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INSPIRED: NORMAN ROCKWELL AND ERIK ERIKSON

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In the early 1960s, Norman Rockwell was at a crossroads. Civil rights, political assassinations and an unpopular war were roiling the nation. Mass media was migrating from his kind of nostalgic storytelling illustration to photography. Abstract art elitists were mocking his realistic style.

He could have retired, but instead he moved boldly forward, abandoning the ultra-conservative *Saturday Evening Post* for more progressive work at *Look* magazine and developing images of racism, the glories of space travel and respect for universal human rights that revealed a deeper, less idealized side to him.

His path toward that transition is examined in *Inspired: Norman Rockwell and Erik Erikson*—a scrapbook-style exhibition of texts, photos and drawings reflecting on his treatment with the renowned psychotherapist at the Austen Riggs Center in Stockbridge. Organized by the Norman Rockwell Museum and Riggs to mark their 50th and 100th anniversaries respectively, it aims to illustrate what each man brought to and

gained from the relationship.

Rockwell sought help for depression over family and artistic problems when he moved in 1953 to Stockbridge, where his wife, Mary, was being treated at Riggs for alcoholism. She died in 1959.

A brilliant theorist who aspired early in life to be an artist, Erikson believed social development doesn't end at adolescence but continues in distinct stages throughout life. He coined the term "identity crisis."

Erikson encouraged Rockwell to confront rather than suppress longstanding problems with close relationships, a direction that may have opened the artist to more empathetic perspectives on the human



Bill Scovill. Norman Rockwell with Erik Erikson during a Portrait Posing Session, 1962, digital reproduction. Norman Rockwell Museum Collection. ©Norman Rockwell Family Agency.

condition. On the flip side, as a German Jew trying to assimilate in American culture, Erikson was said to find in Rockwell a kindred artistic spirit and icon of the values he hoped to absorb.

Rockwell's medical records are confidential, so these observations are based on personal letters, notes and drawings. They sketch out the creative environment at Riggs, the supportive therapist-patient friendship and Rockwell's embrace of diversity, but falter at creating a penetrating narrative. Rockwell's masterful

charcoal portraits of Erikson and other Riggs medical staff are a redeeming takeaway.

-Charles Bonenti