

66: Norman Rockwell *Soldier on Leave* (1944)

Karal Ann Marling

On August 12, 1944, when this painting by Norman Rockwell appeared on the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*, there was reason to hope that the end of World War II might be in sight. During August, U.S. fliers had conducted a daring bombing raid on the Japanese city of Nagasaki. On the European front, Patton's army was driving toward Paris; before the end of the month, the City of Light would be liberated by Allied troops. Perhaps more telling for the average American, Washington had finally allowed manufacturers to resume production of household appliances—a sure sign that combat operations were on the wane.

It was in this moment of optimism—before the bloody Battle of the Bulge, before the epochal flight of the *Enola Gay*—that Rockwell painted another of his intimate, domesticated explorations of life on the homefront, a work variously known as *Soldier on Leave*, *Lovers on a Train*, or *Voyeur*. In a railroad car crowded with servicemen and their best girls, a young flier has lowered the balky window shade as far as it will go and used his coat as a curtain to create a cozy space where he can cuddle with his sweetheart in whatever privacy the situation affords. Sailors framing the picture at the top and the bottom have the same idea. Somewhere in a war-torn world there must still be room for courtship, for tenderness, for whispered goodbyes.¹

Although he was the nation's best-loved artist of World War II, Rockwell did not earn his stripes with scenes of conflict and mayhem. Instead, he took for his theme the folks back home: the armchair generals, the planters of Victory Gardens, the tattooist at work on a much-traveled sailor, the G. I. home on leave.² His most famous wartime cover for the *Post* was probably *Rosie the Riveter* (May 29, 1943), a Michelangelesque redhead posed in her dungarees before the Stars and Stripes to represent all the women who had gone to work in the factories that made the planes flown into battle by the young airman on the train.³

The sense of intimacy, of our close proximity to the couple, is reinforced by the almost preternatural degree of detail with which the scene has been observed. Every lock of hair, every grommet, every stitch appears in closeup, as if there were no air in that parlor car, no impediment of distance to block a perfect godlike apprehension of plush upholstery, polished leather, canvas, dull metal. The result is a kind of magic realism that is both personal and a little unsettling, like the intense gaze of the child peering over the back of her seat, or the single omniscient eyeball staring fixedly from the upper right corner of the image. Homegrown surrealism, Rockwell style: the burning glances add a poignant urgency to the longing of the soon-to-be-separated lovers.

The radical angle of vision, plunging down suddenly upon the denizens of the train, suggests a fleeting moment in time. It also suggests the use of the camera. In the 1940s, it was Rockwell's practice to dress his scenes with the care of a movie director and to have them photographed by his long-time assistant, Gene Pelham (Pelham's is the hand of the conductor, at the right edge of the picture). Then, using a Balopticon projector, he transferred the major lines of the photo to canvas. This procedure, which Rockwell discussed openly, had been surreptitiously used by illustrators since the artist was a novice.⁴



Norman Rockwell,
1894–1978

Soldier on Leave (detail), 1944

Oil on canvas, 22 x 20 in.

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Robert
M. Boynton, 74.98

Printed by permission of the
Norman Rockwell Family

Agency/Copyright ©1944

the Norman Rockwell

Family Entities



As professional models disappeared with the coming of modernism, photography let the illustrator use rank amateurs, who were required to hold a pose only for as long as it took to adjust the f-stop. In this instance, Clara Edgerton, the mother of the farm family who lived next door to the Rockwells in Arlington, Vermont, played the minor role of the blonde head in the foreground. Other Arlington neighbors also obliged. Odd-job boy Roy Crofut, a handsome kid whose relatives were members of Rockwell's stable of amateur models, was the airman. Gladys Cross and her daughter Yvonne were the mother and the spooky little girl seated in front of the lovers.⁵

Just as Rockwell's covers strongly appealed to the general public because of their real-life situations and down-to-earth narratives, Rockwell's neighbors were delighted to be enlisted in the unfamiliar cause of art-making—especially when his pictures reexamined the war on a familiar, grassroots level. For a later, postwar cover showing raucous skiers on their way to Vermont's wintertime resorts by train, Rockwell managed to have a real set of coach seats sent from Albany. For *Soldier on Leave*, he got a whole car, left by the Rutland Railroad on a siding outside Arlington for two days at his behest. Once detached from the train, of course, the car was without light. And heat. Over two exceedingly cold winter days, nonetheless, various Crofuts and Crosses and Edgertons came and went in the name of art for folks like themselves.⁶

The most dramatic of Norman Rockwell's wartime works came in the Four Freedoms series of 1943, or what the artist called his "BIG pictures." Originally intended as paintings without commercial sponsorship, the four images wound up on inside pages of the *Post* when Washington bureaucrats failed to recognize their value as posters. It was only after the public had adopted the pictures as their own that the government saw the wisdom of using Norman Rockwell's *Freedom from Want*, *Freedom from Fear*, *Freedom of Speech*, and *Freedom of Worship* to sell war bonds. As posters, the pictures were eventually reproduced by the millions and remain today among the most revered of all American works of art—precisely because they capture universal moments in the lives of average Americans. In the persons of Rockwell's fellow citizens, they share a Thanksgiving meal, put their children to bed, speak up at a town meeting, and pray as each one chooses. They belong, on a grander scale, to the world of the anonymous, ordinary couple on the train, seeking one last moment of comfort and closeness in the uncertainty of global chaos.⁷

(Facing page)
Norman Rockwell,
1894–1978
Soldier on Leave, 1944
Oil on canvas, 22 x 20 in.
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Robert
M. Boynton, 74.98
Printed by permission of the
Norman Rockwell Family
Agency/Copyright ©1944
the Norman Rockwell
Family Entities

The anonymity of the lovers in *Soldier on Leave*, their faces averted from the viewer, enhances the universality of the sentiment. Rockwell's popular Willie Gillis series of eleven *Post* covers, featured between 1941 and 1946, followed the adventures of a slight, open-faced recruit from boot camp to the week he finally enters college on the celebrated G. I. Bill. Although Willie's face is distinctive, the charm of his adventures came in the ability of the reader to see a son, a brother, a father, a boyfriend in his un-extraordinary progress through the war. Willie gets parcels from home. He peels potatoes on K. P. duty. He basks in the attentions of pretty girls at the U.S.O. Willie, in short, is anybody, or everybody—the American Everyman in the service. He could, indeed, be that young airman on the train.⁸ By his attention to the sights and the feelings we share, Norman Rockwell helps us to see and to feel more acutely, to empathize more fully, to share in the life of an America at war in the summer of 1944.



Norman Rockwell,
1894–1978
Soldier on Leave (detail), 1944
Oil on canvas, 22 x 20 in.
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Robert
M. Boynton, 74.98
Printed by permission of the
Norman Rockwell Family
Agency/Copyright ©1944
the Norman Rockwell
Family Entities

Karal Ann Marling is Professor of Art History and American Studies, University of Minnesota.