Norman Rockwell
1894 – 1978
Americana

In the vertical art storage rack you will find the following reproduction and posters:

Large reproductions: *The Dugout, Happy Birthday Miss Jones*

Posters: The *Art Elements & Principles* posters to use in the discussion

On the NSS PTA website you will find digital images available for download. These can be sent to the teacher to project on their Smartboards.

In the black cabinet you will find a white binder with a copy of this presentation and several 8.5 x 11 prints of the other works referenced in this presentation.
Personal Information

Name: Norman Rockwell
Nationality: American
Born: February 3, 1894 in New York City, New York
Died: Stockbridge, Mass. 1978 (today the Norman Rockwell Museum is located there)
Lived: Rockwell lived most of his life in New York and then New England. He was born in New York City and moved to Mamaroneck, New York, at the age of nine with his family. After the Navy, he continued to live in the New York area, eventually moving to Arlington, Vermont and then Stockbridge, MA, his last home.
Family: Rockwell was married three times. After divorcing his first wife, he had three sons with his second wife. After his wife passed away, he remarried a third time.

Professional Information

Type of artist: Primarily Rockwell thought of himself as an illustrator and painter.
Artistic Credo: Rockwell favored illustrations of Americana highlighting vignettes of warmth and humor. In his inimitable way, he captured a moment in its entirety; with a single image he has told a complete story that everyone can clearly understand, “who gave millions of people pleasure…” “From the beginning Rockwell’s art had a moral undercurrent … the work being primarily a comic form of escapism in a sugary… mode …. ‘life as I would like it to be,’ Rockwell was explained.” “‘I paint ordinary people in everyday situations, and that’s about all I do,’ he concluded.”
Style/Technique: One of America’s favorite and highly recognized artists, he was fortunate to have his pictures grace the cover of The Saturday Evening Post (with a circulation of two million readers a week) for 40 years, thus giving him the largest audience of any other artist in history. He sold his first cover painting to the Post in 1916 and ended up creating 322. His personal contribution during the World War II was the famous “Four Freedoms” posters he painted, symbolizing for millions the war aims for President Franklin Roosevelt. Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson sat for him for portraits, and he painted many world figures, including Nassar of Egypt and Nehru of India.

Artist Background

In America, Norman Perceval Rockwell may be the best-known artist that ever lived. Some book jackets characterize him as “American’s Best Loved Artist.” He was born into a fairly affluent family in New York City with a familial interest in art. His father enjoyed copying illustrations from magazines as a hobby; his maternal grandfather was an unsuccessful English artist who came to America shortly after the Civil War. Although commercially unsuccessful, he nevertheless painted in great detail (“…every hair on the dog was carefully drawn; the tiny highlights in the pig’s eyes – great, watery human eyes – could be clearly seen.”), also a characteristic of his grandson’s work.
As a boy Rockwell was thin, poorly coordinated and pigeon-toed. He started wearing corrective shoes when he was ten, eyeglasses at 12. Unable to compete satisfactorily in sports, he used his drawing skill to entertain his friends from an early age. At the age of nine, Rockwell’s family moved to Mamaroneck, New York. By the time he was 12, Norman had decided what he was going to be. “…Boys who are athletes are expressing themselves fully. They have an identity, a recognized place among other boys. I didn’t have that. All I had was the ability to draw, which as far as I could see didn’t count for much. But because it was all I had I began to make it my whole life. I drew all the time. Gradually my narrow shoulders, long neck and pigeon toes became less important to me. I drew and drew and drew.”

Rockwell began his formal art training when he was 14, first on Saturdays, and then later, with his school principal’s permission, also on Wednesdays, at the Chase School of Fine and Applied Art in NYC – which offered a very stiff and stilted study of art. Two years later he left and enrolled at the Art Students League, the most liberal and exciting art school of its day.

Rockwell was successful from the start, commissioning his first set of Christmas cards at 16, illustrating his first book when he was 17, becoming art director of Boys’ Life magazine when he was 19, and doing his first cover for the Saturday Evening Post when he was 22. As America’s most popular magazine, Saturday Evening Post provided Rockwell with national exposure; and America was treated to Post covers by Rockwell for 47 years. Rockwell’s productivity during these early years was enormous – hundreds of illustrations for books and magazines. He even continued to supply his regular clients with covers and illustrations during his Navy service, sometimes including the initials USN after his name. After the Navy, Rockwell continued to live in the NY area (New Rochelle), eventually moving to Arlington, VT. His last home was in Stockbridge, MA, home of the Norman Rockwell Museum.

Artistic Persona

The subject of Norman Rockwell’s work is average America. He has painted it with such benevolent affection for so many years that a truly remarkable history of our century has been compiled. Through wars, depression, civil strife, and the exploration of space, Norman Rockwell has drawn subjects from the everyday happenings of which most lives are made. Millions of people have been moved by his picture stories about the awkwardness of youth and the comforts of age, about pride in country, history, and heritage, about reverence, loyalty and compassion. The virtues that he admires have been very popular. Since it illustrates them using familiar people in familiar settings with wonderful accuracy, he thus describes the American Dream.

