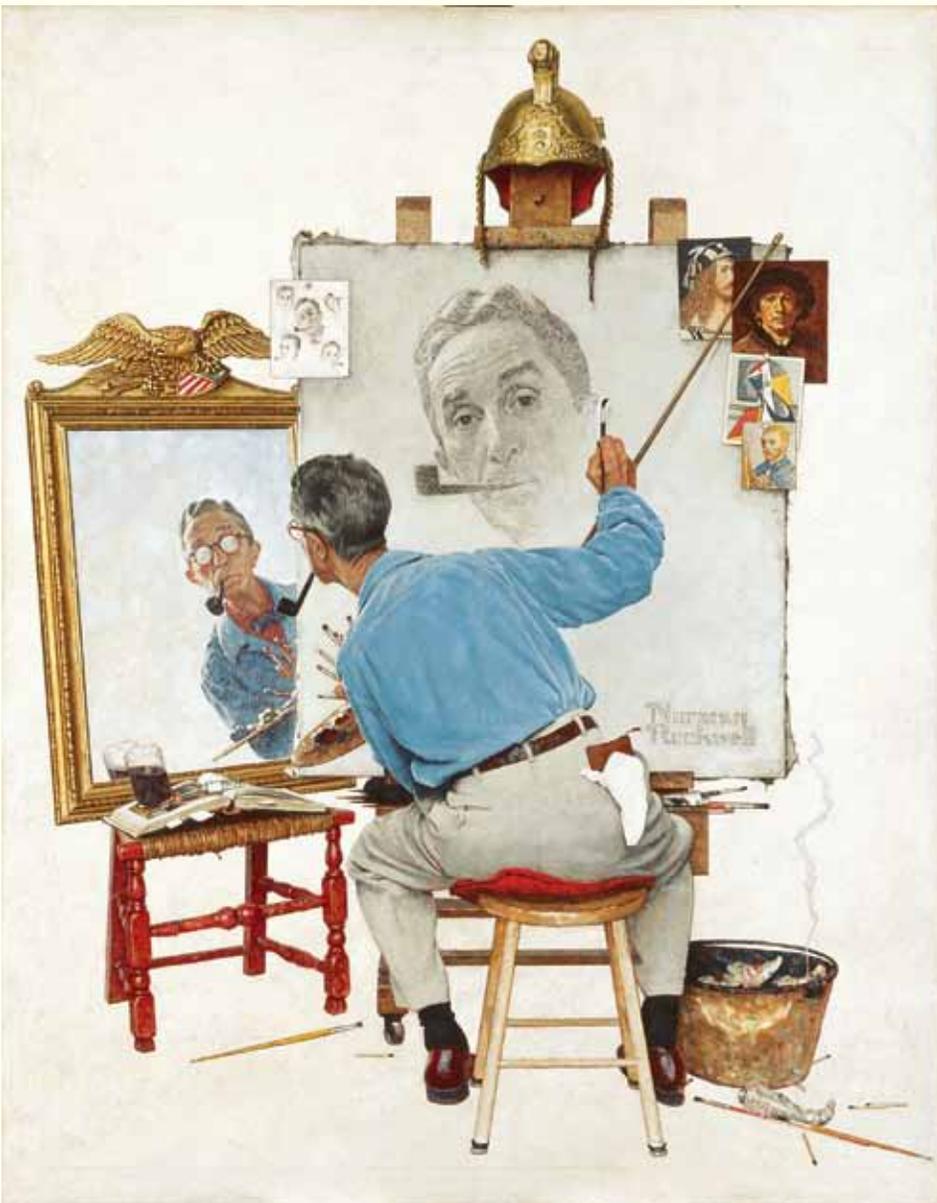
*Girl at Mirror*, 1954

Oil on canvas 31 1/2" × 29 1/2"

Cover illustration for "The Saturday Evening Post," March 6, 1954

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*Triple Self-Portrait*, 1959

Oil on canvas 44 1/2" x 34 3/4"

Cover illustration for "The Saturday Evening Post," February 13, 1960

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Publishing, Indianapolis, IN

Norman Rockwell Museum Collections

PERSONALITY AND CHARACTER WERE vital issues in American life. Internal reflection has long been a key part of the mind-set of the nation. **Ralph Waldo Emerson** first promoted the importance of self-reflection in the mid-nineteenth-century philosophical movement known as *Transcendentalism*. This concern with one's consciousness came to a head in the late nineteenth century in the writings of novelist **Henry James**. James created a new school of psychological realist literature by focusing on a

character's inner thoughts. In the first decades of the twentieth century, when **Sigmund Freud** developed the concept of psychoanalysis, his work received its most enthusiastic reception in the United States. Although Norman Rockwell was not schooled in the academic study of psychology, he possessed a profound and innate understanding of human nature, which gave his art a rare level of emotional depth and inner complexity.

