Exploring *The Problem We All Live With*:

The Motivation and Ambition Behind Norman Rockwell’s Civil Rights Depictions

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Fall 2012
Abstract

In this piece, I focus on Norman Rockwell’s *The Problem We All Live With* (1964), a Civil Rights-era depiction of the integration of black and white students in 1960. Specifically, the painting portrays Ruby Bridges—a young African American girl chosen to initiate the desegregation process—passing a wall scrawled with racial slurs and surrounded by U.S. marshals as she walks to her new school. Using this work, I argue that, contrary to claims of his motivations for painting such progressive works being strictly monetary-based, Rockwell chose to portray Civil Rights depictions in order to bring attention to his altruistic plea for equality in a palatable, relatable way. In order to demonstrate this claim, I have researched academic sources, such as biographies on Norman Rockwell, journal articles that explore Rockwell’s views and painterly approach to race, and documents of important political events of the Civil Rights Movement, such as the 1954 *Brown V. Board* case which called for the integration of schools and, thus, led to the iconic moment captured in *The Problem We All Live With*. Through this research, I have reached conclusions that concretely illustrate Rockwell’s legitimate and genuine interest in promoting Civil Rights, addressed counterarguments, and used textual support (including quotations and primary sources) to support my argument in specific, applicable ways.
Due to his distinctive style and charming depictions of everyday life in “average America,” Norman Rockwell, a 20th century painter, attained a lifetime of popularity and widespread success. His typical and well-known subject matter—which often includes conventional figures with sensationalized facial expressions, jovial family pets, and commonplace settings—evokes nostalgia and emanates innocence, while his precise draftsmanship and linear style imply photographic sensibility. As the cover artist for the favored Saturday Evening Post, Rockwell was adored and highly regarded by the public. However, art critics—excited by abstraction and new, offbeat artists—often condemned his old fashioned style and commercialized career. While the majority of Rockwell’s work is composed of the familiar portrayals produced for The Saturday Evening Post, in 1963, he abandoned his Post persona and shifted his interest toward equality and Civil Rights. This change is evident in his 1964 depiction, The Problem We All Live With (Figure 1), a painting portraying the desegregation of American schools in 1960. Numerous critics and art historians—baffled by his shift in content—attributed this change not to Rockwell’s own wish for integration, but to his pursuit of financial gain. While many agree that Rockwell’s shift toward Civil Rights depictions was purely a fiscal move, I hope to disclaim this popular argument and demonstrate that The Problem We All Live With was, contrarily, a product of Rockwell’s own preference and individual altruism.

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Born in 1894 in New York City, Norman Rockwell began to produce and study art at an early age, as he “had known for as long as he could remember that he wanted to be a painter.” As a teenager, he attended schools such as the National Academy of Design and Art Students League. In 1912, at the age of eighteen, he worked on his “first real publication”—illustrations in twelve *Tell-Me-Why* Stories by Carl H. Claudy. That same year, he gained notoriety when he was hired as the art editor and cover artist of *Boys’ Life Magazine*, a publication produced by the Boy Scouts of America and aimed toward American youth. In his cover art for *Boys’ Life*, Rockwell often portrayed young males participating in childhood activities, as apparent in the cover of the August of 1915 *Boys’ Life* issue (Figure 2). This cover portrays the legs of a young boy who, clad in a striped swimsuit, has just dived into a body of water. Rockwell’s inclination to capture “an everyday experience” in his illustrations would remain evident throughout his entire body of work—most notably, in his work for *The Saturday Evening Post*.

In 1916, at the age of 22, Rockwell achieved national fame when he was hired by *The Saturday Evening Post* as a cover artist. *The Saturday Evening Post*, a popular bimonthly magazine, featured news stories, illustrations, cartoons, photographs, and works of fiction. While with *Post*, Rockwell would go on to produce 322 covers over the span of 47 years. Like his paintings for *Boys’ Life*, Rockwell’s covers for *Post* regularly

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2 Laura Claridge, *Norman Rockwell: A Life* (New York: Random House, 2001), 65. Although he grew up in New York City, Rockwell preferred to depict rural life over urban settings, as he “typified city life as evil incarnate” and favored the simplicity and charm of the country.


featured “subjects from the everyday happenings of which most lives are made.” The public embraced his covers, as their nostalgic nature and endearing representation of American culture alluded to the simplicity of the past while idealizing the present. Critics, however, have often denounced his work and, even today, typically only refer to it within a commercial context. This is because, according to former Metropolitan Museum of Art director Thomas Hoving, “art history, for snobbish reasons, has always been suspicious of artists considered to be popularizers—especially successful ones.”

