

## ARTS & LETTERS

### *Democracy's Artist*

"America's Vermeer" by Dave Hickey, in *Vanity Fair* (Nov. 1999), 4 Times Sq., New York, N.Y. 10036.

Norman Rockwell (1894–1978) is often dismissed as an unimportant portrayer of an unreal small-town America, a mere illustrator whose sentimental cornball paintings are of no lasting worth. Hickey, a professor of art history, criticism, and theory at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, strongly disagrees. Rockwell, he avers, was "the last great poet of American childhood, the Jan Vermeer of this nation's domestic history."

Take, for instance, Rockwell's *After the Prom*, an oil painting that was reproduced as

a *Saturday Evening Post* cover in 1957. In it, a boy in a white dinner jacket perches on a stool at a drugstore soda fountain and looks on proudly as his date on the next stool, a blonde girl in a white formal dress, lets the soda jerk smell the fragrance of her gardenia corsage, while another customer, apparently a workingman and war veteran, glances over and smiles.

*After the Prom*, says Hickey, is "a full-fledged, intricately constructed, deeply knowledgeable work that recruits the total



*After the Prom* (1957), by Norman Rockwell

resources of European narrative picture-making to tell the tiny tale of agape [Rockwell] has chosen to portray.” The painting’s true subject, Hickey says, is not “the innocent relationship between the two young people”—that is more the occasion—but rather “the generosity of the characters’ responses, and of our own.” The artist’s “precise visual argument” was that, despite 1950s concerns about juvenile delinquents, “the kids are all right.”

The picture proposes “a tolerance for and faith in the young as the ground-level condition of democracy,” Hickey writes. “And, strangely enough, this is probably the single aspect of Rockwell’s work that distinguishes him as a peculiarly American artist. In all other aspects, Rockwell was a profoundly European painter of the bourgeois social world in an American tradition that has almost no social painters. . . . Rockwell painted mercantile society, in the tradition of Frans Hals, William Hogarth, Jean-Baptiste Greuze, Louis Leopold Boilly, and William Frith, but as an American he painted a society grounded not in the wisdom of its elders but in the promise of its youth.”

Had *After the Prom* been a comparable European painting, Hickey says, it would have had “earthbound adult lovers surrounded and celebrated by floating infants. In Rockwell’s painting, we have floating youths

surrounded and celebrated by earthbound adults. Thus, the two adults in *After the Prom* are invested with considerable weight. The soda jerk leans theatrically on the counter. The veteran sits heavily on his stool, leans against the counter, and rests his foot on the rail. The force of gravity is made further visible by the draped sweater on the boy’s arm and the hanging keys on the veteran’s belt, while the two young people, in their whiteness and brightness, float above the floor—in one of the most complex, achieved emblems of agape, tolerance, and youthful promise ever painted.”

Even as Rockwell was painting *After the Prom*, however, the *Saturday Evening Post* was phasing out the sort of covers he had done for the magazine since 1916, his beguiling vignettes of everyday life in America. Instead, the magazine—and Rockwell—turned in the 1960s to the pursuit of celebrities and the repetition of moral platitudes.

Rockwell finally became the illustrator he had always thought he was, says Hickey, and, sadly, he largely ceased being “the important artist he correctly believed himself to be.” Yet Rockwell’s great works remain—still alive in the public consciousness and, Hickey writes, more important “than his modernist and postmodernist detractors will ever acknowledge.”

## Another Country

To a rhetorical style redolent of “whole generations of black preachers bearing witness in storefront churches,” essayist James Baldwin (1924–87) added “a certain arch-worldliness” reminiscent of Henry James. The coruscating result appalled black radicals of the 1960s, observes novelist Lewis Nkosi in *Transition* (1999: Issue 79).

*Baldwin [forged] a discourse on race that was deliberately unstable, highly provisional, endlessly deferred, designed to obstruct any easy or uncomplicated play of identities: a syntax so fluid and mutable that it all but drove black radicals crazy! After all, radicals work with iron-clad Manichean categories, right and wrong, absolute good and absolute evil; they possess a healthy suspicion of irony, which they rightly apprehend as an agent of political immobilization. Complexity, qualifications—these are always suspect. For such people, black is always black; white, white. Perhaps Baldwin’s convoluted syntax was superior to the brute certainties that Eldridge Cleaver was retailing, going so far as to justify the rape of women, white and black. Baldwin probably has the last laugh on the other side of the grave.*