



Smithsonian American Art Museum

Telling Stories: Norman Rockwell from the Collections of George Lucas and Steven Spielberg July 2, 2010 – Jan. 2, 2011

Note: The following are excerpts from interviews with the collectors. George Lucas was interviewed Sept. 12, 2008 by Laurent Bouzereau, filmmaker, and Virginia Mecklenburg, senior curator at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Steven Spielberg was interviewed by Laurent Bouzereau Aug. 6, 2008.

George Lucas

“Rockwell symbolized what America was aspiring to and held the most dear, and what the American ideal was during those twenty to thirty years that he was extremely popular. Not only was he popular but at the same time he really captured society’s ambitions and emotions.”

“He really talked about real people. He showed you the way they lived their lives, and I like that about him. At the same time he had a great deal of sensitivity toward those people’s lives, their jobs, and their character. And in so doing, he encapsulated lives that existed at that particular point in time. That idealism, that naïveté, that innocence that is Norman Rockwell was very emblematic of a certain part of America during that time.”

“Storytelling was very important with Norman Rockwell because every single picture he did told a specific story. Each one shows either the middle or the end of a story and you can already see the beginning even though it’s not there. You can see all the missing parts because he used one frame that tells everything you need to know. In filmmaking we strive for that. We strive to find images that convey a lot of information visually without having to spend a lot of time explaining them. And Norman Rockwell was a master at that. He was a master at telling a story in one frame.”

“The key to Rockwell is that he’s a great storyteller who used cinematic devices to tell a story. He essentially cast his paintings. The subjects in there are actually characters who are designed, written, and put in there very specifically. Their face, their expression, their thinking, and everything about them has been cast. He didn’t just say, ‘Oh, there’s a group of people.’ He said, ‘I want this person to look like this, that person to look like that.’ That’s what we do in the movies. He is fabricating a story, which is what movie directors do. So he’s a movie director who just worked in stills instead of in moving pictures.”

“He showed us an idealized version of life, of what he wanted it to be or what he thought it to be. I did that in *American Graffiti*. I came from a small town in central California and grew up in the Norman Rockwell world of burning leaves on Saturday morning. All the things that were in Rockwell paintings were part of my life. So there’s a very strong nostalgic pull for me with

Rockwell. But he really did document what life was like then. And that's what I was trying to do in *American Graffiti*. I wanted to show a uniquely American mating ritual of the '50s and '60s, to show how boys related to girls. It was all done through cars and it was a particular kind of social culture. And that's a direct descendant of Rockwell."

"I've always been interested in anthropology, and I've always been interested in art that speaks to the time in which it was made. I can appreciate art for the beauty of it, but I also think of art as an artifact, something that tells you a lot about the period in which it was done. And I like works that are very expressive, and capture the emotional feelings of the society and the time the art was created."

"When we were in film school we would say, we're not making movies the way things are, we're making movies about the way things should be. And that's the power you have as an artist, to be able to put your spin on reality and make it the way you think it should be. Whether it's darker or more optimistic, you have the choice. Rockwell created his art to relate to people, but at the same time he showed generations to come what it was like in those years. He made a very powerful statement about what our society was thinking during that period of time."

"Growing up on Rockwell was probably a very big reason that I felt so comfortable when I got into the movie business. Because I understood how you develop character and tell stories using the visual medium and the things you have to put in the frame. . . ."

"I think in essence, Americans wish to have this innocent and naïve life. And a lot of young people have that innocent, naïve life. And so, even though Rockwell's images may be dated, the content is not. We are now, in this day and age, actually going through a visual metamorphosis with digital technology and the way kids grow up. Kids' experiences are so much different than the kids of the '20s and '30s in terms of the way they play. And so much of what Norman Rockwell does is play. But the awe, the simple awe of watching a toy being made or playing baseball, those things are eternal. . . ."

Steven Spielberg

"Rockwell in a way pushed a benign but important agenda of a kind of community, a kind of civic responsibility, and patriotism. And he did this in one frame, with one image. And he did it, like *Rashomon*, from many different approaches to the same theme, which was tolerance of the community, of each other, of parents, of presidents, of Boy Scouts, of our veterans, and of soldiers fighting abroad. He was really one of the greatest Americans that this country has produced since, maybe, Samuel Clemens."