One critic who was particularly displeased with Rockwell’s popularity is Clement Greenberg. As a proponent of abstract artists such as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, Greenberg described Rockwell’s work as a “dangerous, even demagogic, threat to the avant-garde” and criticized the popularity of his traditional style. Still, with the public’s approval and the magazine’s consistent prosperity, Rockwell would continue working with Post until 1963, when, due to the “strictures (and sometimes outright censorship) long placed on his work by The Saturday Evening Post . . . he finally terminated his decades-long association with the magazine.”

After leaving The Saturday Evening Post, Rockwell was immediately courted by Look Magazine, a publication that primarily featured photography and general-interest articles. While employed as an artist for Look, Rockwell’s work underwent a drastic—and, even today, seemingly discounted—change. Here, under an “editorial focus [that]

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offered him the freedom to explore challenging subjects that were off-limits at the
*Post,*”\(^{10}\) he began to paint works rooted in the Civil Rights Movement. As apparent in
allegorical works like *New Kids in the Neighborhood* from 1967 (Figure 3) as well as
historical portrayals like *Southern Justice*\(^{11}\) in 1965 (Figure 4), and, most famously, *The
Problem We All Live With*, Rockwell “moved away from calming pictures of nostalgia
and painted newer, discomforting images of democratic struggle in the face of racial
aggression.”\(^{12}\) While with *Look*, he introduced his audience to both a different side of his
art and of himself.

In *New Kids in the Neighborhood*, Rockwell returns to a motif prevalent in his
earlier work: children. The children depicted in *New Kids in the Neighborhood*, however,
greatly differ from the children portrayed in his paintings for *Boys’ Life* and *Post*. Rather
than symbols of carefree childhood and youthful leisure, the children of *New Kids in the
Neighborhood* address issues of racial differences and inequality. Set in the front yard of
a suburban residence, the scene illustrates the first encounter between three white
children and their two new black neighbors. Although the white children—one of which,
who, in typical Rockwell fashion, is clad in a baseball uniform—appear curious, there is
an innate tension present in the scene, as each party appears uncertain about the other.

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\(^{10}\) Ron Schick, *Norman Rockwell: Behind the Camera*, (New York, NY: Little, Brown &
Co. 2009), 200.

\(^{11}\) Jack Doyle, The Pop History Dig, "Rockwell and Race," http://www.pophistorydig.com/?tag="the-
problem-we-all-live-with"-history.
Rockwell initially titled this work *Murder in Mississippi*, as the three men were killed in Meridian,
Mississippi. However, the image was published alongside a *Look* article entitled, “Southern Justice,” and,
consequently, the image eventually adopted this name as well.

\(^{12}\) Gallagher, Victoria, and Kenneth S. Zagacki. "Visibility and Rhetoric: The Power of
Visual Images in Norman Rockwell’s Depictions of Civil Rights." *Quarterly Journal of
The curiosity and hesitance—both typical attributes of a child—emphasize the children’s inherent innocence. Though painted from photographs,\textsuperscript{13} the scene is purely fictional and conceptual; its characters are anonymous and, unlike Rockwell’s other Civil Rights works, it does not revolve around a specific narrative.

Contrarily, in his \textit{Southern Justice} sketch\textsuperscript{14} (Figure 5) Rockwell portrays a factual occurrence: the final moments of activists James Cheney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner, three men killed by the Ku Klux Klan for their anti-segregation efforts in 1964.\textsuperscript{15} In the image, Michael Schwerner, a white male, cradles a dying James Cheney in his arms, as Andrew Goodman, another white male, lies collapsed at their feet. Unlike \textit{New Kids in the Neighborhood}, \textit{Southern Justice} tackles racism in a dark and unsettling way; aside from the morbid subject matter, the painting’s stark, contrasting colors, ominous “shadows lurking just outside or at the borders of [the] painting,”\textsuperscript{16} and ambiguous and mysterious setting juxtapose the pastel hues and suburban familiarity apparent in \textit{New Kids in the Neighborhood}. While both \textit{New Kids in the Neighborhood} and \textit{Southern Justice} are undeniably powerful images, Rockwell’s third Civil Rights depiction—\textit{The Problem We All Live With}—has perhaps become the most prominent and influential of his work with \textit{Look}.

\textsuperscript{13} Doyle, "Rockwell and Race."

\textsuperscript{14} Doyle, “Rockwell and Race.”

Although Rockwell produced a finished painting for the “Southern Justice” article, the \textit{Look} editors were so struck by the “powerful, emotional interpretation” of his preliminary sketch that they decided to publish it instead of the final piece.

\textsuperscript{15} Doyle, “Rockwell and Race.”

