MORALITY AND ASPIRATION: SOME CONDITIONS OF NORMAN ROCKWELL'S FOUR FREEDOMS

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ABSTRACT

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The compendium of scholarly investigation in art history woefully lacks acknowledgement of perhaps the most widely known American artist of the 20th century. Norman Rockwell created works that caused non-critics to identify with understanding their sense of American identity. Rockwell also created works that caused critics to mention him by name a chief arbiter of middlebrow repression. Rockwell's work would later be signposted as a callback to a mythical, simpler time in America. This research considers the aforementioned, exploring Rockwell's Four Freedoms, often recalled, reinvented and discussed as symbols of American morality and aspiration. Through a focused investigation of these four works, this research defines elements of "hyper-American" expression as a subsidiary of mid-century American kitsch. Rockwell's expressions of Americana define the rhetoric of self-realized identity that has been copied, popularized, examined, and re-examined in many areas of popular culture.

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My thanks to my parents in written words will always be woefully insufficient as they have done so much for me. My parents believed in me when many others did not. My parents gave me the confidence to remember my goals, to remain focused on the fruits of my sacrifice and the rewards of a steadfast work ethic, regardless of fear or distraction.

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INTRODUCTION

"This is the first pictorial representation I have seen of the staunchly American values contained in the rights of free speech and free worship and our goals of freedom from fear and want."
– President Franklin Roosevelt on: Rockwell's *Four Freedoms*[1]

Tagged as a "kitchmeister," Norman Rockwell (1894-1978) painted playful children, domesticated animals, cute families, blue-collar Americans, and, most importantly to his career, accessible Americans.[2] The gatekeepers of academia and the critics of the art world vehemently resisted the value of Rockwell's paintings during his career because of his work's mass popularity. Of Rockwell, critic Arthur Danto said that "his success was his failure."[3] Rockwell's work spanned seven decades of the 20th century and has been reproduced in popular memorabilia; in posters, calendars, puzzles, plates and other incarnations of commercial access. Many of his well-known paintings have become templates of communication—a language of signifiers used to essentialize, sentimentalize, question, or mock American identity.

While Rockwell painted some of the most iconic works of the twentieth century, these works would not gain their initial cultural prominence through the discerning eye of the avant-garde. Instead, Rockwell's work became a ubiquitous force of mass media and it would leave an indelible imprint within the American public. According to critic, Richard Halpern, the Rockwell brand still accounts for at least $20 million per year.[4] At the time of his death in 1978, Rockwell was an artist whose work Americans of every demographic had seen, although, as art

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[1] James McCabe and Stuart Murray. *Norman Rockwell's Four Freedoms: Images That Inspired a Nation*. (Stockbridge, Mass: Berkshire House Publishers, 1993), cover.

[2] Robert Hughes. *Nothing If Not Critical: Selected Essays on Art and Artists*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 231.

[3] Laure Norton Moffatt. Ed. Maureen Hart Hennessey and Anne Knutson. *Norman Rockwell: Pictures for the American People.* (High Museum of Art: Atlanta; The Norman Rockwell Museum: Stockbridge, Mass., Harry Abrams, Inc.: New York, 1999), 23.

[4] Halpern, Richard. *Norman Rockwell: The Underside of Innocence*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).134.

critic Robert Hughes stated, "practically none of his audience ever saw an original Rockwell."[5] As will be discussed here, Rockwell's work still provokes either mythical assumptions of anachronistic naiveté, or anti-propagandist cynicism.

Rockwell completed his first paid works of illustration almost thirty years prior to the 1943 publication of *Four Freedoms,* a collection of four works: *Freedom of Speech, Freedom of Worship, Freedom from Fear, and Freedom from Want,* inspired by President Franklin Roosevelt's speech in early 1941. By this time, Rockwell's illustrations were already well known as ubiquitous representations of American culture. He had earned over one million dollars painting for advertising agencies, and publications such as: *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Boys' Life* and of course, the *Saturday Evening Post*.[6] Referred to as his "Big Picture," Rockwell became obsessed with ways to visually convey Roosevelt's ideals.[7] As the origin story goes, Rockwell completed all four paintings by the end of 1942.

Freedom of Speech

Along with the memetic influence of Rockwell's *Freedom from Want (Figure 3)*, *Freedom of Speech* is one of the most recognizable of the *Four Freedoms* series. Rockwell quite often used people in his community to assist as figural stand-ins for his visions. Unlike the other three paintings, Rockwell used an actual event as the inspiration for *Freedom of Speech*.[8] Already commissioned to complete the *Four Freedoms* for the Saturday Evening Post, Rockwell attended a town hall meeting at which the citizens of Arlington, Vermont discussed the financing

[5] Hughes. *Nothing If Not Critical*, 231.
[6] McCabe and Murray. *Norman Rockwell's Four Freedoms,* 13.
[7] Laura Claridge, *Norman Rockwell: A Life*. (New York: Random House, 2001), 306.
[8] Brian Allen, "Freedom to Think & Freedom to Speak: A Rockwell Case Study" in *Enduring Ideals: Rockwell, Roosevelt & The Four Freedoms*, James J. Kimble and Stephanie Haboush Plunkett (New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 2018), 55.

to rebuild a local school.[9] In this well-attended town meeting, James Edgerton, a neighbor of Rockwell, was adamant in his recommendation that a new school not be built in lieu of budgetary concerns.[10] As will be addressed in chapter 1, while Edgerton was the inspiration behind "the speaker" in *Freedom of Speech*, it was Carl Hess, another neighbor of Rockwell, who was the figural model. In the analysis of this central figure of the composition, Chapter 1 will also discuss similar contextual "outsider" figures that parallel Rockwell's aspirations to transcend circumstance for a relatable, emotive response of American exceptionalism. One key comparative work in Chapter 1 explored in textual analysis will be Dorthea Lange's *Migrant Mother*, the iconic WPA photograph, produced in 1936, less than ten years before *Four Freedoms*. In discussion of this similarly mass produced work, we will understand similarities of circumstance, composition, and projection of meanings between *Migrant Mother* and *Freedom of Speech*. This will show how Rockwell's immersion in the current events at the time of *Four Freedoms* is reflected in these paintings. In addition, Chapter 1 will explore formal comparisons between the central figure in *Freedom of Speech* and Rockwell's later re-imagination of Abraham Lincoln, thereby connecting *Freedom of Speech* to later revisited themes of myth creation within the cultural legacy of Americana.

Freedom of Worship

Over the course of two months, Rockwell completed the second of the *Four Freedoms, Freedom of Worship.* Interested in subtle cues of diversity without stereotyping, Rockwell depicts a unified group of people, side profiles of men and women all facing left in the viewer's eye. Rockwell shows us various ages of supposed worshippers, (somewhat) varied ethnicities, all who could be characterized as praying to individual deities or one unifying one—a distinction

[9] Ibid, 56.
[10] Ibid, 58

in and of itself in the analysis to come in Chapter 2. Through the comparison of other works by Rockwell that are similar in theme or composition, this discussion will explain how Rockwell uses sentimental constructions of morality to create emotional resonance from American viewers as a conduit to his perception of Roosevelt's ideas. Inscribed atop *Freedom of Worship* are the words, "Each According to the Dictates of His Own Conscience." In discussion of conscience as a central focus for Rockwell, this research will include his paintings, *The Long Shadow of Lincoln* (1945), *The Golden Rule* (1961), *Saying Grace*(1951), and *Peace Corps: JFK's Bold Legacy* as examples of Rockwell's work that create a similar space of ideals as *Freedom of Worship.* This research will also examine an recent example of Rockwell's Americana in artist Kadir Nelson's, *SoTogether.*

Freedom from Want and Freedom from Fear

Both *Freedom from Want* and *Freedom from Fear* overtly feature the preservation of aspiration. Part of the discussion of these two works will be to note the historical differences between these two compositions as depictions of American life and the many differing realities for Americans in 1943. These two paintings are also depictions of intimate settings in the family home: family dinner and the children's bedroom. This discussion of these works will pose *Freedom from Want* and *Freedom from Fear* as representations of the private results of sacrifice.

In thinking of Rockwell's second pair of *Four Freedoms* paintings, Rockwell's work has often been perceived as sanitized middle-class idealism, depicting themes devoid of conflict or struggle, especially during the first half of his career. The attachment of superficial sentimentalism to Rockwell's work has itself been (too) superficially documented. Instead of debating Rockwell's intent based on the assumption of idealism, I will explore the dimensions of such a perception. This research investigates the prevalence of Rockwell's brand of kitsch to

contextualize *Freedom of Want and Freedom from Fear* as precedents of Americana, articulated in other arenas such as film, advertising, as well as the oeuvre of Rockwell works before and after *Four Freedoms*. In discussion of the significance of kitsch, intimacy, and consumerism, in *Freedom from Want* and *Freedom from Fear*, this research examines examples in popular culture in intersection with Rockwell's contributions in the visual culture of the midcentury middle class and mass consumerism. In my view, the prevailing scholarship has not thoroughly posed *Freedom from Want* and *Freedom from Fear* as a pair of ideals and projections of an American future. Instead, *Freedom from Want* in particular has been canonized as an unserious portrait of American middle class splendor, devoid of little commentary beyond cynical revisionism. This research will discuss and challenge the portrayal of *Freedom from Want and Freedom from Fear* as culturally narrow visual constructions, and build broader discussions of these paintings as precursors to an idealized suburban culture, and later essentialism through a revisionist lens of socio-political conservatism.

Four Freedoms and Norman Rockwell's Values

Cosponsored with the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1943, the United States Department of the Treasury featured Norman Rockwell's *Four Freedoms* paintings on a tour of sixteen cities, largely in department stores, which were important urban centers during World War II. Over 1.2 million people attended to view the four paintings, raising $133 million in war bonds by 1944.[11] While it was certainly the goal of the Department of the Treasury to raise funds for the war effort, it was also paramount to reiterate the shared the responsibility of all Americans in winning the war. Many of the displays alongside *Four Freedoms* at these events contained a focus of bond sales, defeating the enemy, and supporting American soldiers abroad. The *Four Freedoms*,

[11] Claridge, *Norman Rockwell: A Life*, 313.

however, represented a different approach in their appeal as value statements. At the top of the posters, the first two published images contained the titles, "Save Freedom of Speech" and "Save Freedom of Worship," while the bottom of each poster stated, "Buy War Bonds." The top of the last two posters stated the phrase, "OURS…to fight for" with each stating "Freedom from Fear" and "Freedom from Want" at the bottom, respectively. These posters addressed a moral sense of purpose and aspiration for citizens at home. Rockwell scholar, James McCabe views the relatability of Rockwell's representations of values as a different approach from President Roosevelt's speech. McCabe's description of the 1943 war bond show in Detroit encapsulates this notion of Rockwell localizing Roosevelt's abstract ideals. McCabe states:

> Rather than trying to build a compelling case for the president's high ideals, the artist's Four Freedoms started with the familiar and found connections to the ideal. By seeing the freedoms in familiar settings of everyday life, Detroiters found that they could grasp the ideals as their own. The wording of the slogans that accompanied the images on the bond posters framed the freedoms as something to be saved as well as to be built on. For viewers, Rockwell's images fostered personal connections with the president's Four Freedoms and laid the basis for the remarkable success of the Four Freedoms War Bond Show. The voluntary purchase of a bond was an affirmation of those ideals.[12]

McCabe here describes the ability for art to visually encapsulate ideals, however sanguine in its characterization. In this research, I will unpack these "personal connections" within *Four Freedoms* discussed by McCabe. In addition, McCabe's offering is important in understanding how Rockwell is able to concretize otherwise intangible ideas of patriotic sentimentalism. As examples, *Four Freedoms* serve as archetypes of such achievement in visually capturing idyllic American identity as reminders of present sacrifice and visions of a promising future.

