

# The Pictures in Rockwell's Attic



## An Intricate Symbiosis

When he first got news about the invention of photography, the contemporary 19th century French painter Paul Delaroche supposedly lamented, “from today painting is dead.”

Delaroche had good reason to sweat, or so he thought. He'd earned his fame for detailed, naturalistic depictions of history's celebrated events and VIPs. Visual storytelling and record keeping had been the province of hand-rendered images—paintings, drawings, etchings—since Paleolithic man began decorating the walls of his caves 32,000 years before. With the sudden appearance of a revolutionary new medium that could instantly and faithfully capture reality, the role of the painter seemed perilously on the verge of extinction. That, as everyone knows, is not how things played out.

Ironically, in the years of photography's infancy, early images were often self-conscious imitations of paintings, usually allegorical themes and extravagant portraits, suggesting a Renaissance vintage with shamelessly appropriated elements like contrasty, sculptural lighting (the term “Rembrandt lighting” is no accident), ornate wardrobe (a lot of togas and flowing satin), and set pieces, like urns and Italianate balustrades. And it didn't take long before cameras were put to work producing realistic “swipe art” for use by painters. Oscar Rejlander and Felix-Jacques Moulin did hundreds of figure studies for this purpose.



**Norman Rockwell:  
Behind The Camera**  
Ron Schick  
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So did Eadweard Muybridge, whose clever sequential photographs refined every graphic artist's perception of human and animal locomotion. There are works by the likes of Delacroix, Ingres, Gauguin, Manet, Courbet, Toulouse-Lautrec and Degas known to be modeled after photographic “sketches” tucked away in these artists' studios. Delaroche's misgivings aside, photography never replaced painting. These two media have coexisted for nearly 200 years, in a kind of intricate symbiosis. Now there's a fresh and surprising look at that relationship, in a new work by photographic historian Ron Schick. *Norman Rockwell: Behind the Camera* examines a curious side of the artist, who, like it or not, is truly America's unofficial painter laureate.

## History Vs. Hooley

Before any purists among you go apoplectic at the notion of Rockwell as an important painter, be advised that there's currently a powerful resurgence of admiration afoot among serious critics and collectors. (See: [www.nrm.org](http://www.nrm.org)). True, Rockwell was an illustrator, probably best known for the 322 *Saturday Evening Post* covers he produced between 1916 and 1963. As lavish as these works are, with too much of a condescending art world, they were nothing short of romanticized hooley. Even the artist himself didn't call his works paintings; they were “pictures.” But what his most strident detractors seem to overlook was the richly textural vision these pictures distilled of American life and history during the 20th century. To collector and staunch Rockwell advocate Steven

Spielberg, who calls them “portraits of America and Americans without cynicism,” they remain relevant to this day. Rockwell's canon of work, declared critic Robert Rosenblum, is “an indispensable part of art history.”

Cornerstone of the Rockwell style is a maniacal attention to the vernaculars of life—believable details. He scattered ingenious visual grace notes throughout his canvasses—a dusty window, stains on a tablecloth, a discarded umbrella, a dangling cigarette butt—to give even the most sentimental theme a patina of realism. And his casting—red faced, chinless youngsters and adults in rumpled suits and unruly hair—was just as resolutely genuine. The secret to all this? An archive of 18,000 black-and-white photographs that Rockwell produced with meticulous care as visual templates for each of his paintings. *Behind the Camera* explores this phase of Rockwellia, and, for anyone familiar with this artist—meaning most of us—the result is fascinating and entertaining.

Rockwell made no apologies—except one—for his technique. Nor did he claim to be a photographer. Like a film director, he was a storyteller, and, also like a film director, he hired skilled shooters to execute the intricately orchestrated tableaux he envisioned for his finished paintings. “I have never taken my own photographs,” he said. “I never worry about the lighting, focus, exposures, or anything but the feeling I want the model to convey. That's trouble enough.” Scanning the photographs in this book, you can't help but grin at the parade of actual people, locations and props that found their way to immortality in scores of iconic Rockwell paintings: the teenaged couple showing off their prom outfits to a kindly, appreciative soda jerk; the WWII-era marine shyly recounting his tales of the Pacific war to a hometown crowd of civilians gathered in a copiously detailed small town garage interior; the gawky, pre-pubescent little girl comparing her reflection in a mirror to a half rolled up movie magazine image of 50s glamour queen Jane Russell; the literally jaw-dropping gaggle of quirky characters in the classic 1948 montage “The Gossips” (above).

## A Scrupulous Workstyle and a Dirty Secret

Rockwell gathered his characters from a variety of sources, friends and family, and most often professional models with whom he could be, he believed, justifiably forceful in eliciting performances. Sometimes, he'd direct from the sidelines of a shoot, but often, recalled one of his favorite photographers, Louis Lamone, “he would jump up and down...roll on the floor...anything to get his model into that pose.” Though he hardly ever pressed a shutter release himself, Rockwell insisted on the highest quality commercial-grade photography. The detail and tonal range throughout *Behind the Camera*—much of the work shot with large and medium format view cameras—reflect Rockwell's scrupulous creative process. His Stockbridge, MA, studio included a professionally equipped darkroom and one piece of equipment Rockwell considered something of a dirty secret. It was a device called the “Balopticon,” built by Bausch & Lomb—an early version of an opaque projector—and it greatly facilitated rendering his photographic work prints on canvas. It saved time and labor, Rockwell confessed, but it also humiliated him. It was “an evil, inartistic, habit-forming, lazy and vicious machine,” he once moaned. “I use one often... and I am thoroughly ashamed of it.”

With Rockwell's patent genius as a draftsman and colorist as givens, Ron Schick clearly sees the power of this artist's work concentrated in the elaborate photographic preliminaries to the paintings themselves: “His emphatic characterizations invite comparisons with work of the best twentieth-century photographic portraitists, such as Arnold Newman, Philippe Halsman and Irving Penn.” For the benefit of non-believers, Schick concludes, “Rockwell's meticulous attention to nuance in his photographs, is the essence of art.”

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