

Murder in Mississippi Norman Rockwell's Social Realism

By Dennis Raverty

Norman Rockwell is easily the most beloved and well-known American illustrator of the 20th century. Celebrated for his charming anecdotal covers for *Saturday Evening Post* and other periodicals from the 1920s through the 1970s, it is no exaggeration to say that he defined key socially-shared, popular “icons” of each of these decades. His technique and wit are well known. But he had a darker, more serious mode that emerged late in his career.

By the early 1960s, Rockwell was tired of the conservative outlook of the *Saturday Evening Post*, which had endorsed Republican Richard Nixon over John F. Kennedy in the 1960 presidential election. As a recent biography by Deborah Solomon puts it:

He [Rockwell] was well aware that no magazine was eager to commission paintings of Santa Claus or solicitous policemen at a time when a new generation was turning on the radio and hearing Bob Dylan admonish in a vaguely pissed-off voice that the times they are a-changing.

And so Rockwell became a sort of latter-day social realist (a popular style for the socially-engaged artists of the 1930s and 1940s). This consciously politicized attitude and mindset was the one he embraced near the end of his long career. Social realism was his passionate and brilliant swansong.



Rockwell's most impressive work in this social realist vein was painted for *Look* magazine in 1965, to accompany an article entitled "Southern Justice," which dealt with the brutal murder of three young civil rights workers the year before in the small town of Philadelphia, Mississippi.

The victims had been college students volunteering during a summer campaign in Mississippi to encourage Black residents to register to vote. At that time, less than 10 percent of eligible Blacks in Mississippi were registered, and now with the signing into law of the Civil Rights Act, striking down long-standing state "Jim Crow" laws prohibiting African Americans from voting, Black voters for the first time had federal laws protecting these rights, which superseded and nullified previous state voting laws.

No longer having any legal means to prevent Blacks from voting, local white racists now turned to an organized program of terror and intimidation to discourage African Americans exercising their new voting rights. To achieve these ends, the local sheriff's office was clandestinely working closely with the Ku Klux Klan, who burnt the church hosting the summer voting rights campaign to the ground, an act intended to terrorize the liberal student activists that had descended on the town (a local newspaper described it as an "invasion" of unwelcome outsiders).

Rockwell turned for inspiration to Francisco Goya's famous masterpiece, *The Third of May, 1808*. This large, darkly romantic painting commemorates Spanish resistance to Napoleon's occupying armies. Unable to identify the sniper who had killed an officer, the French commandant ordered the execution of all adult males in the small Spanish town by firing squad. Lit by a large lantern just to the right of center, the mass murder takes place at the edge of town under cover of night. It is widely considered to be one of the greatest and most powerful political protest paintings in art history.

Rockwell's early sketches for the piece



Francisco Goya, *Third of May, 1808*

for *Look* resembled Goya's composition, where the pot-bellied sheriff's deputy takes the lead in the murders, surrounded by the vigilante Klan members, the scene eerily illuminated by the glaring headlights of the sheriff's squad car.

In the final version of the painting, however, Rockwell used a vertical format, eliminating the vigilante executioners, whose presence is indicated only by their shadows cast ominously on the ground. The artist limits himself to a stark, monochrome in sepia tones, the only other color being the red blood staining the shirt of the wounded student worker.

One of the students already lies dead or dying on the ground, while the wounded black student grasps desperately to his male companion as he falls to his knees from the shot. Both of them would be dead, like their friend, within minutes. Their bodies were then bulldozed into a pit being dug in connection with the erection of a dam near the edge of town. Both the construction worker who operated the machinery used to cover up the murders and members of the local law enforcement were complicit in the crime with the Klan.

This relatively large, dramatic piece

by the artist at the summit of his powers is a far cry from the light, anecdotal charm of many of his earlier illustrations. Even in his more serious works, like the *Four Freedoms*, the artist never rises to the sublime, tragic pathos of this masterful, deeply moving piece executed, like the others, in the last decades of his life, a fitting close to a brilliant career. No one could ever accuse this highly rhetorical and poignant painting of being kitsch or trite, slurs commonly hurled against his illustrations.

The publishers of *Look* decided in the end to reproduce a preliminary oil sketch of the final version of the work instead of the finished painting, an editorial decision with which the artist, understandably, was disappointed. The large, fully-realized, highly-polished and realistic painting itself, shown here, in the collection of the Norman Rockwell Museum, is arguably the most powerful work of the artist's entire career, comparable to Goya's *Third of May* or to Picasso's monumental antifascist painting, *Guernica*.

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