While Rockwell's popularity is quantifiably known, there has been a relative dearth of investigation of his work, isolated from the context of other areas of cultural resonance. In light

[12] James McCabe, "Changing the Conversation in Detroit: Norman Rockwell's Four Freedoms & the Four Freedoms War Bond Show," in *Enduring Ideals: Rockwell, Roosevelt & The Four Freedoms*, James J. Kimble and Stephanie Haboush Plunkett (New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 2018), 100.

of interest in the *Four Freedoms* and Rockwell's work as paramount sites of investigation, this research heavily relies on the Laura Claridge's *Norman Rockwell: A Life*, and Deborah Solomon's *American Mirror: The Life and Art* of Norman Rockwell as primary biographical sources that each provide helpful perspective on the Rockwell's art and influence. Upfront, it must be stated that Claridge's work proves to be more expansive as it relates to this research compared to the detailed and thoroughly researched work of Solomon. Solomon's work absolutely provides more "color" to its preceding scholarship, but as will be discussed, this latest Rockwell biography presents needless editorializing that will be important to discuss in revealing misunderstandings of Rockwell's ideological expression in his work. While the historical record of scholarship well cites Rockwell's autobiography, *Norman Rockwell: My Adventures as an Illustrator*, this discussion of *Four Freedoms* will occasionally isolate and revisit Rockwell's own words, as they are important in the context of the myriad reiterations and revival of *Four Freedoms* throughout the 20th century, immediately post-9/11, as well as current day discussion of *Four Freedoms* in light of recent political expressions of American identities, partisan fragmentation, and schisms of racial and religious identities of the zeitgeist.

As mentioned here, much of the scholarship on Rockwell's work contains a focus on his life and the brands and events contextualizing his work, including *Four Freedoms*. Instead of comparing him to his American contemporaries in fine art, some compare him instead to Walt Disney or Frank Capra as arbiters of mass consumed imaginary middlebrow culture, much to the chagrin of art critics and cultural critics, alike. Some scholars portray his work as easy surface-level pandering, following the appeasement of the *assumed*, less-cultured, middlebrow consumer, as opposed to the assumed cosmopolitan cultural elite, a relationship relevant to contemporary discussions of *Four Freedoms* in the Conclusion.

Because of the ubiquity of his work, as well as, its generation of polarizing theoretical contexts, scholars use multiple terms describing it. Some refer to them as paintings, illustrations, or the more abstract, "images." The scholar, Richard Halpern explains his own conflict with choices of terminology, stating:

> And here I should admit to something of a terminological embarrassment when I try to name exactly what it is that Rockwell produces. I sometimes refer to them as "paintings," but for reasons just given that isn't quite right. "Images," a word I use more often, seems rather abstract and disembodied. Maybe "covers" is better (at least to denote his work for the Post), but that term would more accurately be applied to the final form of the cover, with the various article titles and other instances of text that were superimposed on Rockwell's images.[13]

Halpern jostles with a distinction here that is critical to other textual assessments of Rockwell's work and their importance. A blithe description of his work as ineffectual propaganda, used to project idealized versions of the American public does not consider the agency of viewers and their myriad interpretations of his work, both when published and in retrospect. Recent scholarship understands *Four Freedoms* as propaganda, but a full-stop at such a dismissal also reveals a view of his work as counter to another existing monolith that Rockwell fails to project, an assumption that falls short of critical analysis considering the commercial placement of much of Rockwell's work. As Halpern suggests, the meaningful point of evaluating Rockwell's work is not to identify singular, all-encompassing terms to define Rockwell or his images.[14] Rather, a more productive place, as it relates to this research, is to recognize underexplored complexities in the prior canonization of Four *Freedoms*. Once recognizing that the relationship between kitsch and fine art, or low, high, and middlebrow do not necessarily have equidistant relationships of economic and socio-cultural boundaries between them, how does Rockwell's work reflect such cultural relationships? To answer this question, this discussion will also understand *Four Freedoms* through the lens of comparison to other

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[13] Halpern, Richard. *Norman Rockwell: The Underside of Innocence*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.144.

[14] Ibid.

Rockwell works delineating themes of moral calling and capitalist destiny existing in Rockwell's illustration of American identity via exceptionalist framing(s) and the othering of figures of emphasis within those other compositions.

While the prevailing scholarship engages little comparison of *Four Freedoms* to other works of art, this discussion will examine non-Rockwell works existing in popular culture, some within a similar vein of political significance such as Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother*. Other non-Rockwell works of comparison will be discussed in efforts to identify themes of American family within Rockwell's similar inspiration of Americana. Because Norman Rockwell is now synonymous with the essentialism of the mid-twentieth century everyday American, it is important in this discussion to examine other examples of such visual representation to more specifically identify the significance of *Four Freedoms*, and to generally better understand distinctions of Rockwell's visual rhetoric. Here, the comparative analysis with Rockwell's other works will identify themes during his career that are relevant to *Four Freedoms*. The comparative analysis with non-Rockwell works will complicate the revisionist placement of Rockwell within American culture, while identifying a broader lineage of American kitsch.

This research will not be a general argument of validity or authenticity regarding the work of Rockwell. Proper categorization of Rockwell's work as a standalone focus is not of interest in this investigation of the *Four Freedoms* in that such compartmentalization does little to understand the culturally transactional relationships of these iconic works. These prevailing generalizations, however, will serve to build interest in Rockwell's provocative denotations of patriotism and cause, and the argument of this research that these denotations are primarily executed through existing norms of civic duty, moral compass, national security, and consumer identity.

Modernism, Rockwell and Art History

Norman Rockwell's career and popularity paralleled many contemporaries considered to be fine artists whose work spanned decades and multiple movements of artistic expression. Wanda Corn's *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935* serves as a methodological guide, exemplifying a fusion of historical narratives, cultural criticism and analysis of visual culture. Corn complicates American modernism's first American moment between World Wars I and II.

In a review of Corn's synthesis, Martha Bayles describes *The Great American Thing* as a fusion of two methods: the formal analysis and cultural theory. By combining the two, according to Bayles, Corn reveals a contradictory mix of motives for each object she scrutinizes, from Marcel Duchamp's work as a European inspiration, to Joseph Stella's painting of the Brooklyn Bridge or Georgia O'Keeffe's still life paintings. It is important to note here that Norman Rockwell's career begins during the 1920s, so the height of the popularity of his work among American consumers ranging from the late 1920s to the mid-1960s, coincided with certain movements discussed by Corn.

Corn examines the period of 1915-1935 and case studies in modernist art by dissecting areas of discourse of American exceptionalism. Through an examination of art and artists, Corn uproots critical notions of national identity as related to newly formed influences of European avant-grade artistic expressions, as well early formations of the individual in newly-formed urban spaces. In her exploration of early modernists she incorporates methods of art history without some of the terminology, exploring "Americanness" over stylistic connotations related to other established movements and methods utilized by critics and historians, a discussion relevant to understandings of Rockwell's *Four Freedoms*.

In a 1999 review of Corn's work, art historian Francis Frascina challenges Corn's "brief glosses on terms," referring to Corn's departure from strict adherence to traditional methods in art history, interchangeably, but purposely referring to modernists in a broad, abstract sense instead of the confines of her discipline.[15] While critical of Corn's use of queer studies and feminist theory, but lack of artists of color, Frascina praises Corn's detailing of artist's relationships with their work. For example, Corn uses the work of Raymond Williams' *The Politics of Modernism* explaining American photographer Alfred Stieglitz's adherence to avant-garde notions of expression. Stieglitz is a central figure throughout, with particular attention paid to his domineering relationship with famed artist, Georgia O'Keefe.

While American modernist artists come to prominence in the 1920s, Rockwell is early in his career, producing illustrations of American life for the *Saturday Evening Post*. In 2003, Frascina published a review of an exhibition of selections from Rockwell's most known works. In late 2001, following the national tragedy of 9/11, the *New York Times* published representations of Rockwell's work. Between Friday, November 2 and Saturday, December 1, *The New York Times* used five altered Rockwell images on seven separate days: 2, 4, 5, 6, 9, and 14th of November, and on December, including *Freedom from Fear*.[16] All of these altered images were located on the last page of the same section. On other days that page was used for different purposes, from photographs of Afghanistan to advertisements.[17] During November these images produced a temporary site of patriotism to which another was added. On November 22, the last page of 'A Nation Challenged', previously occupied by four in the series of altered Rockwell

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[15] Francis Frascina. Review of Review of *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity*, 1915-1935, by Wanda M. Corn. Archives of American Art Journal 39, no. 3/4 (1999): 32–41.

[16] Francis Frascina, "The New York Times, Norman Rockwell and the New Patriotism." *Journal of Visual Culture* 2, no. 1 (2003): 99–130.

[17] Ibid.

images, contained a message from the Whitehouse: 'Thanksgiving, 2001.' It was signed by President George W. Bush and Laura Bush, nod to *Freedom from Want*. As a reminder of the early context of Rockwell's work, Frascina offered the following:

> By 1939, images describable in terms of 'art anecdote' or of 'realism' were subjected to an intense critique in the face of a particular notion of the 'avant-garde': for Clement Greenberg (1939), writing in *Partisan Review*, Rockwell's images, and particularly those on the cover of *The Saturday Evening Post*, were examples of kitsch in its most manipulated capitalist form. Such covers, Greenberg argued, provided the 'uncultivated' spectator, the 'peasant' in industrialized societies, with what they want or, rather, with what they have been conditioned to want. These products of the culture industries provide easy pleasures and distractions depriving spectators of the critical rigors and complexities of avant-garde art. To be so deprived ensured a passive audience content with the media's moralizing narratives and stereotypes.[18]

Frascina's reminder views Rockwell's work as a cultural catch-all, emanating reminiscent images of a happier, calm, period of American stability—a time mostly created by Rockwell, not necessarily a reflection. As Frascina notes, Greenberg's avant-garde was threatened by the more malleable kitsch, a mass-produced formula of production machines, used to anesthetize the masses and distract them from the rigor of engagement with more sophisticated works of high art. Frascina's work allows for further investigation of the multiple meanings of Rockwell's work. Once known as kitsch, periodically revived, and recently re-imagined in an American post-9/11 context, the cultural production of Rockwell is a rich site to be understood using methodologies of art historians.

