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A brush with nostalgia

Norman Rockwell paintings, photojournalist's images are paired in Arkansas Arts Center exhibit

BY [LINDA CAILLOUET](#)

LITTLE ROCK — When it comes to American icons, an inevitable short list immediately springs to mind: Mom, apple pie, baseball. Go ahead and add Norman Rockwell to that list.

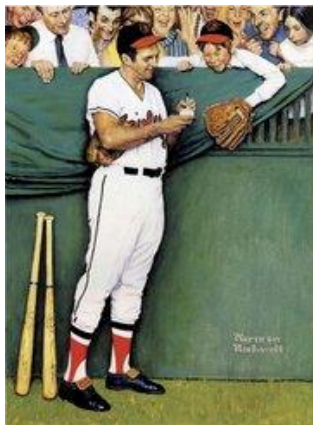
After all, it was his artwork, stretching across half a century, that transformed those romanticized, wholesomegoodness feelings into tangible images, bringing them to fullcolor life.

Critics have argued that Rockwell's images aren't a true picture of the state of this country from the World War I era into the 1970s, but instead were overly sentimental, nostalgic and idealistic — picturing America through a pair of rose-colored glasses.

But Rockwell maintained that his depiction of people and moments was our nation the way he saw it: "the America I knew and observed to others who might not have noticed."



Home from Camp Norman Rockwell



Gee Thanks Brooks by Norman Rockwell

In his vision, it was America the Beautiful — in the eye of the beholder, transmitted through the artist's paintbrush.

Rockwell has more fans than he does critics. He remains today one of our nation's most popular, beloved artists.

Visitors to the Arkansas Arts Center will soon have the chance to see his work up close and personal — but with a modern-day twist added.

"In Search of Norman Rockwell's America" opens Friday and runs through Sept. 18 in the Jeannette Edris Rockefeller Gallery.

The exhibit is built on a novel concept. Presented next to each of Rockwell's original paintings, drawings and lithographs is a contemporary black-and-white photograph by Kevin Rivoli, an award-winning photojournalist whose images evoke feelings similar to those conjured by Rockwell's art.

"The work is presented in pairs with similar subject matter," explains Joe Lampo, deputy director of programs for the Arts Center.

One distinctive piece in the show is Rockwell's *The Golfer*. It's a rare subject matter for the artist, and one of his earlier works, dating to the 1920s.

The two-year, national touring exhibit was organized by Kevin and Michele Rivoli in collaboration with International Arts & Artists in Washington and includes 18 works from each of the two artists. The Rockwell pieces are on loan from major institutions and private collections.

A companion book for the exhibit, also titled *In Search of Rockwell's America*, was published by Simon & Schuster. In addition to photographs of the art in the display, it features quotations and anecdotes about the featured artwork.

Rivoli will not be visiting the museum during the exhibit, but some special events are planned, including the Norman Rockwell All-American Summer Family Festival from 2 to 5 p.m. Saturday. The event will feature American-themed art activities as well as nostalgic children's games and classic American refreshments served in a soda shoplike area.

Tickets to the family day are \$5 per person or \$20 per family; Arts Center members, military personnel, police and firefighters get in free.

Rivoli began taking "slice of life" photographs two decades ago while working as a photojournalist. His shots included his subjects enjoying the pleasures of everyday life, while other themes revolved around patriotism, family, community and landmark moments.

Several years later, Rivoli realized his work's similarity to Rockwell's — not just in what he was capturing but also in the way the photographs were composed and the emotions evoked by them.

The common thread linking the two artists — one using a brush the other a camera? The ability to tell — in a single, spontaneous image — a complete story and celebrate the extraordinary within life's ordinary moments.

Rivoli's work serves to disprove the claim of Rockwell's critics that the artist created "an America that never was and never will be."

The photographer captured candid moments in which most of the people he was focusing on did not realize they were being photographed.

The underlying message? Despite all of America's problems — senseless crimes, economic woes, the challenges in our health-care system, nationwide political divisiveness and more — much goodness still abounds in this nation.

“These are American ideals and themes that continue today — daily events, special events in people’s [lives] — that were true at the time Rockwell painted them and continue to be true today,” Lampo says. “This exhibit uses contemporary work to get to know Rockwell’s work.”

Within the exhibit, all the bases are covered. There’s Mom sharing a moment with one of her two daughters in Rivoli’s black and white *A Kiss for Mom*, taken in 2007.

Baseball is featured in Rockwell’s 38-by-35-inch gouache on canvas *The 100th Year of Baseball*, painted in 1939 and on loan to the exhibit from the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, N.Y. It is paired with Rivoli’s *Baseball Heroes*, capturing a young person sitting on the bench next to a baseball player in a warm-up jacket.

Rockwell’s painting of the baseball scene is one of Lampo’s favorites from the exhibit.

“It has its own presence,” he says.

Another baseball-theme pairing in the exhibit includes Rockwell’s 1971 depiction of Little Rock native and longtime Baltimore Orioles Hall of Famer Brooks Robinson signing a ball for a young fan in a work titled *Gee, Thanks, Brooks*.

And then there’s Rockwell’s *Runaway* from 1972 depicting a boy sitting on a stool at a cafe counter. There’s a kerchief filled with the boy’s belongings tied to a stick on the floor by his feet, while a police officer at the stool next to him leans over to talk with the lad as the waiter leans in from across the counter.

That glass display case on the wall behind the counter? Of the three pies displayed within, at least one of them must be — just has to be — apple.

Art

“In Search of Norman Rockwell’s
America”

Arkansas Arts Center, Ninth and Commerce streets, Little Rock

Opens: Friday, continues through Sept. 18

Hours: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Sunday

Admission: Free (donations welcome)

Exhibit sponsor: Marti and Henry Thomas

(501) 372-4000 or arkarts.com

This article was published July 24, 2011 at 5:23 a.m.