Lessons of Norman Rockwell

Teachers can use the paintings of Norman Rockwell to spark discussions among students about such U.S. values as democracy, tolerance, and patriotism.

Roselle Kline Chartock

The tragic, numbing events of September 11, 2001, at the World Trade Center, at the Pentagon, and in Pennsylvania kept coming to mind as I gazed at “The Four Freedoms,” a series of paintings on display at the Norman Rockwell Museum at Stockbridge (Massachusetts). It seemed to me that Rockwell’s paintings could play a healing as well as a teaching role in U.S. classrooms.

Artist Norman Rockwell (1894–1978), who was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1977, has touched fans intellectually and emotionally not only as a painter but also as a humorist, historian, psychologist, philosopher, anthropologist, and sociologist. Rockwell’s paintings are part of U.S. popular culture: More than 300 of his best-known paintings originated as covers for The Saturday Evening Post and later for Look magazine. Many of Rockwell’s paintings reflect U.S. culture and ideals—ideals in which U.S. citizens have placed their trust for two centuries and which no terrorist attacks could destroy.

Rockwell has been criticized for portraying in his work a United States seen through rose-colored glasses and for painting Americans not as they are but as they would like to be. Nevertheless, several of Rockwell’s paintings—especially among his later work—convey scenes and insights that indicate that Rockwell was a realist who expressed through his art his belief in democracy and tolerance, as well as his concern for the preservation of these ideals.

The “Norman Rockwell: Pictures for the American People” exhibit has brought more than 75 of Rockwell’s most popular paintings to six large cities, where a half million people have viewed his work. Interviewers asked visitors at the High Museum of Art (Atlanta, Georgia); the Chicago Historical Society (Illinois); the Corcoran Gallery of Art (Washington, D.C.); the San Diego Museum of Art (California); the Phoenix Art Museum (Arizona); the Norman Rockwell Museum at Stockbridge (Massachusetts); and the Guggenheim Museum (New York City, where the exhibit will remain until March 3, 2002) what they had learned from the paintings and what the paintings meant to them.

Interviews of exhibit attendees at the first four of the seven exhibit venues revealed that most respondents identified with the emotions and experiences that Rockwell depicted. More than 85 percent of respondents believed that Rockwell’s paintings exposed younger generations to images of the country’s past, were reflections of such traditional U.S. values as tolerance and democracy, had a timeless and universal message, and were moving and thought-provoking (Affect, 2001).

For teachers who cannot bring their students to the exhibit, the Norman Rockwell Museum at Stockbridge provides reproductions as well as packets of teacher resources and lesson plans relating to the paintings. Teachers can use reproductions of Rockwell’s art and the teacher resources to discuss Rockwell’s themes with students of various ages and in different subject areas.

Following are descriptions of some of Rockwell’s best-known works, as well as questions that teachers can adapt to initiate classroom discussions. The purpose of the questions is twofold: (1) to stimulate discussion and increase students’ awareness of the democratic values depicted in the work and (2) to initiate students into the art world and...
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courage them to think about the language of a painting.

Freedom
In a series of paintings known as “The Four Freedoms” (1943), Rockwell created a visual representation of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s statement of what was at stake during World War II. Rockwell used the New England town meeting to represent “Freedom of Speech” and a Thanksgiving dinner to convey “Freedom from Want.” In “Freedom from Fear,” parents, grasping a newspaper that documents the destruction of the war, tuck children into bed at night. Rockwell’s “Freedom of Worship” shows people bowed in prayer and contemplation and an inscription—“Each according to the dictates of his own conscience.”

Commenting on Rockwell’s “The Four Freedoms,” President Roosevelt remarked:

I think you have done a superb job in bringing home the plain, everyday truths behind the Four Freedoms. I congratulate you not alone on the execution but also for the spirit which impelled you to make this contribution to the common cause of a freer, happier world. (Norman Rockwell Museum at Stockbridge, 2001)


Questions for Student Discussion

■ What democratic values and themes do these paintings express? What other values do you consider to be part of U.S. culture? How might you portray these ideas?

■ Critique the paintings in terms of how effectively they portray the themes identified in their titles. Which aspects of the paintings (color, line, layout, setting, characters, perspective) help deliver the theme? Which elements distract from the theme?

■ Are you familiar with songs or documents that contain similar themes? Create a song, speech, poem, article, painting, or other original representation of one of the four freedoms.

■ Find a current newspaper article or an article on the Internet that relates to one of the four freedoms and explain the relationship of the article to one or more of the paintings.

Tolerance
Rockwell based “The Problem We All Live With” (1964) on Ruby Bridges and her brave walk to the all-white William Franz Primary School in New Orleans in 1960. U.S. marshals escort the African American girl in the painting. Someone has thrown a tomato at her, and its pulverized, blood-red remains are prominent against an ugly wall of racial
hatred (Rockwell, 1996).