In 1999, the High Art Museum published *Norman Rockwell: Pictures for the American People*, a compilation of Rockwell paintings with commentary from various art historians. Wanda Corn offered a valuable explication of Rockwell's *The Connoisseur*, published on the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1962. The painting features an older man who appears to be looking at a painting in the style of Jackson Pollock. In her essay, Corn notes that in some

[18]Ibid.

cases, humor is usually the impetus behind other Rockwell paintings featuring onlookers of art. Corn supposes that the incongruity, an element of humor, lies in Rockwell's ability to juxtapose many opposing ideas in one painting. Titling the onlooker of the painting as "The Beholder," Corn says the following:

> The Painting is aggressive and assaulting; the Beholder, rooted to an earthbound tile, is passive and receiving. They are not natural partners but aliens confronting one another. However one wishes to describe it—chaos versus order, color versus line, Baroque versus classical, youth versus age, imagination versus male, immateriality versus material—Rockwell vested his illustration of a gentleman's encounter with an abstract painting with some of the grandest and most elementary conflicts in the universe.[19]

Corn mentions the Greenberg standard, relegating Rockwell's work as a shining representative of mass-produced, commercial art. Corn mentions Greenberg because he was a champion of Pollock's work. Corn supposes that Rockwell, in the latter years of his career, was well aware of his critics, well aware of his art as a symbol of kitsch, and well aware of contemporaries.[20] For this discussion, Corn and Frascina's analysis frame Rockwell as an actor with a purpose in his illustrations beyond the trite or sentimental for sentimentalism's sake. Corn's assessment will be important to remember in the discussion of *Four Freedoms* and its historical context. Corn's couching of Rockwell within the context of Greenberg's criticism, while understanding Rockwell's ability to place his work within the broader conversation of cultural critique allows us to understand Four Freedoms along a continuum of kitsch, and a continuum of Rockwell's conflation of idyllic scenes and politics.

If Corn's textual analysis tells us more about Rockwell's intentions, Richard Halpern's *Norman Rockwell: The Underside of Innocence* goes further. The thesis of Halpern's 2006 work is a "splitting" between Rockwell's personal life and his art. In Halpern's analysis, critiques of

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[19]Hennessey, Maureen Hart, Norman Rockwell, and Anne Classen Knutson. *Norman Rockwell: Pictures for the American People*. Atlanta : Stockbridge, Mass. : New York, N.Y: High Museum of Art ; Norman Rockwell Museum ; H.N. Abrams, 1999*, 87.*

[20] Ibid, 90.

Rockwell's paintings have changed. The "underside" for Halpern contains anxieties. Halpern says that in Rockwell's "anxieties about art and his status as an artist, a number of currents run together: anxieties about aesthetics, culture, commerce, region, social class, and, yes, sex."[21] Like Frascina's work, Halpern's work understands Rockwell's paintings in a 21st century context. Beyond biographical trivia, Halpern notes the varied distinctions or dichotomies present in Rockwell's work, illustrating complexities of class construction, commercial art, fine art, and sexuality, all revealing its inherent anxiety.[22] In doing so, Halpern describes a decontextualized space of Rockwell's work, once relegated as kitsch, now viewed through the lens of irony or humor or indulgence.[23]

Rockwell chose to create works of middlebrow taste, informed by familial relationships, aggrandizement of pious values, and romanticism of the local, hierarchically exalting the small town and a kit of accompanying social values over the fast-paced, secular, urban emergence of the seemingly unpatriotic. The framing of Halpern's "underside" gives cause for further investigations of Rockwell's *Four Freedoms*, historical narratives during the period of Rockwell's most prominent work, and cultural meanings elevated by this artist. Like Halpern, my goal will be to utilize methodological influences in the disciplines of history, cultural criticism, and art history, with more emphasis on the latter two. I will investigate disjointing of Rockwell's *Four Freedoms* from mythological constructions of American life, complicating the place of his work among the American public consciousness.

Cultural Criticism – Kitsch, Subculture, and Identity

In his seminal "A Theory of Mass Culture," cultural critic Dwight MacDonald theorizes the middlebrow. Posing Rockwell's work and the suburban Tudor home as analogues,

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[21] Halpern, *Norman Rockwell: The Underside of Innocence*, 134.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid, 135.

MacDonald explains the development and cultural dangers of mass culture. MacDonald speaks of mass culture as a set of phenomena that is "only good at the very beginning."[24] For MacDonald, culture has a pure form and a potent origin. Once diluted, the form becomes formulaic and sacrificed via mass production of facsimiles.

The "ooze" that bothers MacDonald is evidence of a lack of control, a merger without regulation of ownership. Hinting at the influence of de Tocqueville, MacDonald's primary theory is that mass culture methodically uses people for economic gain. He believes that besides the victimization of the masses, culture itself is sacrificed. Grossly generalized, one can think of postmodern architecture and the tendency to borrow rather than create anew. Thinking of kitsch, Las Vegas comes to mind, the Eiffel tower, pyramids, even poor imitations of Greek and Roman temples create an artificial environment probably worthy of MacDonald's disapproval. But if kitsch is MacDonald's foil, the "oozing" of high culture and mass culture, a landscape without barriers of status, creating a massive blank space of the middlebrow, the work of Rockwell, who is mentioned several times in his influential essay, exemplifies MacDonald discomfort.

While criticizing the ubiquity of *Life* magazine, discussing the limited, but valuable place of folk art or decrying the imminent danger of rampant middlebrow taste in television and film, MacDonald mentions the earlier work of well-noted art historian Clement Greenberg, who defined early cultural definitions of kitsch. Greenberg's seminal 1939 essay, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" has an understandably hyperbolic tone, given the time period and relative misunderstanding of mass culture. Greenberg implicates the *Saturday Evening Post*, where Rockwell published over 300 paintings of cover art, as a product of middlebrow taste. It's important to note that Greenberg was an influential voice of scholarship and expertise in many

[24] Dwight MacDonald. "A Theory of Mass Culture." *Diogenes* 1, no. 3 (1953): 1–17. doi:10.1177/039219215300100301. 72.

art movements during the very time of Rockwell's prominence. Questioning categorization of art movements Greenberg asks, "What perspective of culture is large enough to enable us to situate them in an enlightening relation to each other?"[25] Greenberg questions the enormity of cultural production and lack of sophistication in the development of taste as a result. Furthering his notion of a separation between high art and what would become the middlebrow, he states,

> Does the fact that a disparity such as this within the frame of a single cultural tradition, which is and has been taken for granted—does this fact indicate that the disparity is a part of the natural order of things? Or is it something entirely new, and particular to our age? The answer involves more than an investigation of aesthetics. It appears to me that it is necessary to examine more closely and with more originality than hitherto the relationship between aesthetic experience as met by the specific—not the generalized—individual, and the social and historical contexts in which that experience takes place.[26]

Thinking of the historical period of Greenberg's questioning, this "disparity," as a growing problematic trend, parallels critiques of a lack of stability and a troublesome fluidity between distinctions of taste. Per Greenberg, this reveals a desire for deeper critiques of cultural volatility. For both Greenberg and MacDonald, Rockwell's work signposts the all-encompassing, an empty ideal of expression, hollow and without significance. As we think of *Four Freedoms*, which would come five years after Greenberg's essay, Rockwell's method, and not his skill, was under question. Greenberg mocks kitsch as the overwhelmingly derivative, as a scourge of cultural production, and a steadily broadening departure from the progressive avant-garde, the supposed arbiter of style, taste, and culture. Greenberg presents an edict against a blurring, similar to MacDonald's "oozing," of democratic creation of culture. Rockwell's work represents the peril of cultural "civilization" in the view of Greenberg and MacDonald. The concern of this research is to engage with these critiques of Rockwell's works, ultimately defining Rockwell's *Four Freedoms* as a reactive framing of American ideals.

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[25] Francis Frascina. *Pollock and after: The Critical Debate.* 2nd ed.(London ; New York: Routledge, 2000).

[26] Ibid.

To engage in or perform within a subculture is to unearth dissent of some kind, be it moral, intellectual, or cultural. In the 1979, "Subculture: The Meaning of Style," critic Dick Hebdige explicates punk as an intersection of signs and behavior, explaining the figure. By exploring subcultural signs and the accompanying behavior of the owners of these signs, Hebdige, and the punk subculture, question the role of all signs in behavior as they relate to the context of American capitalism, and both the perception and reality of youth culture. Hebdige's 'commodity form' is the execution of new meanings or subverted existing meanings in order to contribute to a unified stance of a subculture. Rockwell's *Freedom from Fear* and *Freedom from Want* are applicable examples of the commodity form as both have been reinterpreted or interpolated to be "re-consumed." Instead of evaluating signs along the binary of good or evil, Hedbige explains signs as eventually commoditized or codified tools to be flexibly used for a selected agenda. Rockwell's first two paintings hit the American public consciousness decades ago but were codified and then re-appropriated. The post-9-11 use of *Freedom from Fear* is an example. Hebdige's 'ideological form' defines the behavioral execution of a subculture via public strategies of performance, which include signs but prioritizes reaction or provocation as the primary goal. *Freedom of Speech* and *Freedom of Worship* perform as signs of provocation in this way. Together, these two forms push a homology of codes and actions, exhibiting a socio-political and socio-cultural position exerted by choice instead of by force. Just as Hebdige poses a homology of codes within punk subculture, there is a homology of codes present in *Four Freedoms*, a homology of representations created to invoke meanings of American civic agency (*Freedom of Speech*), moral conscience (*Freedom of Worship*), consumer comfort (*Freedom from Want*), and national security (*Freedom from Fear*).

Prior to my specific investigation of *Four Freedoms*, scholarly conversations of the mid-twentieth century American home as a cultural symbol of consumer identity led to inquiries of other prosperity symbols and other parallels with visual representations of American identity. I considered discussions of material culture such as Lizbeth Cohen's *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America.* In *this* examination of Rockwell, we will examine parallels between the broader transactions of material culture and the elements of expression in *Four Freedoms,* especially in the analysis of *Freedom from Want* and *Freedom from Fear*. This scholarship informed later encounters with scholarship about Norman Rockwell and the cultural relevance of his work within mass culture.

