

SATURDAY EVENING PAST AND FUTURE



Shuffleton's Barbershop, Norman Rockwell, 1950

By Steven Heller

SINCE STEPHANIE PLUNKETT joined the Norman Rockwell Museum 16 years ago, the Stockbridge, Massachusetts, institution has broadened its focus beyond its namesake and the Americana he made iconic. In some ways, Plunkett was born for her current role—her father was an illustrator and graphic designer in New York City, and she has long wanted to promote the contributions of artists who work, often anonymously, in the name of commerce.

She was unsure how until she saw an advertisement for a job at the Norman Rockwell Museum, where she has been ever since, first as an educator, and now as the deputy director and chief curator. Drawing on her experience studying in the M.F.A. Illustration as Visual Essay program at the School of Visual Arts, she has introduced narrative through exhibitions and programs that speak to the cultural significance of illustrated images. I spoke to her about Rockwell's complicated legacy and the space she is creating at the museum for contemporary illustration.

Norman Rockwell's art seems much more about the surface than the interior life. But he had many sides. Is the museum a testament to the complex personal man, the iconic American art, or both?

The museum was established more than 40 years ago, and for the first 30, curatorial emphasis was placed solely on the life and art of Rockwell himself. This was an advantage, as it allowed museum scholars to tease out, through many years of study, the intricacies of Rockwell's existence and the impact his imagery had on the American psyche. Processing his vast archive of reference photography, fan and business correspondence, and personal ledgers and effects has made important 20th-century artifacts of commercial art available to other commentators as well, greatly advancing the conversation about Rockwell and the field. We tell Rockwell's story by presenting a layered view that represents his experiences, his influences and aspirations, the complexities of his world, and the iconic images that are his legacy.

I've been to the museum many times, and invariably there are busloads of "average Americans" in attendance. Why is this institution such a magnet for them?

For Rockwell, the story was "the first thing and the last thing," and his visual narratives need no interpretation. As in his day, Rockwell's artworks are instantly understood by appreciative audiences who see the best in themselves reflected in his painstakingly and beautifully executed canvases, created over the course of 60 years. In times of change, Rockwell's images have been a reassuring guide—evidenced in the record attendance at the Guggenheim Museum, which, shortly after September 11, 2001, mounted an exhibition that we had organized. He was and continues to be a trusted visual commentator, even though in his later years he turned his attention from the narratives of daily life to the challenges of contemporary society.

Since you have been at the museum, the breadth of what it addresses has expanded. It now includes political art (an exhibition on Steven Brodner), children's art (Fred Marcellino), and, most recently, contemporary illustration, in a new series starting with Elwood H. Smith. Has this



From left: Illustration from *The Sweethearts of Rhythm*, Jerry Pinkney, 2009; artwork by Istvan Banyai; *Too Many Hats*, Elwood H. Smith, 2010.

been a difficult transition, given the core “Americana” audience?

The museum has exhibited the art of almost 450 historical and contemporary illustrators, and I have no doubt that Rockwell would have been incredibly pleased to have his art exhibited alongside that of his colleagues. No subject can be truly understood without the benefit of context, and the history of this dynamic American art form is an essential aspect of the story the museum aspires to tell. Our commitment to advancing knowledge and understanding is reflected in the recent formation of the Rockwell Center for American Visual Studies, the nation’s first scholarly institute focused specifically on the images of mass culture in our world.

Another consideration is that Rockwell is now a historical figure, and the audiences who experienced his illustrations in *The Saturday Evening Post* and other publications firsthand are dwindling. Engaging with new audiences is essential to the museum’s future, and changing exhibitions that present diverse aspects of the field help us to do that. Of course, there are those who want to experience only Rockwell when they visit, and the museum’s name does not reflect our broadened mission, which can be confusing. Public response to the museum’s illustration exhibitions has been positive, though, and many American institutions that have mounted the illustration-based shows that we have organized.

What is there left to say about Rockwell?

That is the wonder in all of this. Deepened scholarship leads to new pathways, and

going through Rockwell’s archives has provided unexpected insights into his life, art, and times. Over the course of the past few years, we have digitized almost 18,000 archival negatives that reflect his directorial and photographic process—a project that has led to the creation of “Norman Rockwell: Behind the Camera,” an exhibition organized in collaboration with the historian Ron Schick. Now on view at the Brooklyn Museum, it will move on to the George Eastman House, the El Paso Museum of Art, and the Vero Beach Museum of Art, and Little, Brown is publishing an accompanying catalogue.

We are currently moving forward on “The Pleasures of Recognition: Rockwell’s Masters,” an exhibition that reaches beyond the narratives of Norman Rockwell’s art to reveal the deeper foundations of his paintings. Rockwell was inspired by all manner of things—from Michelangelo’s Sistine ceiling and the art of Bruegel and Hals to the drawings of F. R. Gruger and Thomas Nast—and as inventive as he was, he was also a great appropriator. Exhibitions like these offer new insights, and then there are those that are just plain fun. “It’s a Dog’s Life,” on view this summer, will look at Rockwell’s repeated use of man’s best friend in his art.

Rockwell’s work has become a brand. Is anything taboo in how his work is presented?

In exhibitions and publications, we strive to present an honest view, despite and because of Rockwell’s legendary status. He suffered through trials and tribulations, as we all do, and often painted his hap-

piness. It’s important for the public to know that beneath all he has come to represent, Rockwell was deeply human. He accomplished his work with unflinching devotion despite the strains of daily living. His brilliance was countered by depression, divorce, the death of a spouse, artist’s block, and professional concerns—aspects of his story that impacted the art he produced. As a historical figure, he holds up well as a compassionate humanist who was fully committed to his art.

Do you think there can ever be another Rockwell, an artist who captures the heart of the American people?

I think that Rockwell was the last illustrator to have that kind of reach, as the world of publishing and communications has changed so dramatically. When Rockwell achieved success, print media was the public’s primary source of information and entertainment, and television was not even a glimmer on the horizon. Today our attentions are vastly diverted by a plethora of visual and informational sources, some of which are small enough to hold in the palms of our hands. So many letters in Rockwell’s archive speak to the public’s focus on illustrated images in midcentury America. Correspondence corrects the amount of postage on a package carried by a fictional GI, offers a list of adjustments to the artist’s *Four Freedoms*, and makes suggestions for future magazine covers. We are continually struck by just how personal it all was, and how difficult it would be to capture the public’s imagination so completely in our time. ■