

Rockwell: Sonnets to the prosaic

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Norman Rockwell is a litmus test, a way of separating the snob elite from Middle America. An affinity for the Capra of canvas is an even better gauge of incorrectness than a fondness for John Wayne, Ronald Reagan or Rush Limbaugh.

Feb. 3 marks the 100th anniversary of the artist's birth. It has been 17 years since his passing, but Rockwell is very much alive in the sentiments his work still evokes.

A 1993 Newsweek article on the opening of a new Rockwell museum in Stockbridge sneered that America's best-loved artist was the "Brueghel of the 20th-century bourgeoisie, the Holbein of Jell-O ads and magazine covers."

How they loved to loathe him, the lumpen intelligentsia. He wasn't an artist but a lowly illustrator, they sniff. He was cliched, banal, and simplistic. He presented a cutesy-pie, storybook vision of America which, they insist: 1) did not exist 2) never existed 3) could not exist.

On the other hand, many of them go into paroxysms of ecstasy over exhibits of artificial excrement and paintings that appear to be the work of a 3-year-old with severe emotional problems.

Critics are driven to deride popular artists (Frank Capra, Irving Berlin, Steven Spielberg - before "Schindler's List"). For them, popularity is the cultural mark of Cain, a sure sign that the recipient of acclaim lacks subtlety and substance.

Never has there been a greater divergence of popular and elite opinion. For almost 50 years, Rockwell was the best-loved illustrator of America's favorite magazine. A Saturday Evening Post editor noted that in the 1950s a Rockwell cover meant an extra 75,000 newsstand sales.

During World War II, the originals of his Four Freedoms paintings toured the country, generating \$130 million in bond sales. A 1960s showing of 50 of his canvases was panned by critics and mobbed by the public. Every one sold during the preview, at an average price of \$20,000. A book of his illustrations, published in 1970, has to date generated \$10 million in sales.

Each year, more than 300,000 visitors flock to the Rockwell museum. An employee confessed that she "expected to see a bunch of blue-haired, little old ladies," but instead beheld couples with children in strollers reverently touring the facility.

In a troubled century, Rockwell's success reflected a hunger for the mundane. He celebrated the old virtues: love, loyalty, friendship, pride in country. Before me is a book with all 332 of his magazine covers. Opened at random, it cannot fail to delight.

A doctor places his stethoscope to the chest of a doll held by an anxious little girl. A mother, with a yelping child across her lap and various broken objects at her feet, holds a hairbrush in one hand and a book on child psychology in the other, a thoroughly perplexed expression on her face. (No one could capture the play of emotions across a countenance like Rockwell.)

Waiting outside the principal's office, a pigtailed tomboy - disheveled, sporting a shiner - grins ear to ear. In a shabby rail yard restaurant, an elderly woman and her grandson bend over their meals in prayer, while tough yardmen look on.

My favorite Rockwell, the Post cover on Feb. 16, 1929, was titled "The Age of Chivalry." Here a plumpish, middle-aged man is asleep in his easy chair; a volume on chivalry rests in his lap. In the shadowy background, we glimpse the passing pageantry of a knightly dream. A beribboned cat stands vigil over its sleeping master.

Rockwell was the first to admit that his was a fanciful world. He once confided to an interviewer that he had unconsciously decided that if this wasn't an ideal world, it should be, and proceeded to make it so - creating on canvas an idyllic land without disease, deformity or despair, where all women were virtuous, young men determined and children at their worst mischievous, but more often supremely happy.

Problems were humorous and never too big. And yet in the silly dilemmas, misadventures, joys and pleasures of his characters, viewers saw something of their own lives.

It's a perennial question: Should art mirror reality or idealize it? Today, much of what passes for the aesthetic celebrates the sordid, presents a perspective from the foot of a dung heap gazing up at oblivion.

I don't know if Rockwell was a religious man. His art was certainly reverential. His prolific brush produced affectionate portraits of exuberant youth, domestic contentment, budding romance - the best existence has to offer.

Thomas S. Buechner, former director of the Brooklyn Museum, wrote that Rockwell gave us "a body of work which is unsurpassed in the richness and variety of its subject matter and in the professionalism - often brilliant - of its execution."

He did much more. Rockwell painted sonnets to the prosaic that America took to its collective heart. "People somehow get out of your work just about what you put into it," Rockwell observed. "And if you are interested in the characters you draw and understand them and love them, why the person who sees your picture is bound to feel the same way." Throughout this century, millions have and still do