Rockwell's images are representations of American identities cynically referred to as wholly fictional depictions or earnest symbols of American idealism. Through engagement with scholarship by art historians and cultural critics, Rockwell's more prominent illustrations of American ideals for the 20th century came to the fore. Some scholars point to President Roosevelt's *Four Freedoms* speech as a part of the discussion of the so-called "Greatest Generation." For many Americans, the Greatest Generation has been popularized by Tom Brokaw's best-selling books of interviews, adding to the mythology of those Americans whom were of age to serve in WWII and support the war effort. Kenneth D. Rose's work on the popular revisionism of this period is helpful in understanding the historical period of Rockwell's visualization of American citizenry. In Rose's *Myth and the Greatest Generation: A Social History of Americans in World War II*, Rose not only counters Brokaw's exalted profile of the Greatest Generation but, also provides detailed analysis of wartime family relationships and the complexities of military service, as opposed to the rote narrative of American patriotism through a simplified, revisionist lens. In discussion of the reasoning for the valorous narrative of World

War II-era Americans, Rose points to a romanticism of militarism.[27] Rose also identifies a concurrent mythology of a "home front idyll, where Americans during wartime eagerly put aside their class, race, and personal interests to unite as one for the war effort."[28]

The reframing, heightening, or in some cases, creation of the profile of wartime Americans is important in understanding the time of Rockwell's *Four Freedoms*, as inspired by President Roosevelt's speech. It is not, however, central to this research to rehash, prove, or disprove Brokaw's characterizations of Americans through the lens of revision. It is important to also accept Rose's explication of prevailing mythology to further understand the initial viewers of the *Four Freedoms* paintings versus later perception of the works. Because of the ubiquity of Rockwell's work before and after *Four Freedoms*, it is in the interest of this research to accept said characterizations during the war to then consider Rockwell's role in reassuring ideals or, as will be asserted here, *projecting* identities of American free speech, worship, prosperity, and security.

This study examines the *Four Freedoms* of Norman Rockwell, as a popular example of Americana relevant to mid-20th century understandings of kitsch and transactions of social capital. Through his use of the human figure, themes of American identity, as well various stylistic devices, this research will show *how* Rockwell illustrates particular idyllic constructions of morality and desire for this cultural moment. While the *Four Freedoms* denote Rockwell's meanings of Roosevelt's speech, these paintings connote the meanings of the "American Dream" or an exceptionalist formation of aspiration, mobility, and security. Employing methodologies present in the cultural criticism of kitsch, understandings of Rockwell's work in art history, and broader scholarship on the era of Rockwell's work, relative to historians of the 20th century, this

[27] Kenneth D. Rose*, Myth and the Greatest Generation: A Social History of Americans in World War II* (New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, LLC, 2008), 1.

[28] Ibid.

discussion of *Four Freedoms* includes an underside of fear in conversation with these works. Secondly, through comparative analysis, I will interrogate overlapping themes of sentiment and American identity. Thirdly, I will discuss a cultural history of the *Four Freedoms* as representations, cultural symbols, and future source material that others would use as representative placeholders of middle-class standards and American essentialism.

This research will be a cultural history of the *Four Freedoms* as core elements of a discussion of Rockwell's work, themes of class, worship, family and the middle-class. This research will add to the scholarly discussion of Rockwell's most well-known works, broadening the understanding of these works as expressions of American identity through the manipulation of moral sentiment, as represented by *Freedom of Speech* and *Freedom of Worship*, and popular themes of aspiration, as represented by *Freedom from Fear* and *Freedom from Want.* While each chapter pivots on the discussion on each of the four paintings in chronological order, this research employs broader distinctions, viewing these four cultural texts in halves. Here, we will respectively define the first two paintings, *Freedom of Speech* and *Freedom of Worship*, in the context of a "marriage" of American civic duty with Western ideals of religious practice. In lieu of this coupling, these first two paintings will anchor discussions other Rockwell works, other relevant cultural tomes, as well as, textual analysis of these two works as reflections of American identities to be protected, preserved, and maintained. The latter two works, *Freedom from Want* and *Freedom from Fear* will be discussed within the context of other antecedents in popular culture, as well as the relationship between national security and social mobility via consumerism, in midcentury America.

CHAPTER 1: FREEDOM OF SPEECH, MIGRANT MOTHER, AND THE DIVINITY OF CIVIC DUTY

Rockwell's *Freedom of Speech* (Figure 1) is one of the famous works of American art.[2930] While the following three of Rockwell's *Four Freedoms* were entirely created or "staged" by Rockwell, *Freedom of Speech* was the recreation of an event that Rockwell attended—a town hall meeting. When Norman Rockwell read the Atlantic Charter and its Four Freedoms proclamation, the eventual inspiration behind his *Four Freedoms*, he was initially inspired but found it hard to read, feeling limited by the "noble, platitudinous" language.[31]

Rockwell began his creation of the *Four Freedoms* as a cynic—in part he believed, despite his struggle to create sound ideas, that in spite of the media coverage surrounding President Roosevelt's Four Freedoms proclamation, "nobody" read the proclamation.[32] After re-reading the proclamation, he attended a town hall meeting in Arlington, Vermont. At the town meeting, the citizens of Arlington, Vermont discussed the financing of a new school, following a fire which severely damaged an existing school. The town hall would be a contentious debate and James Edgerton, a next door neighbor of the Rockwell family, was vehemently against the allocation of funds for a new school.[33] Both James and his wife Clara were natives of the Arlington area. The owners of a family farm, the couple made little income, like many during the Great Depression. Edgerton's financial struggle contextualizes Rockwell's choice as the

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[29] Norman Rockwell. 1943. Save Freedom of Speech. Buy War Bonds.. https://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.bgsu.edu/asset/LOCEON_1039797906.

[30] Brian Allen, "Freedom to Think & Freedom to Speak: A Rockwell Case Study," in *Enduring Ideals: Rockwell, Roosevelt & The Four Freedoms*, ed. Stephanie Haboush Plunkett and James J. Kimble (New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 2018), 55.

[31] Norman Rockwell, *Norman Rockwell: My Adventures As An Illustrator* [Harry Abrams Inc., (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc.,1988), 312.

[32] Ibid, 312

[33] Allen, "Freedom to Think & Freedom to Speak: A Rockwell Case Study," 56.

eventual figural model as "the speaker" in *Freedom of Speech*. Edgerton was not the only dissenter, but he was in the minority as the vote in favor of a new school was passed 119 to 15.[34]

After mulling over ideas, Rockwell recalled that his neighbor "had stood up in a town meeting and said something that everybody else disagreed with."[35] As Rockwell recalls, speaking of Edgerton, the man was able to speak and "no one shouted him down."[36] This epiphany set Rockwell on a rigorous two-month course to create *Freedom of Speech*. He completed four versions, each featuring a tall, working-class male speaker standing among his seated more professionally-dressed neighbors. This chapter explores the dichotomy of the earnest, working-class speaker and his professional class fellow citizens, as cast by Rockwell in *Freedom of Speech*. *Freedom of Speech* parallels representations in Rockwell's other renderings of Abraham Lincoln as well as another well-known image of the downtrodden underdog—Dorthea Lange's *Migrant Mother*. This discussion explains *Freedom of Speech* as a composition of articulated themes of Americana, highlighting an intersection of morality in step with sentimentalist constructions of civic duty.

Freedom of Speech and Rockwell's Town Hall Orchestration

Known for sentimentalizing visual narratives of American mythos, Rockwell's *Freedom of Speech* idealizes the democratic process within the context of the town hall, itself a mythologized setting of harmonious legislation and the perceived fairness of bureaucracy. Like the bulk of Rockwell's most known works, *Freedom of Speech* contains a glamourized articulation of plainness. Every hair is in place, each figure in their places as the figural center, the speaker, rises (both physically and symbolically) as an example of the First Amendment of the United States Constitution.

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[34] Ibid, 59.
[35] Rockwell, *Norman Rockwell: My Adventures As An Illustrator*, 313
[36] Ibid.

The figural crowd sits in front of a blackboard, indicating the classroom as the setting in *Freedom of Speech*, a choice both indicative of Rockwell's inspiration, the town hall, as well as, a (perhaps paternal) nod towards "teaching" viewers and an egalitarian sense of learning. The classroom as a setting also fits in line with Rockwell's penchant for a utopian sense of innocence as represented in his depictions of young children. Critics have various views on whether such kitschy depictions of innocence are in good faith by Rockwell. *Freedom of Speech*, however, is fairly straight-forward in its formation of a utopian ideal. Rockwell illustrates the moment before the standing man speaks. The crowd sits, each looking toward the speaker who looks up, perhaps in frustration, if we are thinking of Edgerton as a dissenting minority in the town hall. Rockwell himself flanks the very back left of the seated crowd, with one eye and one ear toward the speaker. The white-haired man's head in the bottom left corner of the composition frames an over-the shoulder lens for viewers. Viewers are thereby placed in the crowd, looking over-the-shoulder as the man stands. The backing of the horizontal seating frames the speaker's dirty hand, anatomically stylized in Rockwell's visual rhetoric of technical mastery and expression of Americana. The seating parts the crowd for the viewer, showing the hands of Rockwell's speaker as illustration of speaker's anxiousness, anger, or enthusiasm, for the topic at hand. Brian Allen, scholar and current resident of Arlington, Vermont describes Rockwell's detailed composition, noting:

> The scene is decisively anchored by the rectangle of figures that compose the lower half of the picture and the modified triangle formed by the speaker himself. It has what I call a skyscraper design, with a central tower flanked by two wings. Yet the zipper, jacket seam, and uplifted faces provide thrust. The overall picture is designed as a grid, with verticals—ties, the sides of the speaker's arms, the seams and shirt zipper and the left side of blackboard—crossed by horizontals—the top of the bench, the jacket's fitted and buttoned hem, the speaker's broad shoulders, and so forth. The design is both stable and dynamic, and as a composition it is economical and effective.[37]

[37] Brian Allen, "Freedom to Think & Freedom to Speak: A Rockwell Case Study," 59-60.

Allen's "skyscraper design" contains the narrative conflict of the seated crowd, surrounded by the seated professional men in coat and tie, versus the rising speaker. The "thrust" is a reinforced verticality, pointed to the speaker as representative of the group. While stable as a composition through a grid of horizontal and vertical forms, as Allen notes, Rockwell's modeling of the speaker could read to viewers as pride or bravery. The speaker appears upright, shoulders back and chest forward, addressing not only the crowd, but also addressing the matter at hand. While the speaker looks into the distance and up, a nod toward aspiration and betterment, Rockwell's eye to the left and the man at the far right form a triangle, as Allen mentions.[38] The blue booklets in the composition also form an overlapping, inverse triangle. The blue booklet in the pocket of the speaker and in the hands of the seated others in the frame are identical to the Annual Report of the Town Officers of Arlington, Vermont in 1941.[39] To the viewer, the booklets illustrate the bond of a common goal not unlike the later discussion of *Freedom of Worship*. With booklet in pocket the speaker appears studied on the topic at hand, now prepared to opine among the citizens of his community. While the speaker has the same the booklet as the others, his pocket is folded open, indicating that he has read enough to be called to speak among the congregation. Diagrammatically, Rockwell creates another notable formation of interlocking figures. The speaker's booklet parallels the angle of the head of the onlooker at the bottom right, whose booklet parallels the upward direction of the speaker's head. This same onlooker's booklet points toward the third booklet in the composition, which sits at angle paralleling the most prominent onlooker to the left of the speaker. These linked figures create a tapestry, joining the tasks and problems of the moment represented by the booklet with the democratic cooperation of the people.