The three young men were killed while assisting African Americans as they registered to vote.

The Problem We All Live With portrays young African American girl Ruby Bridges as she walks to her first day at William Frantz School. Bridges, who, at the time, was only in the first grade, was one of six students chosen to initiate the desegregation process in New Orleans following the 1954 *Brown V. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision.\(^\text{17}\) In Rockwell’s depiction, Bridges—whose dark skin is contrasted by her immaculate white dress, hair bow, and bobby socks—is featured as the composition’s focal point. With books and a ruler clutched in her left hand and protective and anonymous US Marshals surrounding her, she passes a wall scrawled with racial slurs—such as “KKK” and “nigger”—and splattered with the blood-colored remains of a recently thrown tomato. The large statures of the marshals emphasize Bridges’ small size, stressing her vulnerability. Similarly, the perspective, which is low-lying and centered around the young girl, implies the viewpoint of a child and, thus, further emphasizes her youth and consequent innocence. This apparent innocence is discussed by Ruby Bridges herself, as she, while observing the painting, has noted that, “the girl in that painting, at six years old, knew absolutely nothing about racism.”\(^\text{18}\) With an unfazed expression and school supplies in hand, the young girl in the image did not know she was altering history; she was simply “going to school that day.”\(^\text{19}\)

In 1954, the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court case deemed the decision reached in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case of 1896 unconstitutional. In the 1896 case, the court ruled that segregation in schools was acceptable as long the facilities were “separate but equal.” However, almost sixty years later, the *Brown v. Board of Education* case established that such “separate facilities are inherently unequal” and that the prior ruling violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.


\(^{19}\) “Ruby Bridges visits with the President and her portrait,” 2011.
The Problem We All Live With was not featured as a cover for Look. It was, rather, a two-page spread found in the middle of the magazine with no accompanying text and with no indication or reference on the cover. Many readers, upon discovering the image, were surprised by Rockwell’s shift from portraying an idealized culture to capturing a gritty society. Thus, most—reluctant or unable to accept both Rockwell’s interest in racial equality and the severity of the innate problems plaguing America at the time—rationalized that this shift was not due to Rockwell’s own wish for integration, but to a monetary interest. Thomas S. Buechner, the former director of the Brooklyn Museum, is one of the proponents of this claim, as he holds that, “the Look jobs were almost completely special assignments. Rockwell accepted them, did the work, and got paid.”20 Similarly, Christopher Finch, author of 102 Favorite Paintings by Norman Rockwell, states that “[one] must recognize, of course, that Rockwell is a commercial artist and often works on assignment, so the idea for this painting probably originated with the editors of Look rather than with the artist himself.”21 It is clear that both Buechner and Finch are hesitant to embrace the artist’s role as a controversial activist, as they attribute the shift in subject matter to his employers rather than to the artist himself. Although this argument is popular and accepted among myriad critics and art historians, it is ill supported and purely speculative. Thus, through concrete evidence and analysis, this shallow assertion can be disproved and, consequently, the argument that Rockwell himself chose to produce his Civil Rights depictions materializes.


Perhaps the most cogent piece of evidence for my claim comes from Rockwell himself. Regarding his departure from *The Saturday Evening Post* and his shift in subject matter, Rockwell stated: “for 47 years, I portrayed the best of all possible worlds—grandfathers, puppy dogs—things like that. That kind of stuff is dead now, and I think it’s about time.”\(^{22}\) It is unclear what exactly Rockwell means by these “things” being “dead”; he may be referring to the fact that his traditional style is no longer embraced in the art world. Or, he may be implying that the innocence and nostalgia of the old world is no longer prevalent in America. Still, he may have simply grown tired of portraying the same sentimental motifs over and over again, as he also has remarked that it was “very interesting for an old duffer like me to try his hand at something new. If I don’t do that once in a while, I might just turn into a fossil, you know!”\(^{23}\) While it is ultimately unknown why Rockwell called his old style “dead,” his words are concise and pragmatic. Essentially, it is clear that he was consciously shifting his focus from the sweet nature of *Post* images like *Going and Coming* (Figure 6)—a two-paneled portrayal of a nuclear family and their canine friend as they drive to and from a trip to the beach—and *Grandfather and Boy on Rocking Horse* (Figure 7)—a Christmas-themed cover featuring an energetic grandfather and his nervous grandson riding a rocking horse together—to the somber and vigilant themes found in *The Problem We All Live With*.

Another piece of evidence that demonstrates Rockwell’s self-motivated interest in


Unfortunately, I cannot find verification in any academic sources that these words are, indeed, credited to Rockwell. However, multiple popular sources attribute them to Rockwell.


