

American Illustration: A Contextual Overview

We live in a commercial culture. Many of the words and most of the images that we encounter on a daily basis have been fashioned for some sort of commercial purpose.

— D.B. Dowd

Like most creators of art for commerce, Norman Rockwell worked within the realm of both aesthetics and technology. An astute visual storyteller and a masterful painter with a distinct, personal message to convey, Rockwell constructed fictional realities that offered a compelling picture of the life that many twentieth century Americans aspired to. Anxiously awaited and immediately understood, his seamless narratives seemed to assure audience engagement with the publications that commissioned his work and, ultimately, with product endorsements that supported the bottom line. The complexities of artistic production remained hidden to his enthusiasts, who were compelled by his vision and content to enjoy his art in the primary form for which it was intended—on the covers and pages of their favorite magazines.

“I love to tell stories in pictures,” Rockwell said. “For me, the story is the first thing and the last thing.” Conceptualization was central for the artist, who called the history of European art into play and employed classical painting methodology to weave contemporary tales inspired by everyday people and places. His richly detailed, large-scale canvases offered far more than was necessary even by the standards of his profession, and each began with a single idea. By his own admission “hard to come by,” strong picture concepts were the essential underpinnings of Rockwell’s art, from the antics of children, a favored theme of his youth, to the nuanced reflections on human nature that he preferred as a mature artist. What followed was a carefully orchestrated process of image development that demanded the careful integration of aesthetic concern, graphic clarity, and the effective use of technology.

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The art of illustration has been, from the start, inherently aligned with both culture and technology. In America, illustration emerged as a viable profession during the Civil War, spurred on by the strong public desire to witness the events of the day as they unfolded. The advent of large-scale, high-speed printing presses in the mid nineteenth century satisfied the call for affordable, mass-produced images, and artists were hired to meet pictorial demand. Before the 1880s, noted periodical illustrators like Winslow Homer, Edwin Austin Abbey, and Howard Pyle reluctantly accepted that their drawings and paintings would be transformed—for better or worse—by skilled artisan engravers.

Wood engraving made wide circulation reproduction possible, but by the 1890s, this waning technology, which translated lines and tones into cuts and grooves filled with printers' ink, gave way to new methods of visual translation. When photomechanical halftone and color reproduction techniques infiltrated the printing process, the camera replaced the wood engraver and handcrafted plates became artifacts of the past. For the first time, mass-produced images in which the artist's hand alone could be seen were made possible.

During America's early twentieth century an abundance of family, youth, and humor magazines and books for children and adults inspired many to enter the field, and during illustration's Golden Age, artists were in high demand. Pressed for time and eager to take on as many lucrative assignments as possible, it was not long before many set aside traditional rules of adherence to the classical practice of drawing and painting solely from the live model. "You must draw, draw, draw, draw first, last and all the time, and until you can draw and draw well, you cannot illustrate," advocated Joseph Pennell, an exquisite draughtsman who traveled the world on assignment for *Harper's*, *McClure's*, and *The Century*. The artist's 1896 volume, *The Illustration of Books, a Manual for the Use of Students*, was the first instructional guide for the fledgling field, which advocated, as in fine art, the study of the Old Masters. Illustrators had no such past to guide them, and approaches to the creation of imagery for mass circulation were still in the making. The time and cost saving practice of posing and photographing models was becoming a popular, if concealed, ritual.

In book and magazine cover art, as in story illustrations meant to illuminate an author's text, narrative imagery reigned supreme even as painters began to reject it. While illustrators and fine artists explored similar motifs such as the portrayal of scenes from everyday life, illustration emphasized accuracy, technical virtuosity, and anecdote rather than the notion of personal expression. Richly visual, America's leading publications relied upon the abilities of gifted illustrators to engage the attention and emotions of their constituents. Their ingenious, complex, and often-idealized images portrayed a compelling picture of the life that many aspired to and a template for who they might become.

In today's digital information age, it is difficult to imagine the role that magazines played in a society quite different from our own, in which radio and telephone offered the only technological connection between home and the larger world. Ephemeral by design and available at low cost, leading weeklies and monthlies like *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Good Housekeeping*, *McCall's*, and *Woman's Home Companion* provided a steady stream of information, entertainment, and advice to vast, loyal audiences. While top publications boasted subscriptions of two to eight million during the 1940s and 1950s, anxiously awaited journals were shared among family and friends, bringing readership even higher. Fiction and serialized novels, poetry, articles on politics, fashion and beauty, and guidance on marriage, child rearing, and household management were staples, second only to the array of advertisements and product enticements that supported the bottom line and occupied the most space in each issue.

Leaping beyond the constraints of traditional narrative picture making, Al Parker emerged in the 1930s to establish a vibrant visual vocabulary for the new suburban life so desired in the aftermath of the Depression and World War II. More graphic and less detailed than the paintings of Norman Rockwell, who was a contemporary and an inspiration to the artist, Parker's stylish compositions were sought after by editors and art directors for their contemporary look and feel.

Embraced by an eagerly romantic public who aspired to the ideals of beauty and lifestyle reflected in his illustrations, Parker's art also revealed a penchant for reinvention, and his ongoing experiments with visual form kept him ahead of the

curve for decades. His cropped compositions and extreme close-ups inspired by film and by photography, which was a prime competitor for magazine pages at the time, made him the artist to emulate. Coby Whitmore, Jon Whitcomb, Tom Lovell, and their contemporaries, employed similar techniques, experimenting with informal poses, bold layouts emphasizing color and form over narrative detail, and high-key palettes that became the visual language of the day.

When the first of Al Parker's famed mother and daughter covers for *Ladies' Home Journal* was published in February 1939, his graceful silhouettes skating in perfect unison and matching outfits created a sensation. The series continued to engage readers for thirteen years, but his last submission, published in May 1952, brought an era in the magazine's history to a close. *Ladies' Home Journal's* covers were solely photographic after that, completing the transition away from traditional narrative illustration that had begun in the latter part of the previous decade. Photography captured the moment for many publications that were striving to remain current, relegating the art of illustration to a more ancillary status.

In the 1950s, dramatic shifts in magazine content prompted the movement away from narrative illustration to conceptual or decorative forms. Fiction, which had previously played a central role in magazines, was sidelined by a plethora of non-fiction articles that inspired a more abstract, symbolic approach to image-making. Colorful, personal, and extremely varied in style, these artworks balanced the specificity of the photographic image in publishing, and attempted to blur the lines between fine and applied art.

Despite a consensus that narrative illustration faltered because the advent of photography and shifts in content reduced the need for naturalistic pictures, this important American art form has always been about more than just the appearance of things. Through the decades, this art of mass culture has looked deeply into society, reflecting and shaping a rapidly changing world. Though periodicals have made way for new media, the impact of narrative imagery continues to be felt. In today's digital age, we are as happy as our predecessors to suspend disbelief in the face of visual technology, which now has the power to bring the impossible to life.