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[38] Ibid, 59.
[39] Ibid, 58.

Rockwell additionally creates a moment of dramatic imagery through the eyes of his cast. Allen poses that certain anatomical details present in Freedom of Speech are no accident. Posing a symbolic connection of eyes and ears, Allen states:

> The proliferation of eyes, including Rockwell's, in the far left by the blackboard, are perhaps more obvious at first glance. Nearly the uppermost figure in the group, aside from the speaker, Rockwell the artist essentially reserved for himself the bird's-eye view. Unusually, we see an abundance of ears, too. They are big and judiciously framed. The blackboard edge points to Rockwell's. The faceless figure on the lower left is not entirely all ears, so to speak, but his left ear is rendered with miniaturist bravura. In many ways, the picture concerns both seeing and listening—which are perfectly appropriate motifs for an image devoted to what Roosevelt called, in his Four Freedoms message, "freedom of speech and expression."[40]

Each eyebrow of each figure in the composition is exaggeratedly raised and wispy in familiar Rockwell-like fashion. Rockwell's dialectal use of eyes signals adulation for the (free) speaker. The "big and judiciously framed" ears are a staple in other Rockwell works. Rockwell casts entire ensembles of character actors to intensify the sentimental voyeurism of viewers. Viewers empathize with Rockwell's imperfect American characters, evoking participation in their viewership. In other Rockwell works, particularly those featuring children, the sinuous eyebrows and wide-open eyes typically indicate the type of kitsch Rockwell's detractors dismiss as insincere expressions of empty happiness via patronizing cynicism. In *Freedom of Speech*, the eyes of the speaker are comparatively sober, another representation of the plainness of the everyman. Aesthetically, viewers see the uniform ruggedness in the facial expression of *Freedom of Speech*'s figures as the characterization of earnest American interest in democracy. Each citizen in the composition is hyper-engaged and attentive with concern for the second after this illustrated snapshot of free speech. Each surface of skin rendered by Rockwell contains depth, where Rockwell uses anatomical modeling itself as a vernacular of American character. Allen's description Rockwell as a New England regionalist painter is important in understanding

[40] Ibid, 60-61.

Rockwell's articulation of morality via a dynamic visual language of now canonized Americana. The facial repeated expression of the seated crowd itself is evidence of Rockwell's oft-used dialect of Americana.

Arthur Danto (1924-2013), an art critic, and consultant on Laura Claridge's' Rockwell biography, *Norman Rockwell: A Life*, says that Rockwell's effectiveness "is not simply what takes place on the canvas. It is what goes on between the canvas and the viewer."[41] Further, Danto claims that, "Rockwell was one of the supreme masters of that space, an eroticist of human feeling, a rhetorician of visual persuasion."[42] Danto's description of Rockwell's manipulation of human feeling indicates alluring elements of expression. *Freedom of Speech* appeals to an idealistic self-identity of the American viewer, examining a singular virtue of civic action. Like the other three *Four Freedoms* paintings, Rockwell's "Big Idea" was not to convey the ordinariness of circumstances in American life. Rather, the goal was to portray a heightened, desired ideal of American character. For Rockwell, the speaker is the physical embodiment of utopian democratic exercise. The similarly articulated physical features of the figures, including the likeness of Rockwell himself, create this ensemble of onlookers, including the viewer, as they all await the comments of speaker.

Understanding Danto's assertion of Rockwell as an instigator of rhetorical conversation with utopian American ideology in a 20th century context, Rockwell projects a duality: an exceptionalist American sentimentalism of free expression alongside the Judeo-Christian notion of testifying before a higher power. The result of such a parallel construction is the near-conflation of a twofold calling or submission to democracy. This secular composition of confession visualizes the obligation of the American citizenry. The rhetoric of *Freedom of*

[41] Danto, Arthur, "Age of Innocence: Norman Rockwell's oeuvre is deceptively simple—the self-proclaimed 'illustrator' had more depth than he's credited for.," The Nation, December 20, 2001.

[42] Ibid.

Speech, and the speaker, reminds the citizenry of their nationalistic perception of self. This process of reiteration deliberately incites existing models of patriotism via dogmatic notions of government power and moral conscience, evoking what Allen refers to as, "the quality of a secular sacrament."[43]

The Speaker

Rockwell poses the central "speaker" as a meek believer in his message with an overly earnest expression almost ashamed to expose the truth of the matter at hand. As mentioned, Rockwell's neighbor, James Edgerton was the man who stood up to speak in the town hall meeting. But combined with the in-studio model, Carl Hess, Rockwell also created a central figure resembling former President Abraham Lincoln, perhaps an allusion to the "Honest Abe" mythological everyman persona represented in narratives of popular culture or the post-mortem revisionism of Lincoln as a political figure. The speaker looks far above his eye-level as if speaking to a judge in a courtroom or a higher power. The raised head of the speaker tells us that he is drawn to quite literally speak truth to power. He appears disheveled against the backdrop of two men, one flanked on each side with an expression indicating interest in the speaker's offering; his confession and testimony. The speaker is a metaphorical representation—he signifies the limitless possibilities of the American democratic process as opposed to an oppressive alternative. The others look on, as the speaker begins what seems to be an unknown, but respected and welcomed offering at Rockwell's artificially purified altar of American democracy—the town hall. Per Allen, this is a fitting setting for Rockwell-as-regional-realist.

Rockwell draws a contrast between the Honest Abe speaker and those seated both in a binary of high versus low as well as class distinction creating the sentiment of free speech.

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[43] Brian Allen, "Freedom to Think & Freedom to Speak: A Rockwell Case Study," 63.

Rockwell illustrates the romanticized belief in free speech often generally attached to the mythology of the Founding Fathers in the popular imagination of the American public. The juxtaposition of class opposites in the center frame is a reminder of what the war effort preserves and what Americans should value. This ideal, this moment when the so-called everyday man can raise his hand and have his voice heard leads the viewer to sentimentalize one's unequivocal allegiance to democracy despite ideological and socioeconomic difference.

This understanding of the United States as a place where issues, opinions, ideas, and arguments can be addressed by any citizen, and be considered with quiet, almost gleeful respect is the core of Rockwell's goal in *Freedom of Speech*. Despite the onlookers, despite what seems to be an exaggerated notion of submission to a higher power, and despite Rockwell's illustration of the "speaker" as a working class figure, the man is able to speak unencumbered. Via presentation, Rockwell wants the viewer to see that this opportunity is in jeopardy. Through his use of light and individualized, differentiated facial expressions, Rockwell signifies a divinity of free speech, awarded to each American citizen, but questioned in this moment of global uncertainty that is World War II. Speaking to compositional ambiguity regarding interpretations of *Freedom Speech*, Rockwell biographer, Laura Claridge explains:

> Presumably based on Rockwell's oft-quoted inspiration for the piece, this was a town meeting where his neighbor was politely listened to in spite of dissenting opinions, and the seated citizens looking up at the speaker have various opinions themselves. The American ideal that the painting is meant to encapsulate shines forth brilliantly for those who have canonized this work as among Rockwell's great pictures. For those who find the piece less successful, however, Rockwell's desire to give concrete form to an ideal produces a strained result.[44]

Claridge points to the mixed messages and varied opinions of *Freedom of Speech*. For Claridge, the significance of the class distinction illustrated via the clothing of the standing man and the other seated citizens in the foreground of the painting is Rockwell's visual communication of

[44] Laura Claridge, *Norman Rockwell: A Life* (New York: Random House, 2001), 306.

idyllic American democracy. Viewers are to see the speaker as a social "other" with whom we should identify as plain-spoken with sound reasoning –a voice that deserves to be heard…because he is an American. Could the speaker be "staring at the heavens," as Claridge intimates? To critics, the men looking at the speaker as he were a celebrity as opposed to one likely to respectfully disagree.[45] While Claridge questions the motive and placement of the speaker and his fellow citizens, Deborah Solomon, author of *American Mirror: The Life and Art of Norman Rockwell*, goes further in criticism:

> Is the painting credible? Not completely. It seems unlikely that established banker types would be trying to glean wisdom from an ordinary worker. Moreover, with his eyes cast skyward, the speaker looks a little frozen, as if he belongs to another painting; he could be standing in a field of corn at night, or preaching to the birds along with St. Francis of Assisi. *Freedom of Speech* remains an extraordinarily popular painting and can be described without hyperbole as the defining image of American democracy in progress. On the down side, it is compromised by a near absence of women, making it look as much like a meeting of aging male Elks or Rotarians as the varied citizenry of an American town.[46]

Solomon's assessment misses that Rockwell's goal is to frame the rural outsider as the celebrity and the two men as his celebrants—extensions of the viewer. The man slightly out of frame in the bottom left corner sits beside the viewer. The viewer, like the seated man on the right, looks over the right shoulder. The viewers are to be similarly mesmerized in awe of the speaker's testimony. Solomon mentions the unlikely behavior of the "banker types." Both Solomon and Claridge note that speaker, as well as his gaze, is out of place. What both of these observations miss is Rockwell's hyperrealist visual rhetoric of American identity. The desire of "credibility" or striving to pose Rockwell's work as an accurate portrayal of American life fall short of

[45] Ibid.

[46] Deborah Solomon, *American Mirror: The Life and Art of Norman Rockwell* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 207.

understanding Rockwell's visual language, and perhaps his intended discourse with American viewers via their collective utopian sentiment.

Carl Hess, the model for the speaker, owned a gas station in Arlington, Vermont.[47] According to Gene Pelham, a Rockwell collaborator during the period, Hess had a "noble head," and was also the owner of the suede jacket depicted in *Freedom of Speech*, an ideal compositional element in the creation of the speaker, a vehicle of earnest, experienced, knowing honesty.[48] *Freedom of Speech* does create a particular binary illusion of inclusiveness—two classes of white men. As Solomon bluntly notes, *Freedom of Speech* contains a very near absence of women.[49] But in some compositional choices made by Rockwell, *Freedom of Speech* resembles a preceding work of art, one that is also a landmark representation of American life, as well as an American icon of womanhood.

Migrant Mother and the "Speaker"

Dorthea Lange, a New Jersey-born photojournalist is best known for her iconic documentation during the Great Depression, capturing a spectrum of humanity in her subjects. In her award-winning biography, *Dorthea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits*, Linda Gordon argues that one of the most important features of Lange's photography is Lange's framing of democracy.[50] Gordon refers to Lange's focus on the dynamics of an individual's humanity rather than said individual's material possessions. In 1936, seven years prior to the release of Rockwell's *Four Freedoms*, Dorthea Lange (1895-1965) met Florence Thompson (1903-1983), a Native American Okie who would be the focus of the now-iconic *Migrant Mother* photograph. While photographing farm workers for the Farm Security Administration (FSA), an organization

[47] Solomon, *American Mirror*, 207.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Gordon Beyond Limits, xiii

created to raise awareness of the destitute conditions of rural Americans, Lange met Thompson by chance. After originally driving past a pea-pickers camp in Nipomo, California where Thompson lived, Lange went back to the camp as she felt that she could meet subjects befitting her assignment and general musings.[51] Upon meeting Thompson, Lange learned that Thompson, and her four children were living eating stolen food to survive.

