

# Norman Rockwell

**Born:** 3 February 1894

**Active:** 1912 – 1970s

**Died:** 8 November 1978

## Facts about Norman Rockwell

Rockwell is best-known for his 321 Saturday Evening Post cover paintings. He also worked for the Boy Scouts of America, Look Magazine, many advertisers, and a number of other publications.

-When Rockwell was young, his dream was painting for the Saturday Evening Post. In order to work for them, he studied the Post's covers done by their then-favorite illustrator, J.C. Leyendecker. Rockwell wanted to be an illustrator like Leyendecker so badly, Rockwell studied Leyendecker's composition, techniques, and on occasion, he would even follow the artist around town, trying to mimic his manners and style of walking!



Figure 1: Norman Rockwell in 1921, age 27. Image from the Library of Congress. Public Domain.

Rockwell said of his Saturday Evening Post Covers: *“Some have been good, some have been bad, and some just indifferent...often the ones I have liked best have been liked least by the readers...one I like least has found favor. This is because the artists is often interested in the problems of composition, tone, and color, while the public is primarily interested in the story told. Which is as it should be.”*

When his studio in Virginia burnt down, he illustrated the entire event in a cartoon style. He even chose to find humor in his professional disaster, showing funny scenes like the fire captain holding a sparking umbrella singing a song, and his measles-quarantined boys watching the whole event from the window.

When Rockwell was asked to illustrate Mark Twain's books “Tom Sawyer” and “Huckleberry Finn”, he traveled to Hannibal Missouri to see the location the books took place in. When he illustrated Louisa May Alcott's “Little Women”, he explored Alcott's home in Concord, Massachusetts. Scenes for these books are based on the actual locations within Hannibal and Concord.

Because Rockwell's illustrations were often commissioned by clients (who frequently told him what to draw and when to deliver it), many critics, including those in Rockwell's own time, didn't think he was a serious or fine artist. What do you think? (Fun fact: prior to the invention of photography, MOST art was commissioned by clients and supposed to be delivered by a deadline. Michelangelo, Rembrandt, and DaVinci, among many others, all painted commission work for clients. Does this change how you perceive Rockwell?)

# Illustration:

(n.) A picture, painting, or other image, often specifically created to pair with a publication, text, or presentation. Illustrations are used to make difficult concepts clear, enhance the enjoyment of a story, or otherwise provide an example to support a claim.

In art, an illustration is sometimes treated differently from “fine art”. “Fine art” is often defined as an artistic object created primarily to be enjoyed for its imaginative or aesthetic qualities, (it’s creative and pretty) and should be judged on merits of beauty and how it makes the viewer feel.

Illustration must do something more: it is created to work with another work, to make an idea more clear, vibrant, or interesting than either text or image could have done alone. That being said, many illustrations can stand as beautiful images on their own.

In addition to authors and children’s books, archaeologists, architects, doctors and medical teachers, scientists, fashion designers, theater and movie designers, all use illustration in their work, presentations, and studies. Some of these fields form specialized illustration disciplines, like “archaeological illustrators”, “botanical illustrators”, “medical illustrators”, “scientific illustrators” and “technical illustrators”.

# Illustrator:

(n) A person who creates art, generally to pair with a specific piece or publication in order to enhance or make the final product more complete.

# Illustration Etymology

**Illustration:** (n) From the Latin word: “*illustrare*”, meaning “to light up, make light, illuminate”. The word appears in English around the 1520s. By the 1610s, it meant, “to provide examples [to make a concept clear]”.

**Illustrator:** (n) From the Latin, “*illustrator*” meaning, “an enlightener” or “One Who Enlightens”. The meaning “one who draws” comes from the 1680s.

# Quotes from Norman Rockwell:

*“Some people have been kind enough to call me a fine artist. I’ve always called myself an illustrator. I’m not sure what the difference is. All I know is that whatever type of work I do, I try to give it my very best. Art has been my life.” -Norman Rockwell*

*“It is we who become tired when we cease to be curious and appreciative. We find it is not a new scene which is needed, but a new viewpoint.” -Norman Rockwell*



"Stuck inside"

Norman Rockwell, 1922

Oil

Public Domain (in the US)

What clues did Rockwell put in this painting to indicate where the boy is? What clues do we have about where (or what) he'd rather be doing?