This quotation also lacks scholarly evidence crediting it to Norman Rockwell.
Civil Rights is his apparent long-term participation in African American causes and his enduring attention to equality. In 1946—almost twenty years prior to his transition to Look Magazine and while still with The Saturday Evening Post—he supported the integration of a University of Vermont sorority and was also involved with the Bronx Interracial Conference. 24 Furthermore, Rockwell himself has commented on the prevalence of racial inequality within The Saturday Evening Post, as he stated that, while working for Post, George Horace Lorimer, the publication’s editor and Rockwell’s superior, told him “never to show colored people except as servants” on his covers. 25 This revelation provides insight into the nature of Rockwell’s job with Post, as it helps to explain why—if Rockwell really was an activist—in his 332 covers, all of the primary figures are white. It is also why in Post images such as Boy in a Dining Car (Figure 8) and The Full Treatment (Figure 9), the African American figures are portrayed in subservient roles—as a waiter on a train and as a shoe shiner, respectively. While the subordinated African Americans depicted in these images are presented very differently from the prominently featured Ruby Bridges in The Problem We All Live With, it is worth noting that—especially in Boy in a Dining Car, in which the affectionate African American waiter is included as one of the image’s focal points—Rockwell did not portray them in a particularly negative light or subordinate them himself; he was simply following the rules set forth by his employer.

Another counterargument to the claim that Rockwell’s work with Look was done purely for financial gain is the fact that, by the time he left The Saturday Evening Post at


the age of 69—and even as a young adult at his onset with the publication—he was tremendously successful, established, and wealthy. According to Rockwell himself, “the cover of the Post was the greatest show window in America for an illustrator. If you did a cover for the Post, you had arrived.”26 By the end of his career with Post, Rockwell had completed 322 covers. On top of his steady employment with The Saturday Evening Post—a magazine that, according to Finch, “could automatically increase its print order by 250,000 copies when an issue had a cover by Rockwell”27—he was commissioned by several other publications to adorn advertisements of everyday brands such as Coca Cola, Jell-o, and Crest Toothpaste with his familiar illustrations. Similarly, during wartime, books, magazines, and newspapers often commissioned Rockwell to boost morale on the homefront with patriotic spreads and war bond posters. His relationship with the Boy Scouts of America—an organization for which he consistently illustrated handbooks, calendars, and covers—was also financially prosperous and would last throughout his lifetime. Ultimately, his work was always in demand, and he “suffered no financial hardship.”28 Therefore, having reached old age and lifelong success, it is unlikely that Rockwell would risk losing an audience and create something as controversial as The Problem We All Live With if he did not feel personally compelled to produce it and merely sought a paycheck.

While many critics and art historians claim that The Problem We All Live With was a “special assignment” and, thus, not of particular interest or importance to the artist,


27 Finch, 102 Favorite Paintings by Norman Rockwell, 11.

this is not the case. Although the underlying messages and themes of his work had no doubt undergone a change following his shift from *The Saturday Evening Post* to *Look*, Rockwell’s draftsmanship and technique remained the same. A key aspect of Rockwell’s artistic process was his use of live models and photographs, the “fundamental building blocks of [his] art for more than forty years.” Rockwell relied heavily on preliminary photographic studies for his drawings, as they allowed him to capture the realism of live models without requiring them to pose in his studio for long periods of time. In order to express authenticity in his work, Rockwell would recruit neighbors, family members, and friends to pose for his photographs, as he desired “human-looking humans.” The photographic studies for *The Problem We All Live With* feature three average African American girls—each in a knee-length white dress and shown mid-step—as well as the “images of the marshals’ feet and clenched hands (Figure 11), scrawled epithets, and a smashed tomato on the ground along with its violent splatter.”

Throughout his entire career, Rockwell worked from photographs, and when he transitioned to *Look* Magazine, he put the same effort, work, and care into his drafting. It is clear, then, that he remained the same artist he had always been; the only difference is

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30 Schick, *Norman Rockwell: Behind the Camera*, 18. Rockwell stated that working from a live model was very difficult, for “as the hours passed, the expression would sag or freeze into a grisly parody of glee.” Thus, he preferred photographing his models and working from the images.

31 Schick, *Norman Rockwell: Behind the Camera*, 20. Rockwell did not use professional models in his photographs, as he found their poses unnatural and practiced.

32 Schick, *Norman Rockwell: Behind the Camera*, 203. The young girl portrayed in *The Problem We All Live With* is not a representation of a single model; the final rendered figure, rather, is a composite image of the three young girls—each from Stockbridge, Massachusetts—photographed by Rockwell.

that, under the liberal guidance of *Look*, he was able to use his old means of production on new subject matter.

