

NORMAN ROCKWELL MUSEUM



Norman Rockwell and Civil Rights

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Subject Areas: Social Studies, Visual Arts

Grades: 6-8th Grade, 9-12th

Theme: Civil Rights

In this lesson, we will explore the art of Norman Rockwell through the lens of civil rights, with a focus on how he and other artists used their work to illustrate and bring awareness to historical and cultural issues.

Key Terms

Civil Rights: Civil rights are the rights of people to be free from unfair or unequal treatment (discrimination) based on the person's race, gender, religion, national origin, disability, sexual orientation, age, or other protected characteristics.

Human Rights: Universal rights that all people are entitled to. These include political, civil, economic, social, and cultural aspects and are recognized by international law.

Discrimination: Unfair or unequal treatment of a person or group based on protected characteristics such as race, gender, religion, national origin, disability, sexual orientation, or age.

Segregation: In the context of civil rights, segregation is the act or process of separating African Americans from other races through legal or social means. This term can also refer to separation of other racial or ethnic minorities from the dominant group identity in mainstream society.

Desegregation: The process of ending the practice of segregation, i.e. the ending of laws or practices that restrict racial or ethnic minorities to specific or separate facilities, neighborhoods, schools, or organizations.

Integration: The process of joining or mixing with a different group of people into a unified whole.

Note to Teachers: Please take a moment to review this lesson before sharing with your students. *The Problem We All Live With* includes a racist slur and a reference to the Ku Klux Klan. *Murder in Mississippi* and artist Pops Peterson's *Freedom From What? (I Can't Breathe)* deal with the subject of racial violence.

Step 1: Look and Discuss

Describe what you see going on in this artwork.

- What is happening in this painting? What do you notice?
- Look at the people in this painting. How would you describe their facial expression? How would you describe their pose and gesture? What do you think they are doing?
- What can you tell us about these people? How do you think they feel in this moment? Why do you think they might feel this way?
- What surprised you or stood out to you in this image?

Take a few moments to learn about the context of this image, using the "Information" tab in the virtual exhibition and the "Learn More" section below.

- How does knowing this information change your thoughts about the painting? Do you have any new or different ideas?

Norman Rockwell created art during the civil rights era that was intended to bring awareness to racial and social injustices of the time. Contemporary artists such as Pops Peterson have continued to explore these issues that still affect society today.

- Does something you see in this artwork seem unjust? What is it?
- What individuals, systems, or structures are causing this injustice? Who is affected by it, and how? What could be done to make it more fair or just?

- Why would the artist have thought it was important to depict this image? What might their intentions have been?
- What does justice mean to you?
- What has changed in the United States since the civil rights movement? What has not changed?
- What are some social or political issues that you care about? What matters to you?

Step 2: Learn More

"For 47 years, I portrayed the best of all possible worlds - grandfathers, puppy dogs - things like that. That kind of stuff is dead now, and I think it's about time."

-Norman Rockwell

Although slavery was abolished at the end of the Civil War, it didn't end discrimination against Black people, who continued to endure the effects of racism, most visibly in the South, but also present in the many social constructs and systems of inequity such as voting, housing, and finance that were prevalent across the nation. In the 1950s and 1960s, a nationwide movement for equal rights for Black Americans fought to abolish the racial segregation and discrimination that was wide-spread and systematized across the United States.

Norman Rockwell, as one of the nation's most well-known artists during this time, worked during the 1960s to raise awareness about the issues faced by Black Americans during the civil rights movement. For many decades Rockwell's portraits of American life had appeared on the covers of popular magazines such as *The Saturday Evening Post*, but the editorial practices of the *Post* during this time allowed Black people to be depicted only in subservient roles. Rockwell left the *Post* for the less conservative *Look* magazine in 1963 and seemed intent on correcting these prejudices and creating work that responded to the racial realities and aspirations of the time. Several of the works he created for *Look* during the 1960s became icons of the American civil rights movement.

*"[Rockwell] was socially concerned, but he wasn't able to paint his views in the *The Saturday Evening Post* because of editorial policies.... it was liberating for him to be able to paint on a wider spectrum of subjects, and he was particularly suited to create a bridge for people to see the unfairness, the anger, the meanness, and the injustices that were happening to people all over the United States."*

-Laurie Norton Moffatt,
Director/CEO, Norman Rockwell Museum

New Kids in the Neighborhood, 1967



Until the American civil rights movement in the 1960s, many places in America practiced racial segregation - making Black and White people use separate hotels, restaurants, and bathrooms - because of their different skin colors.

