

American myth-maker Norman Rockwell finally getting his due

BY DOUG JOHNSON
STAFF WRITER

If you want to be part of Norman Rockwell's victory tour around America you will have to travel to Chicago sometime between Feb. 26 and May 21.

The Rockwell exhibit will come no closer to Detroit.

The exhibit features 70 paintings and all 322 of his *Saturday Evening Post* covers and in Atlanta through the end of January.

In Chicago it will be installed in two rooms at the Chicago Historical Society's building, which is in the south end of the city's Lincoln Park (well north of The Loop).

This exhibit, a new book by the curator of his hometown museum (*in Stockbridge, Massachusetts*), and a recent 90-minute documentary on PBS are all part of a renewed interest in Rockwell.

Rockwell has been dismissed as too sentimental, too corny, too much of an illustrator - he did Boy Scout calendars for heaven's sake - to be considered an American master. He couldn't ever

match up to Homer, Hopper, O'Keefe, Pollock, Wyeth or even Warhol or Grant Wood.

Or could he?

It is interesting to note the full title of the exhibit: "Norman Rockwell: Pictures for the American People." It's as if to say: here is America's favorite artist; critics, art historians, pundits of high culture be damned. This show is for the American people he so richly evokes in his work.

It is also interesting to see that this tour ends in New York City, at the Guggenheim Museum, the famed circular, "ultra-modern" structure conceived by another American master, Frank Lloyd Wright.

Here, the foremost depitor of small-town life comes to terms with the teeming, cosmopolitan, American mecca for art and artists: New York City.

How un-Rockwell.

Baby-boomers and their parents best remember Rockwell and those 40 years of covers for Saturday Evening Post. It is said that he never took on serious subjects until very late in life. By a poll of readers of the Post, his

favorite cover is a boy and his grandmother saying grace at a small dinner.

Supposedly by his own admission he painted an America he wanted to see; Rockwell's covers from the Depression do not reveal the despair that gripped the country.

The show comes more than two decades after his death and appears to be designed to bridge the turn of the century with look back at our best and brightest moments: soldiers back from war, kids at the soda fountain, a whole family at the Thanksgiving table, a couple getting their marriage license. All his covers seemed infused with his sly wit and like Hitchcock, he sometimes put himself into his own pictures.

Visitors to the exhibit will learn about his meticulous methods, his use of preliminary sketches and models, and about his life through a biographical timeline that includes photographs.

After Chicago the show goes to the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C., then to San Diego, to Phoenix, back to Stockbridge

(the Norman Rockwell Museum) then on to the Guggenheim for a long run (November, 2001 to mid-February, 2002).

Rockwell would have been pleased. He often expressed doubt about his ability and his place as a bona fide artist. But as Steven Spielberg tells us in the PBS show, he painted the American dream better than anyone else - so well, in fact his name became an adjective.

"We just drove through a Norman Rockwell town; or, 'It was a Norman Rockwell family gathering.'

You can call (312) 902-1500 for tickets. The museum's number is (312) 642-4600. As of this week the Illinois Ticketmaster Web site was not listing this event.

The Drake Hotel, Doubletree Guest Suites Hotel, the Westin Hotel and the Four Seasons Hotel are close to the museum. About 60 hotels are taking part in a Chicago Winterbreak promotional and advertising low rates for rooms through March. Call (888) FUN-EVENTS or (800) 2CONNECT about various other deals and events.



Daydreaming: "Girl At Mirror," an oil on canvas work by Norman Rockwell, is one of the original artworks that will be on display.

GREAT ESCAPES

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SKI UPDATES

Most of Michigan's 42 downhill ski resorts and ski areas currently report open runs, with plenty of good skiing anticipated for January.

One-fourth of Michigan's downhill ski areas have beefed up their snowmaking systems for this season.

For the latest snow and travel conditions, call Travel Michigan's 24-hour conditions line at 888-78-GREAT (784-7328),

updated twice daily by AAA Michigan, or visit the Travel Michigan Web site at www.michigan.org.

The following information was provided by AAA of Michigan.

IMPROVEMENTS EVERYWHERE

In the southern Lower Peninsula, Pine Knob (Clarkston) has enlarged its terrain park and has a longer re-contoured race hill. It also upgraded its lodge and cafeteria. Mt. Brighton (Brighton), has redesigned half-pipe that features shortened walls. Alpine Valley (Milford), has remodeled portions of its lodge. Cannonsburg (northeast of Grand Rapids), has increased

grooming capability. Bittersweet (Osego), has raised its ski peak to a 350 foot vertical drop, and sports a newly remodeled cafeteria.

In the northern Lower Peninsula, Caberfae Peaks (Cadillac), has added five new runs, a new day lodge and cafeteria, a new ticket sales office, and an expanded rental facility. In addition, Caberfae has boosted the height of North Peak to 485 feet vertical drop. Shanty Creek (Bellaire) opened Cedar River Village, located at the base of Schuss Mountain, which features a unique ski-in ski-out lodging, dining facilities, and slope-side condominiums. The area also includes a new snow-tubing park.

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