Furthermore, as a finished product, *The Problem We All Live With* is undeniably a work of Norman Rockwell. Like many of his earlier works, *The Problem We All Live With* emphasizes childhood innocence. Like most of his works dating back to his first job with *Boy’s Life* as a teenager and continuing into his career at *The Saturday Evening Post*, the piece’s focal point is a child. Although the adults in the image are large in comparison and imply power and authority, they are shown merely as anonymous, unidentifiable guides; their faces are deliberately not shown, and their bodies—collectively forming a square—perfectly frame the young girl in the center. Their presence in the painting is also typical of Rockwell, as he had a tendency to portray children “in the midst of interactions with institutions or with representatives of institutions.”

*The Problem We All Live With* is also politically charged, not unlike the myriad patriotic pieces featured in *Post* during wartime, including Rockwell’s perpetually adored and reproduced *Four Freedoms* (Figure 12) from 1943. Like *Four Freedoms*, *The Problem We All Live With* has political undertones and references contemporaneous matters prevalent in America. Lastly, like essentially all of Rockwell’s works, *The Problem We All Live With* is a snapshot of everyday, American life. By calling this work *The Problem We All Live With*, it is clear that Rockwell wished to emphasize the fact that *this* is now “average America.” Although the image itself was artificially rendered using photographs of models, the

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35 Rockwell produced this set of paintings for *The Saturday Evening Post* as a direct representation of the “four freedoms”—freedom from want, freedom from fear, freedom to worship, and freedom of speech—referenced in a speech by President Franklin Roosevelt in his 1941 State of the Union Address.
messages and concepts behind the image, including the Supreme Court Case, the racial scrawls, the young girl, and the referenced “problem,” are real. Perhaps, then, he was hoping that, due to his renowned reputation as “America’s illustrator” and subsequent familiarity, he could use the artistic freedom given to him by Look to introduce his audience to a very real problem in a very accessible way.

Although the legacy of Norman Rockwell is primarily comprised of sentimental depictions of carefree American life, his Civil Rights portrayals—*The Problem We All Live With*, in particular—are the true gems of his career. Though not emphasized in art history books or highly publicized in retrospectives of his life’s work, *The Problem We All Live With*, today, is a piece of American history and, in essence, a victory for Civil Rights. In 2011, President Barack Obama commissioned the piece to be temporarily displayed in the White House. Among those invited to view the painting in this historical setting was Ruby Bridges herself, who described the experience as a rare opportunity to “stand shoulder to shoulder with history [while] viewing history.”

Although critics and art historians often disregard Rockwell’s genuine altruism and overlook his illustrated pleas for equality, once one analyzes *The Problem We All Live With* within the context of his undeniable, long-term interest in Civil Rights and self-proclaimed desire to “try his hand at something new,” it is clear that his shift in subject matter was not a means of financial gain, but, rather, a self-willed and selfless decision.

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36 "Ruby Bridges visits with the President and her portrait,” 2011.
Figure 1.
Norman Rockwell, *The Problem We All Live With*, 1964. Oil on canvas, 36 x 58 inches.
Figure 2.
Norman Rockwell, *Boys’ Life Magazine (Cover of August issue)*, 1915. Oil on canvas.

Figure 3.
Norman Rockwell, *New Kids in the Neighborhood*, 1967. Oil on canvas, 36.5 x 57.5 inches.
Figure 4. 
Norman Rockwell, *Southern Justice (Murder in Mississippi)*, 1965. Oil on canvas, 53 x 42 inches.

Figure 5. 
Norman Rockwell, *Southern Justice (Murder in Mississippi)*, Sketch. 1965. Oil on board, 15 x 12.75 inches.
Figure 6.
Norman Rockwell, *Going and Coming*, 1947, Oil on canvas, 16 x 31.5 inches (two panels).

Figure 7.
Norman Rockwell, *Grandfather and Boy on Rocking Horse*, 1933. Oil on canvas, 23 x 18 inches.
Figure 8.
Norman Rockwell, *Boy in a Dining Car*. 1947, Oil on canvas, 38 x 36 inches.

Figure 9.
Norman Rockwell, *Full Treatment*, 1940, Oil on canvas, 23 x 18 inches.
Figure 10.
Norman Rockwell, *Photographic Studies for The Problem We All Live With*, 1963.

Figure 11.
Norman Rockwell, *Photographic Studies for The Problem We All Live With*, 1963.
Figure 12.
Norman Rockwell, *Four Freedoms*, 1943. Oil on canvas, 46 x 35.5 inches (four panels).
Bibliography