As an illustrator, Norman Rockwell paid enormous attention to even the tiniest details. At the Art Student’s League he had studied anatomical construction, understanding the “swivel, hinge and arch of bone movement, the contraction, rest and extension of muscles. The body was studied in such detail that once a student knew what any part of the model was doing, he could build that part from the bone up and not have to depend on copying outlines.” Such in-depth awareness of how one part of the body relates to another in any given situation is evident throughout Rockwell’s work, whether it be his amazingly accurate facial expressions, or the emotions expressed by a character’s posture.
Students might enjoy learning how he managed to paint a chicken live: “You pick up the chicken and rock him back and forth a few times. When you set him down he will stand just as you’ve placed him for four to five minutes. Of course you have to run behind the easel pretty quickly to do much painting before the chicken moves. But it’s better than trying to paint him while he’s dashing about the studio. If you want to paint the chicken full face the procedure is even more complicated because the eyes of a chicken are on the sides of his head and when he looks at you he turns his head. I puzzled about that for a quite a while. Finally, I got a long stick and after I’d set the chicken down and gone behind the easel I’d rap the wall at one side of the chicken and he’d turn his head toward me to look at the wall. It’s very strenuous painting a chicken…”

Show: 8.5x11 printout or digital image of comparison between the photos that Rockwell took of his subjects and the final paintings.

Ask: Why do you think Rockwell used photographs as a reference for his paintings?
Ask: Is this something you would do? Why?

When it came to painting people, Rockwell would have family, friends, neighbors, and even actors/actresses pose for him. He claimed he would scream, shout, jump around and act however crazy he had to in order to elicit the right facial expression from them. The eyebrows were very...
Norman Rockwell

important to him. He found that some people just couldn’t raise their eyebrows to get the expression he wanted, or were too self-conscious to act out the emotion he was trying to portray, so then he just had to get another model.

Given Rockwell’s penchant for exacting detail, it’s not surprising to learn that each of his works progressed in several stages, with each stage contributing toward the historical, cultural and or emotional accuracy of his paintings, and therefore their successes:

- First, Rockwell would work at developing a good idea, saying, “No matter how well you paint a story-telling picture, if the idea is not good it will be a failure and people will ignore it.” He would show a sketch, sometimes even a doodle of his idea, to other people to see if they “got” what he was trying to say. If people seemed uninterested or only mildly interested in his idea, he would abandon the idea and search for another one.
- Rockwell would then search for the exact right person to pose for his picture, often working from a photograph of them “in action.” He also researched and searched for authentic props, costumes and even locations, adding a dimension of sincerity to his paintings.
- Next he would make a preliminary charcoal sketch of his idea, claiming that if the sketch didn’t look right, then you could be sure the final painting wouldn’t either. He would use this sketch to try to anticipate and solve any problems with detail before beginning his final painting.
- Next a color sketch was made in order to judge how strong and pleasing it was, and whether the chosen colors helped express the mood and idea of the story he was trying to tell.
- Finally, Rockwell would paint the finished picture.

A variety of “American” themes interested Rockwell, many of which appeared on one of the 322 Post covers he completed. Rockwell left the Saturday Evening Post in 1963 after 47 years, and went to work for Look magazine. It is interesting to note the difference in his work from one magazine to the next. Keeping in mind that his covers were subject to editorial direction and approval, Rockwell’s Look covers were more serious in nature: instead of painting cheerleaders he painted integration; instead of peace and prosperity, he painted poverty, protest and the Peace Corps. Themes reflected in Rockwell’s work include:

- Settings: A detailed documentation of interiors and architectural settings.
- Growing Up In America: A series of episodes that are supposed to add up to the ideal American childhood
- Young Love: Often a source of sympathetic amusement.
- Home And Family: Often a gentle portrayal of the conflicts of home life.
- The American Past In Fact And Fiction: All authentically portrayed.
- Democracy: Paintings that portray the aspirations of a democracy, including The Four Freedoms series.
- Portraits: Presidents, Presidential Candidates and other well-known Americans (including Apollo II Space Team).
- Americans in Uniform: Generally on furlough.
- Americans At Work: Reflecting the national scene.
- The Sporting Life: A favorite subject of Rockwell’s.
- Christmas: An expected tradition for Post covers.
Norman Rockwell

He provided us with a “people’s history of America during the first half” of the 20th Century. He didn’t show us just presidents and celebrities, but of “Aunt Ella taking her niece for a ride in a horse-drawn carriage, and of dad and mom driving grandma and the kids to their summer vacation in a crowded Packard with the family’s green rowboat strapped to the car, and of a new television antenna being installed on a the gabled roof of an old Victorian House with a church steeple in the distance - old religion giving way to new. Rockwell presented the facts of a changing country “an old-fashioned glamour and comforting, self-effacing dignity that helped, at least a little, to ease the country’s passage into the future. He reminded people that the little things sometimes matter more than we think...”

