

# The Berkshire Eagle

## OPINION

### Laurie Norton Moffatt: Why Norman Rockwell matters

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FILE - This undated file photo provided by Sotheby's shows the popular Norman Rockwell masterpiece "The Gossips" which is heading for the auction block. It is among seven works by The Saturday Evening Post illustrator going on sale at Sotheby's in New York on Dec. 4, 2013. The painting was returned to Norman Rockwell Museum on loan by its new owner in December 2013. (AP Photo/Sotheby's, File)

**What an autumn it has been for Norman Rockwell.**

With the market record of \$46 million set for Rockwell art at this month's Sotheby's American Art sale, we've emerged in 45 years from being the museum dedicated to the artist most ridiculed by the art world to the museum that embodies the artist whose masterpiece work has commanded the highest American art auction price of all time.

This on the heels of the long awaited biography by Deborah Solomon, an established cultural and art critic whose book has introduced heretofore unexplored ideas about Rockwell that incited a good many Rockwell fans and troubled some members of the Rockwell family so deeply that a statement was issued disavowing the book. Interest in Norman Rockwell has never been higher.

Yet how quickly the news high of wealth unleashed in the rarefied art world was overshadowed by the outpouring of affection upon news of the death of a singularly great life -- of another ordinary, extraordinary man, Nelson Mandela. How powerful and impactful a life can be. On some lasting level Norman Rockwell spoke deeply through his pictures about his belief in the goodness of humanity. Norman Rockwell was always kind.

With the sale of "Saying Grace," a family of three brothers who have sparred for two decades has come into an inheritance previously unimagined, created by Rockwell's hand. We know that at least two contenders were willing to invest nearly \$50 million to own one of Rockwell's finest works that portrays the qualities of gratitude and tolerance.

At the same moment, another family of three brothers whose lives have been inexorably shaped by Norman Rockwell, feel the personal pain of media spotlight on ideas promulgated about their father by a trusted biographer. [In addition they must be pondering the plight of so many artists and their families who, like the Norman Rockwell Museum, receive little of the financial fruits of their forebear's creativity.] The persistent, diligent work of the Norman Rockwell Museum inviting the world to see Rockwell anew, helped to make these events possible.



I can remember the days when we wished for the art world to treat Rockwell with greater respect and take him seriously. When we seemingly were the only museum willing to exhibit Norman Rockwell's artwork. Today, the Norman Rockwell Museum has partnered with as many as 150 museums around the world in presentation of Norman Rockwell's art and the very best of American Illustration art.

We are entering a new era for Norman Rockwell and American art. Our commitment to illustration arts, fully embraced with the formation of the Rockwell Center six years ago, has flowered and borne fruit across the land. Norman Rockwell's archives, which the museum has been processing for more than 20 years and has invested millions of dollars to make them accessible in digital form on the Internet, are open to all scholars, researchers and students of Rockwell, The museum has just received a gift to the archives of thousands of papers and hundreds of original artworks from The Famous Artists School, a donation of an original Rockwell Saturday Evening Post cover and the gifts of a fine group of illustration works, which further strengthen the Rockwell Museum collection for future generations with an art collection now approaching 8,000 artworks.

Though we are the epicenter of all things Rockwell, the Norman Rockwell Museum is not the sole keeper of the Rockwell flame. Art patrons, auction houses, biographers, dealers, curators and museum founders,

collectors and professors, family members and many other voices and leaders are emerging to embrace the important legacy of this artist we have always honored. The museum's role is to present the artwork, support the scholarship of many to reflect and offer a variety of points of view.

For example, next month, scholar Jane Allen Petrick will present a talk on Norman Rockwell's artworks that feature people of color, as told in her new book, "Hidden in Plain Sight: The Other People in Norman Rockwell's America." Last year, the museum hosted the book launch of James O. 'Bud' Edgerton's, (Norman Rockwell's good friend in Vermont,) personal memoir "The Unknown Rockwell: A Portrait of Two American Families." Hundreds of author/illustrators have spoken about their books at the museum.