Rockwell always had a deep respect



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for art, particularly for the art of the past. He admired the work of the Old Masters and always retained a lasting respect for their achievements. He captured the joys and tribulations of being an artist in two contrasting paintings: *Art Critic* (1955) and *Triple Self-Portrait* (1959). In *Art Critic* a young painter, presumably a student, has carried his painting gear into a venerable museum and has paused to study close-up a rubenesque portrait of a woman. The painted figures are shown coming to life and responding with amusement to the seriousness of the art student's scrutiny.

In *Triple Self-Portrait* Rockwell poked gentle fun at his own role as a maker of illusions. He depicts himself as a slightly harried and dishevelled middle-aged painter creating a highly idealized self-portrait. The image emerging on his canvas appears much younger and more self-assured than real life. He understood that while his art drew inspiration from life, it was not a simple mirror of daily affairs.

His art was an artificial construct—a condensation and strengthening of what he saw in the world around him. Although by this time Rockwell was revered as a national celebrity, he always maintained a realistic perspective on the difficult labour and creative work involved every day in being a famous illustrator.

**I**N HIS LATER YEARS ROCKWELL became more aware of social issues and in the 1960s produced a number of important paintings supporting the Civil Rights movement. One of his most moving compositions is *The Problem We All Live With* (1963), which depicts **Ruby Bridges**. Bridges gained national attention—and earned the

angry jeers of her community—when she became the first black child to attend an all-white elementary school in the South. She later recalled that on November 14, 1960, when she arrived to attend the first day of the court-ordered integration at William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans, she was greeted by a hostile crowd: “Driving up I could see the crowd, but living in New Orleans, I actually thought it was Mardi Gras. There was a large crowd of people outside of the school. They were throwing things and shouting, and that sort of goes on

in New Orleans at Mardi Gras.” But this was no party. When the citizens of New Orleans issued death threats, the Federal government provided her with marshals to escort her to and from school. As one marshal remembered, “She showed a lot of courage. She never cried. She didn’t whimper. She just marched along like a little soldier, and we’re all very proud of her.”

Rockwell was moved by her bravery. In his painting he chose to emphasize her steadfast resolve not to be deterred from her right to get an education. He chose to model his composition on the



*Art Critic*, 1955

Oil on canvas 39 1/2" × 36 1/4"

Cover illustration for "The Saturday Evening Post," April 16, 1955

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Norman Rockwell Museum Collections

horizontal frieze format first developed in the ancient art of Egypt and Greece. As in many ancient friezes, the marshals are actually the same figure repeated over and over, in order to emphasize their official duty and the repetitive action of escorting her every day. In contrast, Ruby is shown as quietly confident and determined, walking to school just like any little girl on any average day. Dwarfed by anonymous adult government officials, she is the one who appears as a hero.