Many places had signs that read "Whites only". Neighborhoods were often segregated, and African Americans and other minority groups were not allowed to live in White neighborhoods. The Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964, making it illegal to discriminate based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. By the mid-1960s Black families were moving into neighborhoods where they had not been allowed to live before.

New Kids in the Neighborhood was created for a 1967 article in *Look* magazine on housing desegregation. In 1967, when this painting was created, there were lots of neighborhoods where African American families did not and could not live. However, Rockwell's painting tells a more hopeful story about the changing racial profile of a suburban neighborhood. A Black family with a boy and a girl have moved into a White neighborhood, and this

scene shows the meeting of the 'new kids' and the other neighborhood kids. Rather than focusing on the racial differences of the children, Rockwell emphasizes their commonalities, including details that the kids share between them such as pink hair ribbons, pets, and baseball gloves. As a visual storyteller, Rockwell encourages us to wonder what might come next for these kids who mirror one another and seem curious about their counterparts.

Interestingly, adults are not the main characters in this story. The only adults are a man emptying the moving van who doesn't even see the kids, and a nosy neighbor peeking out from behind the partially closed curtains of her house next door. Rockwell asks us to consider whether all the neighbors will be as open to new people as the kids in this scene are likely to be.

The Problem We All Live With, 1964



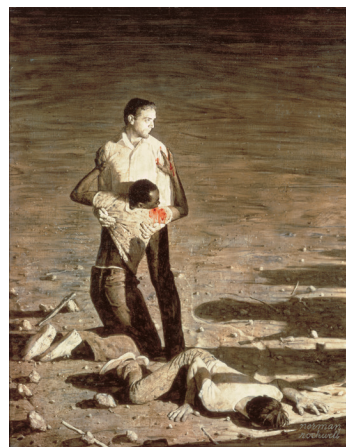
Norman Rockwell's painting *The Problem We All Live With* was published as the centerfold image in *Look* magazine in January 1964. The painting celebrates the dignity, innocence, and courage of a young Black girl escorted to school by federal marshals past a screaming mob of racist White protestors. These protestors are not pictured, but their violence and hateful voices are captured in the scrawled slurs and the blood-like splatters from a tomato thrown against the wall behind her.

Rockwell based his painting on actual events that took place in New Orleans, Louisiana in 1960. In the historic 1954 civil rights case *Brown vs Board*

of Education, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that state laws establishing separate public schools for Black and White students were unconstitutional. After years of inaction, the state of Louisiana was ordered by a federal judge to proceed with school desegregation. On November 14th, four 6-year-old girls -- Ruby Bridges, Gail Etienne, Tessie Prevost and Leona Tate -- became the first Black students to integrate the all-White elementary schools of New Orleans. Protesting parents mounted a boycott of the schools and kept their own children at home for months. As a result, the Black students like the little girl pictured in Norman Rockwell's painting were often all alone in their class. When she saw the illustration as an adult, Ruby Bridges remarked "if you look at the picture in the magazine, you'll see things going all right and nice and quiet, but if you looked at the television, back then, it was real bad."

The Problem We All Live With painting has gone on to become one of the most recognized images of the civil rights movement. The symbolic power of the painting was again highlighted in 2011 when President Barack Obama requested that it be hung in the White House in commemoration of that history and in recognition of the ongoing work still to be done to create true equity in public education.

Murder in Mississippi, 1965



In 1964 the civil rights movement was well underway, but the South remained segregated, especially in relation to voting rights. Of all the Southern states, Mississippi had the lowest percentage of Black voters. African Americans there faced

violence and intimidation when they attempted to exercise their constitutional right to vote. "Freedom Summer" was a campaign to register Black voters in Mississippi. Despite threats of arrest and violence,

many young people volunteered that summer to help register voters, including two White students from New York, Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman, and James Chaney, a young Black man from Mississippi. On June 16th, the three men visited a Black church, one of 20 that had been burned down by the Ku Klux Klan that summer. Shortly after this visit, the three men disappeared, and their bodies were discovered a few weeks later. An FBI investigation revealed that they were abducted and shot by members of the Ku Klux Klan with the help of the local Sheriff's deputy. The news of the murders sparked national outrage and helped gain support for the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

In early 1965, Norman Rockwell began work on an illustration for *Look* about the murders. He researched the case extensively, and compiled news clippings and notes about the physical traits and clothing of the three young men and the circumstances of their death. He made numerous sketches and even photographed models posing as the men. The painting stands out from Rockwell's previous work that almost always tells a complete story at a glance - this painting allows the viewer to wonder about the situation and its circumstances while focusing instead on the moment after the murder was committed. *Murder in Mississippi* is much less detailed and the only color in the otherwise monochrome composition is the red blood on James Chaney's shirt. Rockwell deliberately chose not to include the figures of the murderers, instead showing only their menacing shadows.