Featured Artwork

The Dugout (1948)
(Oil Painting - Cover for the Post September 1948)
Show: Large reproduction or digital image

The Dugout is about as American a scene as you can get. From the looks on the expressive faces of the ballplayers and batboy, we can guess that it’s not a very good day for the Chicago team, a fact substantiated by the hissing catcalls of the fans in the bleachers behind. In fact, 1948 was a terrible year for Chicago baseball fans. Both teams (Cubs and White Sox) apparently were close to finishing last in their respective leagues, with the former winning 64 games against 90 losses, and the latter team recording 51 wins and 101 losses. Toward the end of the season, Rockwell’s own record of this dismal chapter in Chicago sporting history appeared as a Post cover. He shows us the dugout and the jeering fans. Some peculiarly embarrassing incident has evidently occurred on the playing field. The whole story is summed up by the expressions of disbelief worn by the players and the batboy.
Norman Rockwell

**Ask:** What do you think the mood of the people in the crowd is? Who is winning/losing the game? How can you tell? Take a close look at the players. What do their different facial expressions and body language tell us?

**Ask:** This painting tells a story without using any words. What story does this picture tell you?

**Ask:** We are all familiar with the items in this painting. What familiar items do you see?

**Ask:** Color can be used to set the mood. What is the mood in this painting?

### Happy Birthday Miss Jones (1956)
(Oil Painting - Cover for the *Post* March 1956)

**Show:** Large reproduction, with additional 8x11 prints of photograph of the woman Rockwell posed as a model to paint picture (digital images available)

Much of Rockwell’s early work (in the ‘teens and ‘20s) reflected the essence of childhood of America. This painting, completed in 1956 returns to that same theme, but is painted somewhat differently, offering a more natural treatment. That is, the subject continues to be that of an idealized childhood, but dressed up in the trappings of realism. It has also been observed that Rockwell’s post-war children are more behaved than those painted previously. In this painting as well, Rockwell, has captured a precise moment in time, yet he wants the viewer to know what has just happened or will happen next.

### General Discussion:
- How does this painting make you feel?
- What do you think Norman Rockwell is trying to tell us?
- Could this “story” happen today – to you or to people you know or know about?
- What is the action? When did it take place? (Before, during, after)
Norman Rockwell

- What do you think will happen next?
- How would you describe the mood?
- How would you describe Rockwell’s treatment of the story/characters? For example, sarcastic, funny, gentle, nostalgic, upset, etc.?
- Do you see any evidence of humor?
- What evidence do you see of authentic detail?
- Do you think this is really how people dressed during this time period? Do they dress at all like we do today? What details are different?
- Do the clothes say anything about the lives of the people (rich or poor)?
- Do you know what “nostalgia” is?
  
  Definition of Nostalgia - a wistful desire to return in thought or in fact to a former time in one's life, to one's home or homeland, or to one's family and friends; a sentimental yearning for the happiness of a former place or time
  
  Does anything about this painting make you feel nostalgic?

- Do you think the painting is realistic? (If yes: Do you think it’s important or useful to look at paintings that show how things used to be?)

Talking about the Elements of Art
You can use these points to talk about either of the paintings.

Color:
- Think about the colors he painted. How do they set the mood of the painting?
- What kinds of colors did Norman Rockwell use?
- Are the colors bright or muted?

Shape:
- What shapes do you see?
- Does the painting look three-dimensional or flat?

Texture:
- What kinds of textures are depicted in the painting through his drapery of clothes on the people and other objects in the paintings?

Line:
- Does Rockwell’s use of lines create a mood? Angle of the shoulders of the subjects or the head can convey sadness, disappointment, or thankful.
- Did the lines that Rockwell used draw your attention to any one area of the painting? The bat leads your eye up to the bat boy who is the center of focus, the ceiling of the dugout underlines the jeering faces of the crowd
- Are the lines clean and hard or soft?
- Is the painting highly detailed or not detailed?

Light:
- What kind of light is Rockwell showing?
Norman Rockwell

**Space:**
Identify items in the:
- Foreground: The objects and ground that are “before” or in front of everything else in the picture.
- Middle ground: The objects and ground in a picture that are mid-distant, in front of the background.
- Background: The farthest away objects in a picture, usually near the top of the picture plane. In a landscape it is the sky and the farthest land.

**Composition:**
- Is the painting balanced? How does he show movement? (Can reference the broken chalk or people jeering for example.)
- What does his subjects’ eye direct you to see? **Artists will use the eyes of the subject to direct you to what they want you to focus on. What are these subjects looking at?**

**Resources**
Thomas S. Beuchner, *Norman Rockwell, Artist and Illustrator*
Thomas S. Beuchner, *The Norman Rockwell Treasury*
Thomas S. Beuchner, *Norman Rockwell, A Sixty Year Retrospective*
Christopher Finch, *Norman Rockwell’s America*
George Mendoza, *Norman Rockwell’s Patriotic Times*
Norman Rockwell, *How I Make a Picture*
Jan Wahl, *The Norman Rockwell Storybook*
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norman_Rockwell
From The Norman Rockwell Museum at Stockbridge, *Norman Rockwell, The Artist And His Work*
The teacher’s guide was developed to accompany the exhibition *Telling Stories: Norman Rockwell from the Collections of George Lucas and Steven Spielberg*, at the Smithsonian American Art Museum