The painting appeared as a special foldout in Look magazine on January 14, 1964, to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the Supreme Court’s Brown v. Board of Education decision that de jure school segregation was unconstitutional. Ten years after Brown, many still opposed integration in parts of the South. Rockwell’s portrayal of the little girl also illustrated his belief in the courage of young people and in the importance of engaging them in the struggle for civil liberties.

The relevance of Rockwell’s work to recent events has touched other artists as well. In his version of “The Problem We All Live With,” published in The New York Times (September 23, 2001), political cartoonist Mark Matcho drew a Muslim girl wearing traditional garb walking between the marshals. The drawing accompanied an article on the increase in anti-Muslim, anti-Arab sentiment that followed the September 11 terrorist attacks. The warning is clear: The perpetrators of these acts were extremists and intolerant of Western beliefs, but we must not resort to the same kind of intolerance in our response to their acts.

Other Rockwell paintings that address tolerance and brotherhood include “New Kids in the Neighborhood” (1967) and “The Golden Rule” (1961), about which Rockwell remarked, “Most of the time I try to entertain with my [Saturday Evening] Post covers. But once in a while I get an uncontrollable urge to say something serious” (Norman Rockwell Museum at Stockbridge, 2001).

Questions for Student Discussion

■ Note the location of the girl in the painting and other elements of symmetry. What draws your eye to the little girl? What other features point to her?

■ Discuss any signs of intolerance in your own community (graffiti, for example). Can you also identify examples of people trying to solve the problem of prejudice in your community and in the nation?

■ What actions, if any, should be taken to fully integrate schools and school districts?

■ Prepare a chronology of at least 10 civil rights laws passed between 1954 and 2001 and describe them briefly. Do you see the effects of these laws in your school or community?

Patriotism

Rockwell’s version of “Rosie the Riveter” (1943), which appeared on the cover of The Saturday Evening Post, shows a proud working woman contributing to the war effort as many women did in factories across the United States when men left their jobs to fight in World War II. Although the government encouraged women to participate in the war effort, officials expected women to return to their homes after the war. This painting, part
issues of an effort to sell U.S. war bonds, has become one of Rockwell’s most famous and enduring images, in part because the women who went to work during World War II paved the way for the women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Injecting some of his characteristic humor, Rockwell based Rosie’s pose on Michelangelo’s Isaiah in the Sistine Chapel.

“Rosie the Riveter,” like many of Rockwell’s paintings, could be the focus of interdisciplinary activities. The painting could be a springboard to discussion in social studies and literature classrooms of fiction and nonfiction works that address World War II or women’s studies. Through creative writing assignments, students may express what they see in the painting or the connections they draw between this painting (and others) and current events.

Paintings lend themselves to dance and theatrical interpretation as well: The Berkshire Ballet has choreographed “Rosie the Riveter” and other works. And, of course, students can create their own original artwork to depict U.S. values or to express their feelings about current events, such as those of September 11.


Questions for Student Discussion

- On close inspection, you will discover that “Rosie the Riveter” is more complex than it first appears. For example, note what Rosie is wearing and holding and the relationship of these articles to the flag in the background. What do you “read” in Rosie’s facial expression? Notice the symbol and words that appear in the newspaper on which her foot rests.
- How has the role of women in the United States changed since 1943 when Rockwell did this painting? What do you think Rockwell would say about these role changes? (Teachers may decide that they want students to debate the controversial issue of admitting women in the military, depending on the age of their students and other factors.)

In his series “The Four Freedoms,” Rockwell used the New England town meeting to represent “Freedom of Speech” and a Thanksgiving dinner to convey “Freedom from Want.”

- Research and compare the status of women in different parts of the world.
- In times of crisis—and in the name of national security—the federal government has occasionally responded by curtailing the rights of some citizens. For example, following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, more than 100,000 U.S. citizens and residents of Japanese ancestry were evacuated from their homes and businesses and interned in relocation camps. Since then, the U.S. government has acknowledged the injustice of this action and made financial restitution to those interned. During a national crisis such as the terrorist attacks of September 11, to what extent, if any, should the government limit the freedoms depicted in many of Rockwell’s paintings?

Art as Teacher and Healer

Laurie Norton Moffatt, director of the Norman Rockwell Museum at Stockbridge, noted soon after the September 11 attacks that many visitors drew comfort from Rockwell’s paintings because of their life-affirming messages and because the paintings reminded them of the ideals upon which the United States was founded: democracy, tolerance, human dignity, and the First Amendment freedoms—speech, press, religion, assembly, and petition but also skeptical of our success in living up to our ideals (“The Problem We All Live With”). Rockwell communicates with humor (“Rosie the Riveter”) and incorporates an underlying message of tolerance and inclusion.

1 For more information, please contact the Norman Rockwell Museum at Stockbridge, P.O. Box 308, Stockbridge, MA 01262; (800) 742-9450 or (413) 298-4100; [www.nrm.org](http://www.nrm.org).

2 Some of these questions are based on those in a curriculum packet prepared by staff at the Norman Rockwell Museum at Stockbridge.

References


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