"Norman Rockwell was the great American storyteller. And he did his storytelling in a flash; he did it with a single image. And he invites you to explore that image. He draws you into that image and he invites you to, once it makes an impression on you, to question why, simply question why. And as you answer your own question, there are clues throughout all of his paintings."

“[—*And Daniel Boone Comes to Life on the Underwood Portable*] was the first Rockwell painting I ever possessed. And it was wonderful, because it was speaking to me on a whole other level. When I would sit down in front of my typewriter to try to write a story for a movie, I would wait for that little thought bubble to appear over my head producing an image that would get my fingers dancing on the keys. And that was very evocative for me, that he was imagining Daniel Boone before he actually began to write about him. The work of a writer is among the most laborious and the most frustrating there is, trying to pull these disparate visual elements out of the sky and finding a way to express them in words. I love that painting because he hasn't really gone into the rough stuff; he's not in pain yet. He will be in pain, but right now he's just dreaming of what he wants to write.”

“I've always loved *Boy on a High Dive*. That painting means a lot to me, because we're all on diving boards hundreds of times during our lives, taking the plunge or pulling back from the abyss. For me, that painting represents every motion picture just before I commit to directing it. Just that one moment, before I say 'Yes, I'm going to direct that movie.' For *Schindler's List*, I probably lived on that diving board for eleven years before I eventually took the plunge. So that painting spoke to me the second I saw it. When I saw that the painting was available to add to my collection, I said, 'Well not only is it going in my collection, but it's going in my office so I can look at it every day of my life.'”

“I've wanted to own a lot of Rockwell's Boy Scout paintings, because the Boy Scouts was a very important part of my life growing up. The Boy Scouts gave me the opportunity to discover filmmaking. When I went for a photography merit badge and made a little 8-millimeter movie, the Boy Scouts in my troop, 294, Scottsdale, Arizona, liked the movie and made so much noise laughing and clapping that I got the virus, thinking I've got to do this the rest of my life. The Boy Scouts taught me a lot of very useful skills. I'm sure I've forgotten how to milk a cow, but I certainly still know how to tie knots, which helps with seven children growing up in your house. Rockwell saw the Boy Scouts as young men on the home front who could do good deeds and would be there at the ready to help you in any situation.”

“Whenever my dad would bring home *The Saturday Evening Post*, Norman Rockwell's work was often the cover art. So often, in fact, that I looked forward not even to opening up the *Post* to see what was inside. I was mainly interested in seeing what story this painter was telling on the cover.”

“Rockwell had a really wonderful sense of source lighting. It was very evocative of the mood that he was trying to communicate. He would use a window, often, a single source of light and he'd be very true to that source. But he would also add a lot of fill light, which is what frequently happens when you light a movie set.”

“I think Rockwell was a great humorist. So many of his paintings are evocative of the humor of the times, innocent humor, not raunchy humor like we have today, but innocent humor like stepping on a girl's toes at the dance. This is something we've all done when we were younger and we still do at my age. This was Rockwell extolling the virtues of this 1940s, '50s, and '60s innocence, which is how he saw America. Simple values and simple moments. . . .”

“Frank Capra made movies about community, and about the bringing together of community. He made movies about a single person, the kind of individual that goes against the grain of, let’s say, a movement. Like *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, where a single person, through his courage and tenacity, suddenly brings everybody onto his side. I think there are similarities between some of the Capra films and a lot of the Rockwell art. But there were also American filmmakers at that time, like William Wyler, who made *The Best Years of Our Lives* that also spoke to Rockwell, as Rockwell spoke about the sense of community, and the sense of a community in need of repair.”

“I think if he had been a filmmaker he’d have been a great filmmaker and he would have been a famous filmmaker. But thank God he wasn’t a filmmaker; thank God he painted pictures to inspire other filmmakers to do better work. I think that’s what Rockwell has done for all of us who love him and appreciate his paintings. He has made us better artists.”