Thompson's narrative, in addition to her prominence in *Migrant Mother* is relevant to our discussion of Rockwell's speaker in that Lange's framing of Thompson exhibits a similar heroic portrayal of the have-not. Thompson, the gaunt, real-life figure, like the fictional "speaker," is deep in thought, almost to a point of panic. In comparison of the two figures, one photographed, one painted, we see that both are centered in composition, posing each as either in positions of power of debilitating vulnerability. Gordon tells us that the children in *Migrant Mother* anchor Thompson in peril and that Lange's particular inclusion of the children around Thompson ensured that Thompson's face was the focal point. Gordon claims that Lange "was building the drama and impact of the photograph by forcing the viewer to focus entirely on Florence Thompson's beauty and anxiety, and by letting the children's bodies, rather than their faces, express their dependence on their mother."[52]

Like Thompson, Rockwell's speaker is bound by two figures. Each is at his side, with both connected by surprise and anticipation of what he may say. If we look at the faces of the speaker and Thompson, each is dark in complexion and in expression. Thompson stares into the distance, hand placed on chin, signifying uncertainty, slightly squinting from the sun's glare or perhaps, given her backstory, from sleep deprivation. She appears physically fragile as her children look away, clinging to her. Thompson's posture contrasts the children. Together we

[51] Gordon, Beyond Limits, 236
[52] Gordon, Beyond Limits, 237.

read the photograph as a mother struggling to protect her children from further calamity. We see further context in one of the children's hands atop Thompson's left shoulder. The child's fingers are covered in dirt but cover the child's face, indicating the child's vulnerability to poverty, and that such luxuries as a child's cleanliness have been comprised during the Thompson's travels.

Comparatively, both Rockwell and Lange created these works as calls to action for Americans to redouble their moral imperatives of American identity. These two artists use civic duty as a medium. For Lange, the sight of a mother with her children unclean and disheveled frames a shocking contrast to existing ideals of twentieth-century American civility, domesticity, and modernity. The image of a mother caring for her child in *Migrant Mother* contradicts 20th century signs of material upkeep, yet this photograph provides a rich, legacy of class distinctions and religious ideologies. Explaining the gendered associations of *Migrant Mother* and its iconography, Gordon elucidates:

> The image evokes several powerful historical ideas and clichés about motherhood, all of them highly ideological. Her children lean on her because she is a pillar of strength. Not only do they lean on her but there is no space separating the four members of this family; they have become, as they began, one flesh. The mother's worry expresses her need to nurture and protect them at any cost. Nothing will induce her to walk away from her motherly responsibility. Like so many other mothers, she has worked hard but reaped no reward or security. She is overpowered by circumstances she cannot control. She is absolutely innocent of any blame. We somehow know that she has already done her utmost and is in danger of running out of survival strategies. She may even strengthen associations of women with weakness, as she is paralyzed with anxiety rather than active. More, she is at the center of a holy family.[53]

Just as Gordon illustrates the visual rhetoric of the children and oneness with their mother, we can see a similar metaphorical relationship between Rockwell's speaker and the two men at his sides. Rockwell wants the viewer to value the personal relationships in *Freedom of Speech*. Just as Lange projects the relationship between mother and child as insecure, or in peril, Rockwell

[53] Gordon, 238

projects the speaker as a pillar of democracy, also in peril during World War II. While dressed in more expensive clothes emanating more economic prosperity, the two men visually look to the speaker with anticipation of providing the next step in agreed upon experience of civic duty. Lange's group of three illustrates the fragility of an American mother's civic duty to care for children. Rockwell's group of three projects a reminder of the ideal of democracy through a stylized reality of civic duty in practice. The goal in each case is to remind the viewer of exceptional views of American identity. Just as Gordon tells us that Thompson is absolved of any blame and overpowered by that which she cannot control, Rockwell's speaker is similarly vulnerable in his moment of free speech. Lange and Rockwell cast these two figures as moral idols, both doing what they are "called" to do, regardless of means or circumstance. Lange's composition frames Thompson's face as a focus of empathy, followed by sympathy, then later symbolically exalted in American popular culture. Rockwell offers the speaker as a figure of admiration through his ability to speak, despite Rockwell's placement of the speaker in environs we do not think he frequents. The mutual ideal in the two compositions of this discussion is preservation. Just as Lange and the FSA endorsed *Migrant Mother* as a warning to uphold American (and per Gordon, Judeo-Christian) values, Rockwell, the Office of War Information (OWI), and the *Saturday Evening Post* posed *Freedom of Speech* as a call to preserve and reiterate notions of American exceptionalism.

Rockwell's speaker could be seen as the fictional husband or brother of Lange's *Migrant Mother*. They are a pair both created to be worshipped as two different examples of distinctly American constructions of resiliency. Each figure represents a relative everyday identity, despite the fact that Rockwell's speaker and *Migrant Mother* are very specific constructions of American ideals in times of crisis; *Migrant Mother* during the Great Depression and Rockwell's speaker

during World War II. In *American Mirror: The Life and Art of Norman Rockwell*, Deborah Solomon refers to class differences between the central figure and the two seated men in *Freedom of Speech*, noting clothing differences and. While providing some rumination about the composition, Solomon's analysis of *Freedom of Speech* rings hollow in its nod towards innuendo over scholarly analysis. Generously speculating without proper consideration of Rockwell's visual language or historical context, Solomon opines:

> The men around him are dressed in white shirts, ties, and jackets and presumably have wives and children—in the lower right, a man's pale, plumb fingers and wedding ring receive undue visual emphasis. But the speaker isn't wearing a ring. He is unattached and sexually available, unbuttoned and unzipped. So what we have here is a scene of town fathers listening respectfully to a swarthy, sunbaked, blue-collar neighbor, an outsider from the working class and maybe a person of ethnicity (Italian? Greek?) who isn't afraid to think for himself or to stand alone and who represents both the promise of the town and a threat to its genteel homogeneity.[54]

Solomon ignores the context of *Freedom of Speech*. Because of the criticism of Rockwell's work as a timestamp of mid-twentieth century Americana, in the past as well as in contemporary terms, Solomon's speculation is an act of subversion as a scholarly intervention, projecting such subversion upon Rockwell. But Solomon's melding of obvious details with sexualized speculation does not usurp an understanding the symbolism which lies in this painting and the reality of its inspiration. In a 2014 issue of *The Berkshire Eagle*, James Edgerton Jr. contributed his perspective as a neighbor of Rockwell. Edgerton Jr., who is the son of James Edgerton, challenged Solomon's commentary on *Freedom of Speech*. Edgerton notes that in "the painting, you cannot see the complete left hand (ring finger) of Carl Hess, and even if you could, he probably would not be wearing a ring. He was a mechanic and likely would not wear a ring around motorized equipment." Scholars of Rockwell, other than Solomon, understand his speaker in *Freedom of Speech* as more than a cynical threat to homogeneity. The comparison of

[54] Solomon, *American Mirror*, 207.

Rockwell's speaker to Lange's *Migrant Mother* avoids such myopia often stated in reference to Rockwell because of the popularity of his work. The prominence of the seated man's hand with a wedding band aids the three-point perspective of the composition, reiterating placement of the viewer as a part of the town hall. If the hand provides "undue visual emphasis," as Solomon poses, it does so to an end.

Lincoln and the Speaker

Known for prior creation of utopian circumstances of American sentimentalism, Rockwell produced some of his more socially conscious work, during the 1960s. In 1965, he created *Murder in Mississippi*, which focused on the killing of three civil rights workers. Rockwell's 1967, *New Kids in the Neighborhood* featured suburban children, black and white, facing each other in a new, desegregated American landscape. One of his more well-known paintings during the 1960s was *The Problem We All Live With*, a recounting of the story of Ruby Bridges, the first African American child to integrate an elementary school in the American South.[55] In *The Problem We All Live With*, like *Freedom of Speech*, Rockwell recreated a composition based on an actual moment in history, exemplifying American civility. But while the 1960s has been framed as his period of engagement with "visual documentation of contemporary issues," *Freedom of Speech*, and its invocation of Abraham Lincoln as a figural muse, is an example of earlier engagement with socially conscious symbolism.[56]

Freedom of Speech and *Freedom of Worship*: Dual Imagination of Citizenship

Freedom of Speech and *Freedom of Worship* represent two ideals joined by an egalitarian understanding of moral discipline. The first, *Freedom of Speech*, features the visual rhetoric of

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[55] Stephanie Haboush Plunkett and Ruby Bridges, "Ruby Bridges and The Problem We All Live With" in *Enduring Ideals: Rockwell, Roosevelt & The Four Freedoms*, ed. Stephanie Haboush Plunkett and James J. Kimble (New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 2018), 55.

[56] Ibid.

an outsider who triumphantly rises to speak in a public forum of his fellow citizens, framing a singular, simplistic example of democracy in-practice. The second, *Freedom of Worship* features a varied group, all worshipping in unison. For Rockwell and viewers at the time, these first two paintings exemplify the freedoms that Americans should strive to maintain, celebrate, and protect during the Second World War. Rockwell does not address free speech and religious freedom exclusively to invoke pride without direction. Rather, they are warnings. As we will discuss further, Rockwell uses contrasting compositional elements, as well as dynamic figural expression to call to an American citizen's essentialized sense of democracy as a vocation. For Rockwell, it is the divine calling to the American viewer to preserve his romanticized imagery inherent in these works.

The first two of Rockwell's *Four Freedoms* paintings contain such themes of as: a mythologized mutual understanding of American identity, and the dedication to uphold two virtues: free expression, and choice of religious worship. According to Ben Hibbs, Rockwell's editor at the *Saturday Evening Post*, the first two paintings, *Freedom of Speech* and *Freedom of Worship*, are artistic expressions worthy of designation among Western conventions of 'high' art. Quoted in Rockwell's autobiography, *Norman Rockwell: My Adventures as an Illustrator*, Hibbs says:

> Many people have asked me whether I regard the 'Freedom of Worship' and the 'Freedom of Speech' as great art. I do. Norman himself probably would disagree. He has always modestly labelled himself an 'illustrator' with no pretensions to fine art. I suspect art critics would say that those two pictures are excellent examples of an illustrator's work at its best, but not great art. I am no art critic, but I still disagree. To me they are great human documents in the form of paint and canvas. A great picture, I think is one which moves and inspires millions of people. The Four Freedoms did—and do.[57]

[57] Ibid. 317.

