



# 1st Grade: NOVEMBER

## *Commuters*

### Norman Rockwell

Debra J. Herman, M.F.A., Concordia University, River Forest, Illinois  
Funded by the John and Frances Beck Foundation, Chicago, Illinois  
Edited by Constance Kamrath, M.A., Concordia University, River Forest, Illinois

#### **About the Artist**

The following information is provided to give classroom teachers a comprehensive understanding of the artist and artwork. Use your judgment on what to share with your students based on their level of curiosity, observation/inquiry skills, comprehension and age-appropriateness.

#### **Norman Rockwell**

Norman Rockwell was born February 3, 1894, in New York to Ann Mary (Hill) and Jarvis Warning Rockwell. Rockwell and his older brother were raised in a middle-class household. He was nine-years old when his family left the city and moved to the nearby commuting community of Mamaroneck. Evening entertainment in the Rockwell home was listening to father read aloud from classic books. Young Rockwell listened carefully to descriptions of particular literary characters and rendered sketches, capturing the image that formed in his head. Rockwell's passion for art eventually led him to leave high school to attend the National Academy of Design and later the Art Students League.

At seventeen, Rockwell accepted a job as an art illustrator for a series of children's books and later, the art director of *Boys' Life* magazine. Successful at these two jobs, Rockwell relocated to New Rochelle, New York and set up a studio. In 1916, at twenty-two, Rockwell presented a magazine cover which was well received to *The Saturday Evening Post*. Rockwell went on to create three-hundred and twenty-one covers for *The Saturday Evening Post* during his career with the magazine. Americans treasured Rockwell's illustrative ability to capture middle-class life and values, especially at a time when the world was transitioning into a more modern way of life. Inventions such as the automobile, flying machines, telephones and even the vacuum cleaner were threatening the old ways of life, especially the established Victorian and/or rural lifestyle.

While he appreciated the advancements of modern times, Rockwell hung on to what he valued in the American people—decency, hard work, optimism, and innocence. In "Rockwell's America," elders were respected and loved by their families, parents were affectionate to and adoring of their children, children were adventurous but well-behaved and neighbors were kind and compassionate. This is the world Rockwell noticed and the one he wanted Americans to see. He drew from life. He was both a story teller and an entertainer bringing humor to his images. Every face was a story and a story with which one sympathized. He often used poses and expressions of friends or relatives captured in photographs as references as he painted. Sometimes he enlisted the service of a stranger to serve as a model if he were looking for a particular body type. Aided by "props," every scene

was packed full of enormous detail and nostalgic charm.

Rockwell painted for the general public; his audience was widespread and spanned generations. During World War II, Rockwell painted the Four Freedoms series for which he is probably best known. Inspired by four principles of universal rights stated by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Rockwell painted *Freedom from Want*, *Freedom of Speech*, *Freedom to Worship*, and *Freedom from Fear*. They were exhibited in many U.S. cities in an effort to promote the sale of war bonds. *The Saturday Evening Post* published these in 1943.

Rockwell concluded his working relationship with *The Saturday Evening Post* magazine in 1963 when he began to work for *Look Magazine*, a magazine with a bit more modern appeal. Here, Rockwell was able to focus on his personal interests which were social and political-minded in nature. Illustrations of racism, the Peace Corps, space exploration and poverty were published. Rockwell was able to "tell the story" with heart and compassion just as he had in his earlier paintings.

As a self-proclaimed illustrator, Rockwell never thought of himself as a traditional artist. He was not interested in working within the boundaries of an art movement or impacting art history. Yet, in his lifetime, Rockwell executed several thousands of original works. He was commissioned to paint Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon and other world leaders. Former President Gerald Ford awarded Rockwell the 1977 Presidential Medal of Freedom, America's highest civilian honor, for his documentation of everyday American life.

On a personal note, Rockwell's first marriage to Irene O'Connor in 1916 ended in divorce. His second marriage to Mary Barstow gave him three children. The family moved to Arlington, Vermont where Rockwell enjoyed painting small town America. The Rockwells moved to Stockbridge, Massachusetts where Mary became seriously ill and needed treatment. She died unexpectedly of a heart attack in 1959. Rockwell married his third wife, Molly Punderson, in 1961 and continued living in Stockbridge. Emphysema took Norman Rockwell's life on November 8, 1978 at eighty-four years of age.

#### **About the Art**

*Commuters* was painted oil on canvas and reproduced in print form for the December 7, 1946, issue of *The Saturday Evening Post*. This work is sometimes referred to as Crestwood Train Station, an actual commuter train station located in Tuckahoe, N.Y. We see in this painting Rockwell's common themes of life in small town suburbia. The Crestwood Train Station outside New

## Discipline-Based Art Education

The following components are integral to students having a complete, well rounded art experience.

### Art Aesthetics

Providing opportunities to develop perception and appreciation of visually expressed ideas and experiences.

### Art Production

Providing opportunities to develop skills and techniques for creative visual expressions of emotions and ideas.

### Art History

Providing opportunities to develop an understanding of the visual arts as a basic component of personal heritage.

### Art Criticism

Providing an opportunity to develop an intellectual basis for analyzing and making aesthetic judgments based on an understanding of visual ideas and experiences.

