

How Norman Rockwell Invented Christmas

Illustration by Eliane Gerrits



In Christmas week my home town of Princeton, N.J., turns into a setting for a fairytale. The gargoyles on the university chapel are dusted with snow. The turrets on the Gothic towers rise against a piercingly blue sky. The pine and fir trees in town show off their lights and glittering ornaments; doors are hung with wreaths and garlands. Stores are perfumed with a heady mixture of cloves and cinnamon. From the loudspeakers we hear yet another version of "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas." The whole town is transformed into a fantasy that could be rendered by Norman Rockwell.

Of course. By who else? Norman Rockwell painted Christmas scenes that are deeply embedded in our collective subconscious. A rosy-cheeked Santa in his sleigh, stockings hung over the fireplace. A benign elderly couple opening the front door to greet their grandchildren, their arms overflowing with Christmas presents.

We know this is pure nostalgia for an imagined past that never really existed. But where does this longing for a picture-perfect life full of uncomplicated happiness come from? It most cer-

tainly did it not come from Rockwell's past, which was miserable. As we know from Deborah Solomon's new biography, Rockwell grew up in an environment that had nothing to do with the world he so nostalgically painted later. He spent an unhappy childhood in cramped apartments in New York. His parents neglected him. He was a withdrawn child — not a good student, not athletic, and not social.

Yet it was Rockwell who, more than anyone, depicted America's difficult crises of depression, war, and recovery during the 1940s and 1950s as an idyllic, romantic period. That had everything to do with his discerning eye for the small, the ordinary — not the heroic. Shy children in a simple classroom, a father bringing home his daily loaf of bread. A doctor attentively examining his patient. The paintings speak of compassion and care — reassuring values at times of disorienting change. No wonder Rockwell became the most popular artist in America.

But when the country finally did recover, and the 1960s arrived, Rockwell lost his appeal. His sentimental illustrations were not considered art.

But, today, in a time of rising economic disparity, the old-fashioned values are making a comeback. And so is Norman Rockwell.

Saying Grace is a Saturday Evening Post cover from 1951. It is one of Rockwell's best-known works. We see an elderly woman and a boy about 6 years old sitting in a cafe, where they bow their heads in prayer. Two young men, cigarettes in their mouths, look on, as well as an unshaven man in his forties. Everyone in the cafe is quiet. Here, gratitude and respect are depicted in an iconic way. It sold recently for a record sum of \$46 million.

Rockwell himself believed that a painting is more than just color and shape. "It starts and ends with a story," he once said. Steven Spielberg and George Lucas are ardent collectors of his work. That's not surprising. They are storytellers, too, and they see in him a kindred spirit. They, too, tell stories about a past we wish we'd had.

According to a recent poll, more than half of Americans celebrate Christmas in a nonreligious way. The emotions about the birth of the child Jesus in a stable, lying between the ox and the donkey, surrounded by shepherds in the field, don't mean much to many of us. But the Rockwellian desire to feel those primal feelings about Christmas are well alive. The happiness that comes with being with family, loved ones, and friends. The cathartic effect of forgiveness. The comfort for pain and sorrow. This is what we all want, a life full of love and warmth. And once a year, with candles, holly, and good will, we come close to that.

Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas.

— Pia de Jong