



Inspiration (Norman Rockwell) Backstory

Norman Rockwell was one of the most prolific and well-known of American artists. During his 47-year career as a painter and illustrator, he depicted people and situations from everyday life. By his death in 1978, his work was familiar to millions of people, and remains iconic today.

Some of Rockwell's most recognized works include his cover art for the Saturday Evening Post, the Four Freedoms series (Freedom from Want, Freedom of Speech, Freedom to Worship and Freedom from Fear), A Problem We All Live With, showing school integration during the 1960s, and Triple Self-Portrait, which is featured on The Foundation for a Better Life's "Inspiration" billboard.

Rockwell was born in 1894 and died in 1978. The Great Depression, World War II, The Civil Rights movement, the Space Age - Rockwell lived, and painted, through most of the turbulent 20th century. Even during the most frightening and uncertain moments of that century, Rockwell's work never turned grim or despairing, retaining a fascination with the human drama he saw unfolding around him.

Rockwell's work conveyed a belief in the goodness of humanity. One example is Triple Self-Portrait, where we see the artist (in his 60s at the time of painting) from the back, reflected in a mirror, and in the larger-than-life portrait on the easel. In the mirror we see a man with an aging face, a grizzled moustache, and thick glasses - but he is painting himself as a young, handsome man, ready to take on the world. The viewer gets the sense that this depiction isn't a false one, but that the artist is looking in the mirror and seeing his own best self.

In the same way, Rockwell saw the best in those around him. The Four Freedoms, painted during World War II, made it evident that Rockwell also strove to showcase what he saw as the best of American values and ideals. In the midst of a grim conflict, these illustrations were a reminder of what kind of world Americans were working for through their sacrifice and hardship. Deeply concerned with civil rights, equality, and the war on poverty, Rockwell incorporated these themes into his later work. Even his paintings that deal with troubling subjects show a resistance to despair and pessimism.

Critics have dubbed Rockwell's work as sentimental, overly sweet, and idealized. This may be because his work seemed to say that the ordinary people he was painting were extraordinary at the core. If what Rockwell painted was idealized, he also believed that we, individually and collectively, have the potential to reach that ideal.

"I showed the America I knew and observed to others who might not have noticed," Rockwell said. He later received the Presidential Medal of Freedom for "vivid and affectionate portraits of our country." Norman Rockwell saw the best in us - and so he has given us occasion to see the good in ourselves and each other, and that even an honest look in the mirror can be cause for hope.

Sources:

Norman Rockwell museum: www.nrm.org

Freeglossary.com

Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norman_Rockwell

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