*"Christmas Homecoming" Norman Rockwell, 1948; Oil on Canvas (35-1/2" x 33-1/2") Saturday Evening Post Cover for December 25, 1948 issue; Norman Rockwell Museum, Stockbridge, Massachusetts. Copyright Norman Rockwell, Fair Use*

Trivia: Rockwell used friends, family, and himself as models for this portrait. Can you see Grandma Moses in this painting? How about Rockwell himself?

Grandma Moses and Rockwell ended up being friends, even though they didn't meet until after her art career started to build. When they met, she was 78, he was 56, but he already had almost 40 years-experience as a professional artist.

For more about the people in this painting see this article from the Norman Rockwell museum:  
<http://www.nrm.org/HEA/CH/>



Norman Rockwell (1894-1978), "Freedom from Fear," 1943,  
Story illustration for "The Saturday Evening Post," March 13, 1943.  
Norman Rockwell Museum Collections. ©1943 SEPS: Curtis Licensing, Indianapolis, IN. Fair Use

The Rockwell series "The Four Freedoms" were created in 1943 as illustrations of President Franklin Roosevelt's January 1941, "Four Freedoms" speech. These were four freedoms, Freedom of Speech, Freedom of Worship, Freedom from Want, and Freedom from Fear, which Roosevelt believed were universal human rights which should be protected. These four paintings toured in 1943, raising over \$132 million dollars for the war effort from 1.2 million people.



Triple Self-Portrait, Norman Rockwell, 1960. Oil on Canvas, 44 ½" x 34 ¾"; Cover illustration for The Saturday Evening Post, February 3, 1960. From the permanent Collection of the Norman Rockwell Museum, Stockbridge, Massachusetts.

For this self-portrait, Rockwell included a number of elements which told a lot about himself. For an explanation of the elements in this composition, see this article from the Norman Rockwell Museum: <http://www.nrm.org/MT/text/TripleSelf.html>

In the meantime, see if you can spot Albrecht Durer, (who we studied in Cycle 1) and Rembrandt (who we studied in Cycle 2). There are two other famous self-portraits hidden in this work—whose are they?

# Ideas to go Deeper at Home:

Norman Rockwell created everyday scenes which people might miss during their day-to-day lives. He tried to show the beauty in these “ordinary” scenes. Stop during your day and think about an ordinary scene and what makes it extraordinary. (you can draw it if you like, that’s up to you!) Simple scenes like:

- A child or adult reading or reading together, or surrounded by books. (the wonder of reading, the miracle of knowledge in our homes. After all, for thousands of years, so few had such knowledge at their finger tips...)
- A pet sleeping in the sunshine or in front of a roaring fire. (the beauty of simple pleasures, like the warm sunshine-especially if you are in a cold-weather area at the moment!)
- Children playing together, indoors or out
- Eating dinner as a family
- Gathering to worship together openly.

These are just a few ideas. You will likely have more-especially if you keep it up. Rockwell’s world wasn’t so cheery as his paintings showed: he lived through two world wars and a depression. He and his first wife divorced, his second wife died, his career took twists and turns. But through it all, Rockwell *chose* to see the beauty in the ordinary.

## Compare and Contrast

Look at Rockwell’s work on [wikiart.org](http://wikiart.org). Then look at J.C. Leyendecker’s work. Do you think there are similarities? Leyendecker was America’s most popular illustrator prior to Rockwell’s rise. There’s a great article on both men: “*Norman Rockwell and his Mentor, J.C. Leyendecker*” on the [americanillustrators.com](http://americanillustrators.com) website. (under “*Traveling Exhibitions*”).

## Books & Online Galleries:

- “*Meet the World’s Great Artists: Norman Rockwell*” by Mike Venezia
- “*Norman Rockwell: Storyteller with a Brush*” by Beverly Gheman (a longer book with more of his life story. Better for older Foundations kids or kids who want a lot more information or want to see more of Rockwell’s work.)
- <http://totallyhistory.com/norman-rockwell-paintings/> & <https://www.wikiart.org/en/norman-rockwell>

## Field Trip:

The following museums and institutions have some of Rockwell’s art:

- Norman Rockwell Museum at Stockbridge, Stockbridge, Massachusetts (the largest single collection of Rockwell’s work, plus a number of articles and Rockwell works.)  
<https://www.nrm.org/>
- National Scouting Museum, Irving, Texas, (Near Dallas)
- Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas
- Delaware Museum of Art, Wilmington, Delaware
- Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York