Works by important illustrators are commanding leading prices in the art market. Many authors are writing about Rockwell. Imagine the chilling effect on scholarship if the museum were to censor their work. In many ways our work as cultural caretakers of this important American illustration genre is just beginning anew.



We might ask, "What is the value of culture to humanity? Can it be measured fully in monetary units? Is it a measure of our civility and civilization? Is it the keeper of our stories and history? Would we be less civilized without art to remind us of what is important in life?" A simple moment of prayerful gratitude in blessing for a meal shared with a loved one? Rockwell reminds us in his painting of "Saying Grace" of the goodness of the common man. The nobility of the commonplace, now worth millions to a collector, yet somehow priceless and owned by us all.

So what role does Norman Rockwell Museum play in this theater of our human stories? The heady drama of an auction record? The stories told of an artist's life examined in the glare of the public eye? The story of saying grace in a busy transit hub? What is the role of our museum in shaping a nation? Of inspiring young people? Of reminding us of our better selves? Of the importance of ordinary people leading ordinary yet somehow extraordinary lives, be it a courageous young girl surrounded by U.S. Marshalls stepping boldly into a more just future as depicted in Rockwell's "The Problem We All Live With," or a man of quiet resolve and courage such as Nelson Mandela who inspired a nation forward toward freedom, democracy and equality?

One of the things Rockwell has taught me -- one of the reasons I suspect he was and remains so beloved -- is that everyday life matters, and the seemingly mundane decisions of everyday life also matter, not just to you but to your family, your neighbors, your community and nation. Indeed, it is in the everyday that the deep meanings of our individual and collective lives reside.



The question then, is why does Rockwell continue to matter? This is a question of ultimate importance to our museum. It is also a question that's easy to lose sight of at the very moments Rockwell seems most

relevant and newsworthy because the art market has placed a high monetary value on his work. To answer it, I'd like to illuminate what I believe we find in his art.

Fundamentally, we find moments of emotion. In the grand Renaissance tradition, Rockwell was a painter of people. Ordinary people, mostly, though as his fame grew he was called on to paint presidents and heroes. A keen observer of human nature, he painted ordinary people in the small, ordinary moments of their lives -- moments that many of us might not take the time to notice. Rockwell did.

There's a sense in his paintings that these "ordinary" moments are in fact defining. The joy, fear, courage, foolishness, warmth and wonder of life are all there. And the pain, too -- the civil rights pictures of his late career demonstrate how alive he was to the suffering and injustice that are also part of the American experience. He didn't grandstand these messages. He depicted them as moments of liminal space, filled with expectation and hope.

The Norman Rockwell Museum has been working to collect, preserve, interpret and exhibit Rockwell's work for 45 years. We have done this out of a two-fold consciousness that his work is indispensable to an understanding of American culture past and present, and that his messages carry an intangible human value that gives meaning to our lives. With the firm belief that he was a superb artist unparalleled in his time.

Beyond our art collection, our archives are a rich repository of artifacts and ephemera from the life of one of the 20th century's truly fascinating figures. Numerous scholars continue to draw on these materials to ask the question, "Who was this extraordinary 'ordinary' man?"



Norman Rockwell captured the imagination of a nation for 65 years, keeping his finger on the pulse of a changing America through four generations, two world wars, the Great Depression and the American Civil Rights movement. His indelible images have become firmly rooted into the American psyche, crafting a common heritage among a nation of immigrants and uniting Americans around the core values of our nation and culture -- democracy, freedom and social justice.

His images illuminate our common humanity with humor and kindness, decency and tolerance. His images are deeply burned into our collective memory and his name has become an eponym. "Rockwellian" is ubiquitously applied to conjure an image of America.

The power of the illustrated image to create identity and teach beyond words is nowhere more powerfully demonstrated than through the art of Norman Rockwell. He was a master communicator and will be remembered as a compassionate and idealistic humanitarian as well as one of the greatest artists of the 20th century.

*Laurie Norton Moffatt is director and CEO of Norman Rockwell Museum. Since 1977, she has been a student and scholar of Rockwell and is author of the Rockwell catalogue raisonné "Norman Rockwell A Definitive Catalogue."*