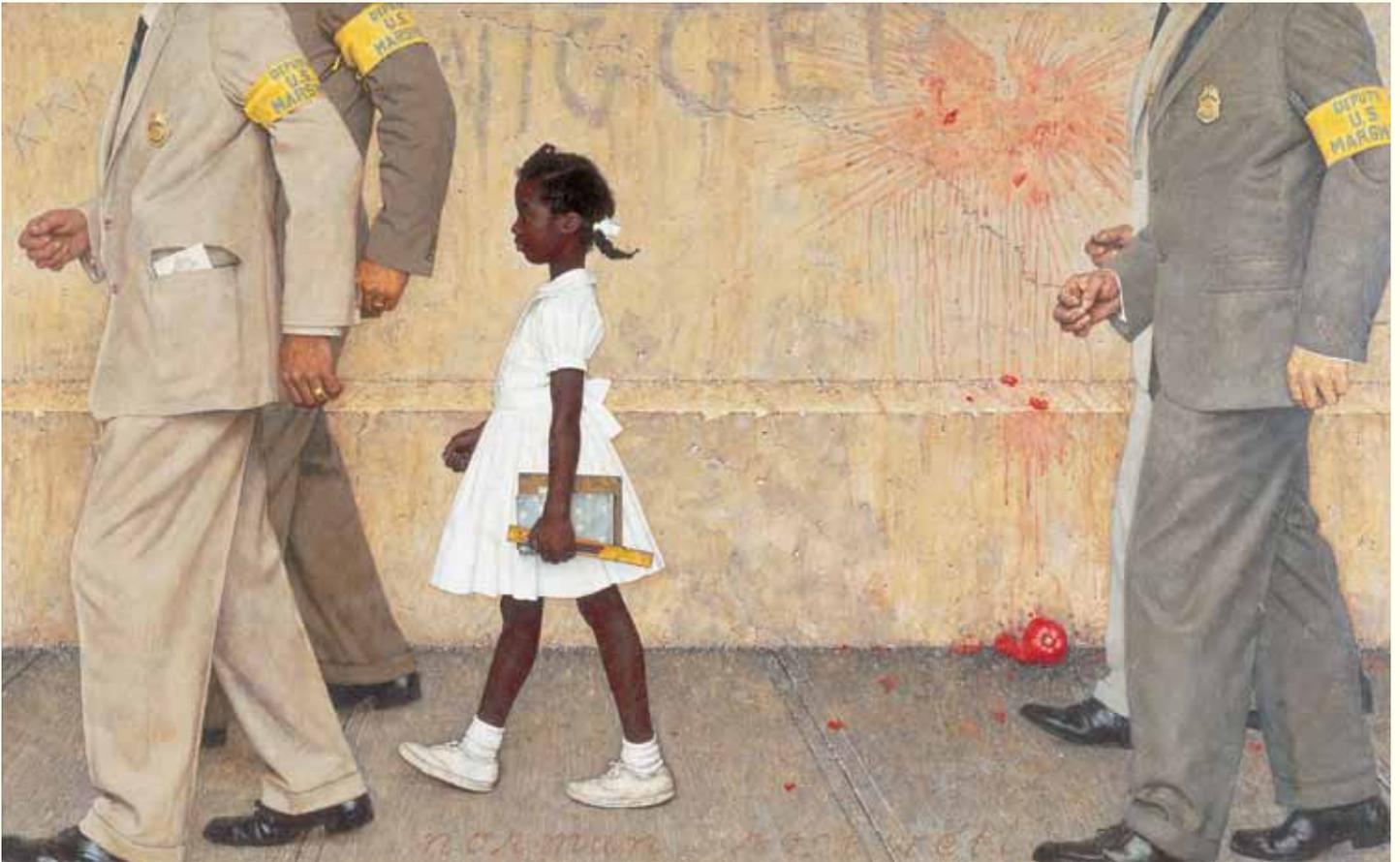
Norman Rockwell admired young Ruby because of her character. And he demonstrated great character himself by choosing to depict a subject that was extremely controversial at the time. He possessed an inner sense of right

and wrong and used his role as one of America's most famous artists to support an unpopular and contentious cause. Throughout his career he produced paintings that became widely admired because the situations and emotions he addressed were deep and complex. The United States since its inception had been a nation of intrepid individuals—idealists and dreamers, explorers and inventors. Rockwell celebrated the moral fibre of the people who shaped our country and in so doing created a timeless contribution to American culture. ☒

*Notes:*

The author, **Michael Zakian**, is Director of the **Frederick R. Weisman Museum of Art** and an adjunct professor of art history at **Pepperdine University** in Malibu.

The **Crocker Art Museum** in Sacramento is hosting "American Chronicles: The Art of Norman Rockwell," on view November 10, 2012 through February 3, 2013. Drawn from the collection of the **Norman Rockwell Museum** in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, the exhibition includes more than 50 paintings as well as 323 original "Saturday Evening Post" covers and some of Rockwell's most famous illustrations, drawings, and war bond posters. Together they offer an overview of one of America's most iconic and beloved artists.



*The Problem We All Live With*, 1963

Oil on canvas, 36" × 58"

Illustration for "Look," January 14, 1964

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