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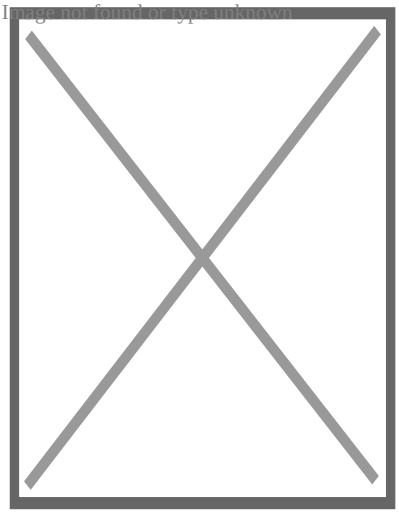
Norman Rockwell: America's storyteller

by Abigail Haber

Uncle Sam, apple pie, and Norman Rockwell: these are the things that make America. At the New-York Historical Society, this summer's "Rockwell, Roosevelt, & The Four Freedoms," on view through September 2, explores how four of Rockwell's 1943 paintings—*Freedom of Speech*, *Freedom of Worship*, *Freedom from Want*, and *Freedom from Fear*—propelled Franklin Delano Roosevelt's ideas about democracy, liberty, and wartime duty into the American public consciousness. "Rockwell, Roosevelt & The Four Freedoms" suggests that Rockwell's images not only captured the spirit and scenery of the World War II era, but also were instrumental in increasing public support for the war and for the values for which America chose to fight.

All four paintings in the "Four Freedoms" series, which hang facing one another in an octagonal gallery at the center of the exhibition, are striking for their near-life-size scale. The images within the paintings, however, are equally as powerful. Rockwell's *Freedom of Speech* was inspired by Jim Edgerton, a Vermont man who stood up in a local town hall to express a controversial opinion. Portrayed is the model Carl Hess with a tanned and Lincolnesque visage, a rumpled blue flannel shirt, and chapped knuckles. In *Freedom of Worship*, people of all faiths and denominations tilt their heads in prayer. *Freedom from Want*, depicted in the muted hues that mark much of Rockwell's work, features a smiling family gathered around the Thanksgiving table. A married couple tuck their sons in for the night in *Freedom from Fear*. In one hand the father holds a newspaper, which bears a headline with the words "Bombing" and "Horrors." War is intangible and far-off in this painting, not pictured outright but rather discretely referenced. Rockwell created an idyllic America of his own imagining, replete with sleeping children, earnest farmers, and family dinners. These are the images—of old men with too many smile lines, of children who think only of candy stores and sibling squabbles (not bombings and *blitzkriegs*), of dining rooms with delicately patterned wallpaper—that entice. These are the images that reassure.



Norman Rockwell, Four Freedoms (series), *1943*, *Oil on Canvas*, *New-York Historical Society*.

The "Four Freedoms" series was inspired by Roosevelt's 1941 wartime address. A break from the non-interventionist rhetoric that had long defined U.S. diplomacy, FDR's speech justified the recent aid to Allied forces—namely, the cash-free, all-access Lend-Lease program. According to Roosevelt, American involvement in World War II was necessary to uphold, both at home and abroad, the four liberties inherent to democracy: freedom of worship, freedom of speech, freedom from fear, and freedom from want.

A flurry of memos from The Office of War Information informed FDR that his speech had failed to energize the American public. Thus, the president put out a call for art inspired by the Four Freedoms oration. One of the artists to answer this was Norman Rockwell.

As regards the historical context surrounding Roosevelt's speech, I find the exhibition slightly lacking. There is discussion, as well as the presentation of numerous drafts, of one crucial wartime document: The Atlantic Charter. Co-written by Churchill and FDR, the charter outlines the Allied goals for the post-war world, among them the self-determination of peoples, a loosening of trade regulations, and—most importantly—a recognition and description of FDR's Four Freedoms. Yet, the exhibition makes only hazy mentions of other early-WWII milestones: Hitler's rise to power, the bombing of London, the Nazi invasion of Poland. Explaining these events in greater detail within the exhibition would have made one fact clear: Roosevelt was desperate to save his country from a fate identical to that of Poland and Britain.

By 1943, when Rockwell finally finished his paintings, the Axis threat had already burst through Allied borders. Several of J. C. Leyendecker's 1943 cover illustrations for *The Saturday Evening Post*—a magazine at which Rockwell worked for nearly fifty years—are on display at the exhibition. These pictures both offer a loose summary of these events and chart the escalation of the conflict. The Germans had taken Southern France and installed the Vichy regime, the Russians were in the throes of battle with Hitler's troops to the East, and the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor.

The homespun idealism of Rockwell's art, then, resonated with American audiences when it was most needed. The 1943 national tour of the Four Freedoms paintings raised $132 million in war bonds, with the average donation amounting to $25. These were not the contributions of society's wealthiest; they were the wages of working men. Amid the backdrop of war—a war that had thrown the globe into a frenzy—The "Four Freedoms" series cemented the ideals for which Americans should, and more importantly *would*, fight. In doing so, Rockwell profoundly altered the course of the war. By including more historical context, the exhibition could have more effectively presented Rockwell's success at converting Americans to the war cause as the tide-changing feat that it was.

The final room exhibits Rockwell's post-war work, pieces that were made after leaving his tenure at *The Saturday Evening Post*. One such piece is Rockwell's *The Problem We All Live With* (1964), which depicts Ruby Bridges, clad in a crisp white dress and matching hair bow. Escorting her into a desegregated New Orleans school is a group of National Guardsmen, their torsos and faces cropped out of the picture. It is a commanding, visceral piece that holds one's attention. To see this painting in person is an altogether different, and entirely more impactful, experience than viewing a reproduction in one's American history class.

Murder in Mississippi (1965) is another post-war work of particular interest. Rockwell drew inspiration for this piece from the deaths of three civil rights activists. The painting is, despite its gory subject matter, surprisingly restrained in its execution. In Rockwell's early paintings and posters (of which the exhibition displays many), virile male bodies fill up the canvas; here, there is an excess of empty space. The loose brushwork of the dark background threatens to swallow whole the few details in the painting—the scattered stones, the gnarled bodies of the fallen men. It is in this minimalism that the viewer too is swallowed by the work's deafening and painfully perceptible silences, its immaterial grittiness, its cavernous darkness. While a subdued color palette and vacant background appear in other paintings by Rockwell, *Murder in Mississippi* provides a refreshing counterpoint to the all-American, easily digestible imagery of Rockwell's early works.

Norman Rockwell, Murder in Mississippi, *1965*, *Oil on Canvas*, *New-York Historical Society*

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Rockwell's art is not perfect. It often lacks nuance or subtlety, and seems overly caricaturesque. "Rockwell, Roosevelt & The Four Freedoms" shows that the artist, however, did at least one thing well: he took Roosevelt's grand manifesto, his how-to for living in the modern democratic age, and translated it into a visual language that is cozy, familiar, and fundamentally American.

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