It is reasonable to assume that Hibbs' opinion of Rockwell's work was biased in favor of Rockwell. But as Rockwell details the period in which he created these paintings, he chooses to include this and other commentary from Hibbs to speak for him in his autobiography, indicating Rockwell's shared understanding of these first two paintings and their primary meanings. The paring of *Freedom of Speech* and *Freedom of Worship* here is to note Rockwell's illustration of formally prescribed virtues as opposed to his more frequent framing of the everyday. Hibbs notes this intersection in his description of "human documents."[58] Rockwell illustration of freedom of speech frames the circumstantial as evidence of morality in action. *Freedom of Speech* visually captures an ideal to invoke and remind the American viewer of who they are, and therefore what ideals they should embrace. Critically, this ideal is flawed in its lack of representation of women and ethnic minorities, which has been said of much of Rockwell's work. In further examination of *Freedom Speech*, however, Rockwell's composition contains a varied collection of ideas to be examined.

[58] Ibid.

CHAPTER 2: FREEDOM OF WORSHIP: SENTIMENT AND VULNERABILITY

"The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way—everywhere in the world." – President Roosevelt (Four Freedoms speech)

Rockwell was unsure where he read the phrase he inscribed across the top of *Freedom of Worship*. (Figure 2)[59] Claridge posits that Rockwell likely borrowed the phrase "Each According to the Dictates of His Own Conscience" from the "Thirteen Articles of Faith" by Joseph Smith, the founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, commonly known as the Mormon Church.[60] Nonetheless, Rockwell's invocation of "conscience" as a catalyst for support of World War II leaves a sense of irony that, while relevant, is somewhat outside of the scope of this discussion. Rockwell's lifting of religious text reveals an ideologically hypercritical framing by invoking notions of a greater good for some groups, favoring the destruction of others. Themes more central to this discussion are Rockwell's stylistic and contextual departures from norms within viewers' familiar recognition of his work.

While much of Rockwell's work places the viewer in an identifiable, if not familiar setting, *Freedom of Worship* does not provide viewers with such an orientation. Each of the other three compositions contains a geographic, photorealistic context of expression, while *Freedom of Worship* contains softer tones of a more limited palette of color, perhaps muting a sense of individualism of the symbolic figures and instead weaving a tapestry of prayerful Americans. But what do we make of Rockwell's choice of visual language, projecting the message of religious pluralism, given the context of the other images of the set? What can be gleaned from this and other works of Rockwell's with a similar composition and portrayal of

[59] Norman Rockwell. 1943. Save Freedom of Worship. Buy War Bonds.. https://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.bgsu.edu/asset/LOCEON_1039797905.

[60] Claridge, *Norman Rockwell: A Life*, 312.

American idealism? How does Rockwell dictate emotional resonance from his American viewers? Borrowing from Richard Halpern's *Norman Rockwell: The Underside of Innocence*, this chapter will detail Rockwell's "disavowal," the denial of certain contexts to present a singular one. In his explication of Rockwell's manipulation of innocence, As Rockwell uses the term "conscience" as a plea to the viewer's understanding of American moral duty, Halpern suspects that Rockwell's *Freedom of Worship* is insincere.[61] For this discussion, Halpern's skepticism is not as important as his understanding of the absence of context in *Freedom of Worship*.

Freedom of Worship contains similarities to others of Rockwell's works— *The Long Shadow of Lincoln* (1945), *The Golden Rule* (1961), *Peace Corps*, *Saying Grace* (1951). Their similar expression of "conscience," as the inscription notes on *Freedom of Worship*, helps us to understand a constant theme of American morality in Rockwell's work. This discussion will also examine *So Together*, a recent work by Kadir Nelson, an artist who also works in the Rockwell tradition of American essentialism, featuring people of color. Because of its parallel to *Freedom of Worship*, the examination of Nelson's work will point to Rockwell as a framework of expression. Via textual analysis, the pivot from *Freedom of Worship* to other selected Rockwell works and a recent example reveal a combined pattern of sentiment and vulnerability created to remind American viewers of their distinct responsibility as superior agents of morality.

Rockwell's paintings are representations of American exceptionalism via identity traits of nobility, grace, and a related sense of patriotic duty. Rockwell created hundreds of this type of image for the *Saturday Evening Post*, and hundreds of other compositions for private industry over the course of his career, spanning the middle half of the 20th century. One could open myriad discussions through the selection of several other entire groups of paintings that may

[61] Halpern, *Norman Rockwell: The Underside of Innocence*, 178.

compare to *Freedom of Worship*. For our discussion, however, the selected works are helpful to understand Rockwell's creation of moral sentiment through a fictional depiction of "Average American" values, in specific regard to tolerance and moral authority.[62]

Stuart Murray and James McCabe's *Norman Rockwell's Four Freedoms: Images that Inspire a Nation* makes a comparison of Rockwell's works, given their contextual consideration of the future betterment of American society.[63] This discussion will build upon Murray and McCabe's examination of formal similarities in Rockwell's suggestion of abstract sentiment. It is, therefore, important to read Rockwell's work as a dialogue of identity reinforcement between viewer and artist. Claridge notes Rockwell's sophistication in his work and its conflict with his need to please his audience. Claridge poses this tension between self-expression and audience satisfaction as a prime influence on Rockwell's vacillation between realism and representation.[64]

Worship: A Rough Draft

The consensus among Rockwell scholars is that *Freedom of Worship* was one of Rockwell's favorites of the *Four Freedoms*, along with *Freedom of Speech*. Rockwell himself said that he wrestled with the delicacy in carefully depicting a broad sense of tolerance while containing the clarity of religious imagery.[65] He completed the work in two months, originally creating a full mock-up, as well as a first draft that was unlike the final product. In the original version, Rockwell depicted a Protestant barber shaving a Jewish man in the foreground, while a religiously non-descript black man and a Catholic priest wait seated in the background of the

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[62] Claridge, *Norman Rockwell: A Life,* 310.

[63] James McCabe and Stuart Murray, *Norman Rockwell's Four Freedoms: Images that Inspire a Nation (Stockbridge, Mass.: Berkshire House Publishers, 1993), 49.*

[64] Claridge, *Norman Rockwell: A Life*, 311.

[65] Norman Rockwell, *Norman Rockwell: My Adventures as an Illustrator* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1994), 315. "It is so easy to hurt so many people's feelings. And the picture was further complicated by my desire to say something about tolerance. I wanted it to make the statement that no man should be discriminated against regardless of his race or religion."

painting, in portrayal of religious diversity as a virtue to be projected and cherished—and to be upheld as an American value.[66] Feeling that he had fallen short of the true power of President Roosevelt's speech, Rockwell was unsatisfied.[67] According to Rockwell, the first draft of *Worship* "bordered on the ridiculous.[68] Claridge describes Rockwell's early difficulties creating the painting, stating:

> He found himself unable to characterize the men not in clerical garb without resorting to offensive stereotypes—exaggerating the Jewish man's Semitic features, squaring the white customer into a preppy golfer, and rendering the black man as an agrarian. The composition is clean, impressively sparse, in counterpoise to a dense narrative content. Beautifully painted even at the preliminary oil sketch stage, the picture would have failed to convey clearly the government's theme, even if it had exemplified Rockwell's own spirituality.[69]

Claridge's account of Rockwell's first draft notes an over-simplified framing of a complex ideal. While noting Rockwell's relative success in technique, Claridge tells us that the first draft of *Freedom of Worship* was too much of a nod towards caricature. Rockwell's juxtaposition of clergymen, and a religiously unidentified black man, within the setting of a barber shop, is an attempt to neutralize religious affiliation, thereby revealing the commonality of humanity via the intimate setting of the barber shop. For Rockwell, the normality of visiting the barber shop represents the notion that all (male) Americans, regardless of religion but, *including* all religions, all have the common goal of co-existence. According to Rockwell, the feedback he received on the first draft was that he had fallen short of accurate portrayal. He states that "…the Catholics who came into the studio all said, "Priests don't look like that." (I'd done a stout, rosy-cheeked priest with a bit of a double chin.) And the Negroes thought the Negro's skin should be lighter

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[66] Claridge, Norman Rockwell: A Life, 311.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Rockwell, *My Adventures as an Illustrator*, 315.
[69] Claridge, *Norman Rockwell: A Life*, 311-312.

or darker. And the Jews didn't like my portrayal of the Jew."[70] Rockwell's recollection of criticism lacks feedback relative to the overall point of religious freedom. Rockwell sought clarity in the second point of Roosevelt's four-point manifesto. Despite this attention to photorealism from his detractors, Rockwell created a final draft absent of such symbolism within a composition of traditional circumstance. Instead, Rockwell created a representation of religious tolerance, stripped of a traditional sense of place, framing prayer as a point of American unity.

Freedom of Worship: Characters of Piety

Eschewing an architectural setting that would be like its three counterparts, Rockwell frames a portion of an endless collection of pensive onlookers focusing westward, a symbol of American land expansion, idealistic progress, the promise of capital, Anglo American dominance, and moral culpability. Though more detailed than Rockwell's caricaturized figures of his draft, each of the featured figures are stand-ins for religious groups, suggesting individual diversity within a common idea of piety in the name of patriotism. In the foreground of this collage features four heads; two couples, with varied clarity in terms of their representative sect. In the far left-center, viewers see a young woman holding a rosary. To her left stands a taller man with a "roman nose."[71] Positioned lower-center stands an older woman, hands clasped, looking downward, perhaps the only figure completely "staged" in prayer, and the most complete, prominent face featured in the painting.

Much of the latest scholarship describing the man in the right corner varies; there is not a consensus on his religious affiliation. Claridge describes him as "holding a Koran."[72] Solomon has a different interpretation, stating that the man in the corner is supposed to be Jewish and is

[70] Rockwell, *My Adventures as an Illustrator*, 315.
[71] Claridge, *Norman Rockwell: A Life*, 311.
[72] Ibid, 312.

holding a Bible.[73] In his contribution to the 2018, *Enduring Ideals: Rockwell, Roosevelt & the Four Freedoms*, Rockwell scholar D.B. Dowd describes the man in the right corner as Greek Orthodox but "sometimes seen as a Jew."[74] Despite such indecision as to whether the man is a clergyman or an acolyte, or which religious text he holds, Rockwell uses him to create a semicircle of devotees, including viewers. And while the prevailing scholarship makes some guesses as to the religious affiliation of the some figures, Rockwell makes such indications vague to allow commonalities among the group. Here, we should recall Rockwell's sense of democracy. Like *Freedom from Want*, Rockwell stages a standout corner figure, acknowledging and including the American viewer. The man in the corner appears physically closer to the viewer due to Rockwell's rendering of the man in darkness.