## ELEMENTS OF ART

- Line: A continuous mark
- Shape: Area enclosed by a line
- Color: Hue, reflection of light.
- Texture: Surface quality, real or implied
- Form: 3D shape or illusion of 3D
- Value: Graduated areas of light/dark
- Space: Illusion of depth

## PRINCIPLES OF DESIGN

- Repetition: Imagery repeating pattern
- Variety: Contrast/variation
- Rhythm: Issues of eye movement
- Balance: Even visual weight
- Emphasis/Economy: Dominance/minimalism
- Proportion: Compare size relationships

## COMPOSITION

- Symmetrical: Mirrored imagery
- Asymmetrical: Random placement
- Radial: Mirror image from center point
- Repetition: Repeating pattern, motif

## ARTISTIC STYLES

- Realism: Realistic representation
- Abstraction: Personal interpretation
- Non-Objective: No recognizable depiction

## ELEMENTS OF DESIGN IN PICTURE BOOKS

Children's literature that relate to this lesson due to elements of art or story content are:

- *Black and White* by David Macaulay
- *City Green* by Dyanne DiSalvo-Ryan
- *Keats's Neighborhood* by Ezra Jacks Keats
- *The Neighborhood Mother Goose* by Nina Crews
- *One Afternoon* by Yumi Heo
- *Something's Happening on Calabash Street* by Judith Ross Enderle and Stephanie Jacob Gordon

## REFERENCE/BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Buechner, Thomans S. *Norman Rockwell, Artist and Illustrator*. Harry N. Abrams. NY. 1996
- Finch, Christopher. *Norman Rockwell 332 Magazine Covers*. Abbeville Press. NY. 2005
- Finch, Christopher. *Norman Rockwell's America*. Harry N. Abrams. NY. 1985

York City is bustling with morning activity as commuters pack the platform. Reading the newspaper seems to be common practice for those waiting on the platform. Even the mad dashers take a precious moment to grab a newspaper from a young newspaper boy in the bottom center of the painting. Newspapers were the major venue of receiving local and national news. Television was in its very early stages of development and it was extremely rare for families to have a television in their home. Radio, however, was common. Do notice the large antenna behind the train station, telephone wires, and power lines in the painting. Today, many of these wires are buried underground to keep the landscape free of clutter. The top half of the painting gives way to rolling hills of the community and the signs of the rise of suburbia: houses, roads, traffic, telephone wire, and antennas. Notice the commuters en route in their cars to the train station or local places of work.

Both men and women are dressed in professional work attire. Notice the fashion indicative of the mid-1900s. Hats were worn by both men and women. All the women are wearing dresses and stockings with high heel shoes. In those days, everyone dressed up to go into the city for work or pleasure. The fact that commuters are wearing coats, hats, and gloves gives viewers a clue to the season. The landscape, including the bare trees, indicates the colder temperature of the late fall or early winter months.

This painting was heavily textured by applying layers of paint on the canvas surface. Rockwell was a master at understanding how his paintings would reproduce in print form. He knew the heavily painted textures would add detail to the roofs, platforms, and hills.

## Directed Observation

Show students an image of *Commuters* and tell them it was painted by Norman Rockwell on a very large canvas. More than likely you will have to explain the word "commuter" to your students. As appropriate, share additional information found on the previous page. Invite students to quietly study the work, then encourage students to share what they see. Welcome all comments. The following questions are provided to help students use art vocabulary to talk about the work.

1. Norman Rockwell liked to tell stories through the images in his paintings. What does this painting tell you about this community and the people who live there? What does Rockwell want you to think about this place and the people?
2. Rockwell loved to include many details in

his work. What details can you find? How do these details make the painting interesting?

3. Rockwell also used humor in his work. What is funny in this painting?
4. How does the community of Crestwood compare to/differ from your community?
5. If Norman Rockwell painted your community, what place/people do you think he would paint and why?

## Things to Do

1. Identify a favorite place in your community where people gather. Try to observe this place and the people everyday for a week. Describe the things that make this place special. Find something funny about your place or people. Make sure you think about a story you want to tell. Practice drawing the place and people. Finally, make a drawing or painting capturing all the parts that make this place special. Remember, you can add extra "props." Present your work to the class and share the story you created.
2. Rockwell was a master at capturing facial expressions and body posture. Take photos of people making funny expressions and/or standing in a humorous way. Use these photos to create a drawing. Consider using a carefully chosen object (prop) in the photographs to add interest. This could easily be a self portrait project.
3. Rockwell painted what he wanted Americans to see. He painted what he considered the best qualities of America and Americans. Think about your family, friends, school, community. Talk about when these groups of people are at their best; being kind, and sharing, helping one another. Share these thoughts and/or take photographs of these people in action. Create a work of art that expresses this quality.
4. Consider your best friend and the things you do together with your friend. Develop a picture book telling a story about you and your friend doing something together. Be sure to focus on the setting, the personalities of you and your friend, and any other details which will make your picture story interesting and fun to "read."
5. Pretend you are Norman Rockwell and give a speech about yourself. Describe your art work.
6. Invite members of your community to the classroom to share their occupations, including how they serve people in the community. Encourage presenters to wear their uniforms or job-appropriate clothing. Choose a favorite occupation and draw the person at work.