

That Was Then; This is Now

TOPIC

To explore how Norman Rockwell's illustrations tell a story of America and Americans and how they reflect small towns and rural society made up of ordinary people doing ordinary things.

OBJECTIVES

- Students will write descriptions of the people and places evident in the paintings.
- Students will compare the lifestyle changes between then and now.

MATERIALS

- Postcard or print versions of Norman Rockwell images
- Writing paper

PLAN

Observing Rockwell. Norman Rockwell painted scenes of small town America throughout his career. He used his friends and neighbors as models for the characters he portrayed, and took his characters from everyday life. These pictures reflect the times in which they are painted. There are clues in the details that tell us a great deal about the character, the place, and the time in which they living. Comparing our observations about the past with what we know of society today we can discover evolving trends.

Begin by dividing the students into teams of two or three, and distribute the postcard or image. Have them discuss and write their answers to the questions and share with the class their picture and the observations they've made.

- What is happening in this scene?
- What can you tell about the setting and the time period from the clues Rockwell painted into his picture?
- Describe the inferences you can make about American life in this time.
- How are things different today?
- What changes would have to be made to the illustration to reflect life today?

Grades K-3

Instead of working more independently in small groups, use a large -sized print and the whole class responding to the one image. Try some of the posing suggestions below if you think it appropriate for your group. Try to bring the experience around to something they have experienced in their own lives—Have you ever been in this kind of situation? When? What happened to you? How did it make you feel?

Grades 4-6

Have the students write questions they would like to ask the character.

Try posing some members of the group in the pose of the characters in the pictures. Ask them how sitting like that (standing, looking, etc) makes them feel. After asking how would this pose have to change to reflect life today, you can have the students act out the new pose and describe the difference in how they feel in the new pose compared to how they felt in the previous pose.

Grades 7 & up

Have students interview someone who lived during the time period in the picture. Write up the interview and compare that with what the student had written in class. How accurate were their speculations about American life?

Taken from Resource Packet for Teachers created by The Norman Rockwell Museum in Stockbridge MA.

A New Viewpoint

“Commonplaces are never tiresome. It is we who become tired when we cease to be curious or appreciative.... [We] find that is not a new scene which is needed, but a new viewpoint.”

Norman Rockwell

GRADE LEVEL

This project is designed for students in grades 7-12.

TOPIC

To consider Norman Rockwell’s imagery as a means of helping students reconsider their familiar cultural and community contexts.

OBJECTIVES

- Students will develop visual literacy skills by carefully observing and analyzing Norman Rockwell’s representation of the “commonplace.”
- Students will reevaluate their own communities by giving attention to details they have overlooked.
- Students will create photo collages or multimedia presentations that focus on details of their communities.

MATERIALS

- Postcard or print versions of Norman Rockwell images.
- Disposable cameras (one for each student, if possible).
- Large poster board for mounting images or computer access with scanning capabilities.

TIME

Two 45 minutes class periods are needed for presentation of projects. Students will need additional time to complete their work.

PLAN

- I.. ***Observing Rockwell.*** One of the essential features in Norman Rockwell’s painting is his use of commonplace details as a means of creating a distinct sense of place. His representations of small town America are characterized by careful attention to artifacts that imbue his imagery with a sense of authenticity and location. Rockwell once said, “I showed the America I knew and observed to others who might not have noticed.”

Begin this lesson by breaking the class into small groups and distributing a Rockwell image to each. Have the students identify the location” of the images and generate a list of all the details they observe in the painting. For each of the important elements or details, ask them to interpret the possible meaning of the detail, to suggest *what information it gives about the place*. Challenge them to move beyond the most obvious elements to examine less apparent issues of the composition.

1. How are the details arranged? What is emphasized? Where does your attention fall?
2. What perspective does Rockwell take on the subjects? Where are you placed as a viewer? Why would he construct the image in this way?
3. What are the dominant colors and tones? What sort of light does the image capture?
4. How does Rockwell want you to feel about this place? How is this accomplished?

Have each group share a selection of their findings, emphasizing their responses to Question #4. Make a list of common techniques that Rockwell used to impart a sense of place. Discuss why Rockwell might have chosen these details as symbols of small town America: *How did his decision to use familiar details make his representations of ordinary places seem special,*

important or unique? Rockwell's work poses important questions: *How does representing an ordinary place or idea cause people to think of it differently? Why is it valuable to observe a place closely, with a careful attention to detail? What do we understand about a place when we do this?*

To better understand this idea, have students silently observe the classroom for three minutes. Then ask them to individually select five details within the space that could be easily overlooked. For each of these details, have students speculate as to how they would look to an outsider. What would an outsider learn about this place from each detail you have listed? Encourage them to identify unlikely or obscure details. Discuss their findings, emphasizing again the idea that commonplace details are a powerful means of evoking or representing a place.

Return briefly to the Rockwell images and pose the questions: *Have you ever been someplace this before? How did it compare to the Rockwell images? How are these hometown images different from the place you live? If you were going to represent your most familiar place, what would you show?*

- II. **Observing Environment.** As homework, ask students to decide on a familiar place they want to represent and celebrate. Challenge them to choose a place of personal significance. Have them go to the place and spend 10 minutes observing important and easily overlooked details. Then ask them to select 10 of the details they feel best represent or evoke a sense of the place. Make sure they give this a good deal of thought, as they will have to defend or explain their choices.

The next day, have each student name their place and one detail before giving them the camera. Encourage them to frame these photos carefully composing their representations as deliberately as Rockwell did. If possible, have each student take many pictures to ensure the quality of her/his selection options.

Once the photos are developed, have students select their two best representation of place. For each image, ask students to write a brief anecdotal explanation of the significance of the details. *Why are the details important for evoking a sense of this place?* Encourage them to explore varied forms of writing memoir, poem, etc. Place the images together with their text on poster board or in some other multi-media presentation.

CURRICULUM LINKS

Many contemporary American poets address the concept of place and experience, emotions, events etc that invest that place with meaning. Through language and metaphor, writers like Robert Pinsky, Elizabeth Bishop, Rita Dove, Robert Hass, Richard Wilbur, Li Young Lee, and many others lend often overlooked places a special significance. As a related activity to the photography described in the above plan, have your students write poems that celebrate the "common-place" through language. Help them to create images that evoke this place through a variety of senses through memory, and through historical references or emotion. Working from discussion of contemporary poetry, challenge students to write work that addresses these questions: *Why and how are your familiar places invested with meaning? What details could you use to evoke a sense of that place? How will you represent these details to communicate their importance?*

Rockwell Lesson Plans for Secondary Level
<http://www.nrm.org/learn/schools/teachers-resources/>

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Norman Rockwell

THAT WAS THEN:

--Take a close look--

1. What are the commonplace images? How are the details arranged? What is emphasized? Where does your attention fall?
2. What is happening in the scene?
3. What can you tell about the setting and time period from the images and clues painted into the picture?
4. What perspective does Rockwell take on the subjects? Where are you placed as a viewer? Why would he construct the image this way?
5. What are the dominant colors and tones? What sort of light does the image capture?
6. How does Rockwell want you to feel about this place? How is this accomplished?

THIS IS NOW:

1. How are things different today?
2. What changes would have to be made to the illustration to reflect life today?