Pops Peterson, *Freedom from What? (I Can't Breathe)*, 2014



In his project entitled "Reinventing Rockwell", contemporary artist Pops Peterson updates Norman Rockwell's *Four Freedoms* paintings to create a contemporary vision of America. In *Freedom from What? (I Can't Breathe)*, he reinterprets Rockwell's original artwork *Freedom from Fear* through a 21st century racial lens.

Like Rockwell, Peterson portrays a couple tucking their children into bed. However, while the newspaper in Rockwell's painting references the "bombings" and "horror" of WWII, this father holds a newspaper with the headline: "I Can't Breathe." This phrase was repeated 11 times by New Yorker Eric Garner, an unarmed Black man who died after being held in a chokehold by police. The words "I can't breathe" have been uttered by many others who died in police custody, including George Floyd who was killed by police in 2020, and is now a phrase used across the United States in protest against police brutality and racial inequality.

By replacing Rockwell's White family with a Black family, Peterson draws critical attention to the all-too-real fears shared by many Black parents that their children will become victims of police-involved violence. Peterson said "I knew the complex emotions I wanted to project. There was the love and tenderness from the nurturing parents tucking their children into bed versus the uncertainty and fear on their faces, as the blue lights of a patrol car intrude through the curtains."

Step 3: Create your own

Create a Poster

Have your class generate a list of current events in the news that contain complex issues, for example, gun violence, homelessness, or immigration. Divide students into small groups and ask each group to choose one issue that they care about.

Ask groups to brainstorm why this issue matters using three categories “Why it matters to me”, “Why it matters to the people around me”, and “Why it matters to the world”.

Ask students to consider where they stand on the issue, and the pros and cons of their position. Ask students to generate phrases images that can be used to represent their position on the issue. Students can then create posters that can be used to advocate for their position.

Students can present their posters to the class and collect supporting and opposing viewpoints on the issue.

Reflect:

- How can visual art be used to spark a dialogue or discussion about an issue?

- What are some ways that using visual art as a medium for activism can be successful? What are some challenges?

Civil Rights Timeline

Divide students into four groups, one group for each painting discussed. Each group should research the event that surrounded the painting using resources from the NRM Virtual Exhibition, class textbooks, and trusted sources on the internet.

Create a timeline in the front of the room and ask each group to add their selected painting on the timeline. Ask students to research other key events relevant to civil rights and fill them in on the timeline.

Go through the timeline as a class and have members of each group present the event that they added to the timeline to the class.

Reflect:

- How did these events affect or influence one another?
- How are these issues affecting people today?

NATIONAL LEARNING STANDARDS

VISUAL ARTS

NA-VA.5-12.2 USING KNOWLEDGE OF STRUCTURES AND FUNCTIONS

NA-VA.5-12.3 CHOOSING AND EVALUATING A RANGE OF SUBJECT MATTER, SYMBOLS, AND IDEAS

NA-VA.5-12.4 UNDERSTANDING THE VISUAL ARTS IN RELATION TO HISTORY AND CULTURES

NA-VA.5-12.5 REFLECTING UPON AND ASSESSING THE CHARACTERISTICS AND MERITS OF THEIR WORK AND THE WORK OF OTHERS

CIVICS

NSS-C.5-12.1 CIVIC LIFE, POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT

NSS-C.5-12.3 PRINCIPLES OF DEMOCRACY

NSS-C.K-4.5 ROLES OF THE CITIZEN

US HISTORY

NSS-USH.5-12.5 ERA 5: CIVIL WAR AND RECONSTRUCTION (1850-1877)

NSS-USH.5-12.9 ERA 9: POSTWAR UNITED STATES (1945 TO EARLY 1970S)

NSS-USH.9-12.10 ERA 10: CONTEMPORARY UNITED STATES (1968 TO THE PRESENT)

Teaching resources for
Norman Rockwell Museum’s *Imagining Freedom* virtual exhibition are supported by:

K.A.H.R. Foundation

Feigenbaum Foundation

Dena Hardymon

Green Foundation

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