The Long Shadow of Lincoln (1945)

Much like Chapter 1's comparison of Dorthea Lange's *Migrant Mother* to *Freedom of Speech*, it is important to understand the relevance of cultural predecessors, if not influences on Rockwell's work prior to his creation *Four Freedoms*. Because these first of Rockwell's *Four Freedoms* paintings reiterate American ideals, discussion of Rockwell's influences and resulting works illustrate broader artistic themes of patriotism. By understanding precedents, such patterns of expression and choices of invocation by Rockwell in allow understanding of his visual language beyond stylistic constructions of illustration.

Two years following the release of *Four Freedoms*, Rockwell creates an image imbued with themes similar to *Freedom of Worship*—moral culpability via the patriotic lens of American exceptionalism, and the dramatic imagery of collective. While Carl Sandburg's poem, "The

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[73] Deborah Solomon, *American Mirror: The Life and Art of Norman Rockwell*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2013) 209.

[74] D. B. Dowd,"Everyman, Meet Somebody: Characterization & Melodrama in Rockwell's Four Freedoms" in *Enduring Ideals: Rockwell, Roosevelt and the Four Freedoms*, edited by James J. Kimble and Stephanie Haboush Plunkett (New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 2018), 74.

Long Shadow of Lincoln" inspired the title of the painting, Rockwell used the last paragraph of President Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address (1862) as the inspiration for the painting itself. The selection reads:

> With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan — to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.[75]

Lincoln reveals connotations similar to *Freedom of Worship* that Rockwell projects in order to inspire future guidance during tumultuous times. In thinking of the idyllic image of Lincoln, Rockwell creates a vision of American healing—a representation of earnest altruism with ties to patriotism and civic duty. Echoing Lincoln's efforts to unify a wounded, young, and divided nation during the Civil War, Rockwell seeks pointed calm—a theme in each of the *Four Freedoms* paintings, to remind viewers of an American historical narrative of resilience. In the article featuring the painting, *Saturday Evening Post* editors wrote:

> In the heart-lifting symbolism of Norman Rockwell's great painting there is thought for all of us. For here we find not only the crippled soldier who must learn a new way of life, the builder who will help put a shattered world together, the teacher and her brood, and the sorrowing family of a fallen warrior, but also the hand of brotherhood extended to the downtrodden and, in the background, the less fortunate races of humankind who must not be forgotten if peace is to be anything more than an armistice. Here, in the faces and attitudes of these people, are determination and tolerance and the yearning for a better world.[76]

In this praise by the *Post*, we can see familiar elucidations of Americana typically attributed to Rockwell as a progenitor of kitschy expressions of a saccharine 1950s American cultural milieu. The centered wounded soldier in the painting, with a look of exasperation, (similar to Lange's

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[75] Patrick Perry,"Abraham Lincoln: A Tribute (The Post celebrates the Lincoln Bicentennial)," The Saturday Evening Post, February 6, 2009, https://www.saturdayeveningpost.com/2009/02/abraham-lincoln-a-tribute/

[76] Ibid.

Migrant Mother) is the only primary figure looking toward the light source of the composition. The viewer sees him with a book in hand, and a crutch in the other with a similarly toned crucifix draped with dog tags. Unlike, *Freedom of Worship*, another figural painting without a setting, *The Long Shadow of Lincoln* is somewhat anchored by the collaged tandem of the soldier and the crucifix, creating the representation of a gravesite and reminder of the sacrifice of life made by soldiers in war. One could also interpret the soldier's proximity to the crucifix as religious analogy, posing the soldier as a Christ-like figure.

McCabe and Murray tell us that *The Long Shadow of Lincoln* "shows a group of people of diverse races and backgrounds, free from oppression, free to worship and express themselves, and provided with education to create a decent life."[77] The "diverse races" however, seem to only be in the shadows, and freedom doesn't seem to be expressed as strongly as much as sadness in unison or a collective mourning. What Rockwell does illustrate with variety is a collection of vulnerabilities. A la *Freedom of Worship*, Rockwell provides the viewer with a spectrum of expressions of vulnerability—the wounded with the weak—creating a mosaic of strength and an emotional balance of empathy. The collective bravery and perseverance is the "shadow" or echo of Lincoln's inspiration in prose. Rockwell uses such prose as a medium, invoking existing distinctions of sympathy, empathic action, and religious devotion within the self-image of American life. Lincoln's words, as well as, his use in the title evoke a relative mythical paternal presence. While not depicted as a figure, *The Long Shadow of Lincoln* as a total composition is a visual metaphor of Lincoln's values. Like in *Freedom of Worship*, Rockwell illustrates an image displaying how American viewers like to think of themselves.

[77] McCabe and Murray, *Four Freedoms*, 47. It is important to note that these comments are a part of the caption of this painting, which should be noted as a somewhat gratuitous interpretation.

Rockwell's The Golden Rule

As art critic Arthur Danto and Claridge tell us, Rockwell projected a level of superiority in his "Big Ideas."[78] In 1960, after completing portraits of the two final candidates for president of the United States, Senator John F. Kennedy and Vice President Richard Nixon, and inspired by the optimism in John F. Kennedy's acceptance speech at the Democratic convention, Rockwell wanted to "do something large, something lit with social significance."[79] In doing so, he sharpened his focus on multiculturalism in *The Golden Rule* (1961).

With a gold inscription that reads, "DO UNTO OTHERS AS YOU WOULD HAVE THEM DO UNTO YOU," Rockwell again creates an ensemble of heads and faces that collectively project a message of unity in their vulnerability and steadfast dedication to humility and faith in *The Golden Rule*. The broad cultural representation with all figures seemingly praying indicate a solidarity in moral compass, despite cultural difference. Similar to *Freedom of Worship*, the composition of *The Golden Rule* contains a mosaic of conspicuously vulnerable figures, many in prayer, looking forward, pensive in thought. Empathy is the medium here as Rockwell wants the viewer to empathize with this multicultural representation of individuals. As Rockwell took five months to complete this painting, Solomon asserts that *The Golden Rule* is a period of transition, calling the painting "…a turning-point picture, the moment when he became intent on making art that carried an overt liberal message."[80] Solomon speculates that this Rockwell painting was inspired by Rockwell's reading about different religions, and Erik Erikson, Rockwell's long-time therapist and sometimes scholar of religion.[81] According to

[78] Claridge, *Norman Rockwell: A Life*, 310. This chapter in Ethridge's biography is titled, "Big Ideas." It is a reference to a point in Rockwell's career where he strove to depict large political or philosophical topics of note in this work. It is during this period that he creates *Four Freedoms*.

[79] Solomon, *American Mirror*, 340.

[80] Solomon, *American Mirror*, 340.

[81] Ibid, 340, 342.

Solomon, Erikson championed the Golden Rule as a most valuable moral code above most others.[82] Noting the importance of Erikson to Rockwell, and some deduction about the centered figure in *The Golden Rule*, Solomon posits:

> In assembling models for this painting, Rockwell enlisted his nonethnic neighbors in Stockbridge to pose as ethnic types. Note, for instance, the lean, elderly rabbi who comes complete with a snowy beard, black yarmulke, white tallis draped over his head, and lively brown eyes gazing from bony sockets. In real life, he was not a rabbi but the retired postmaster of Stockbridge: William Lawless, a Catholic who did not have a beard. The rabbi, interestingly, is depicted as the senior figure in the painting. He is decades older than the people around him, and Rockwell has positioned him at the apex of a pyramid. Perhaps the rabbi was a stand-in for Erikson, who had been raised in the Jewish home and whose most noticeable feature was his corona of thick white hair. Erikson was the closest Rockwell, a nonbeliever, ever came to having a spiritual leader.[83]

Solomon's comments here, despite some recklessness in speculation, helps to understand a through-line of moral underpinning in Rockwell's work, despite being a "nonbeliever." Rockwell inserts himself into the collage of figures in *The Golden Rule* with what appears to a communion wafer, overtly placing himself in a position of weakness or submission. Rockwell more overtly placed himself in *The Long Shadow of Lincoln* as a figure who is physically reaching down to lend a helping hand. That Rockwell places images of himself into is not uncommon among artists. But what is significant, particularly as it relates to this study, is Solomon's notion of Rockwell's self-exploration in artwork intended to identify the exceptionalism of others.[84] *The Golden Rule* unites Rockwell's sense of moral compass with an all-encompassing care for one another.

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[82] Ibid.

[83] Ibid, 342.

[84] Solomon, *American Mirror*, 10. Here I'm referring to Solomon's explanation of her book title, American Mirror, when she states that Rockwell's work "mirrors his own temperament—his sense of humor, his fear of depths—and struck Americans as a truer version of themselves than the sallow, solemn, hard-bitten Puritans they knew from eighteenth-century portraits."

JFK, Rockwell and Re-invention

In the December 6, 1963 issue of *Time* magazine, Theodore White interviewed Jacqueline Kennedy just days after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. The article, titled "For President Kennedy: An Epilogue," would begin a new, and perhaps the most prevailing mythological framing of the slain president: Camelot. In the in the article, as Kennedy describes the disposition of her husband, she describes his fondness for utopian glory in classical literature:

> "At night, before we'd go to sleep Jack liked to play records; and the song he loved most came at the very end of this record. The lines he loved to hear were: Don't let it be forgot, that once there was spot, for one brief shining moment that was known as Camelot."[85]

Using the metaphor in relation to the presidency and her marriage to Kennedy, the First Lady went on to say that there will "be great Presidents again—and the Johnsons are wonderful, they've been wonderful to me—but there'll never be another Camelot again."[86] From the First Lady's brief commentary, the idea of Camelot would be synonymous with the legacy of President Kennedy in the American popular imagination. With a cursory knowledge of Norman Rockwell's catalog, one knows that Rockwell is no stranger to the themes of endless youthful hope and American utopian symbols. As mentioned in the discussion of *The Golden Rule*, we also know that Rockwell, to some extent, felt inspired by Kennedy. In the June 14, 1966 issue, *Look* magazine featured the Peace Corps using the image created by Rockwell, titled, "Peace Corps: JFK's Bold Legacy." Of the examples mentioned here, this painting has the most direct compositional similarities to *Freedom of Worship*. Like the second *Four Freedoms* painting,

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[85] Theodore H. White Personal Papers. Camelot Documents. "For President Kennedy: An Epilogue," by Theodore H. White, Life, 6 December 1963. THWPP-059-009. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum

[86] Ibid.

Rockwell's *Peace Corps* offering features the side profile of a group of people looking to towards light symbolizing the promise of the future. With facial expressions of determination, led by the profile of President Kennedy, Rockwell paints young Americans as a group willing to bear the responsibility of American exceptionalism via international altruism, despite the backdrop of relative civil unrest at home and questions of an ongoing Cold War, abroad. As Claridge notes, despite the backdrop of consternation about American youth during the 1950s and 1960s, Rockwell repeatedly casted youth as less threatening individuals who would have a promising future.[87] The Peace Corps illustration is representative of this trend. Three years removed from the assassination of President Kennedy, an American figure often associated with some political youth movements, Rockwell poses Kennedy as a leading spirit of the Peace Corps goals of caring for fellow citizens worldwide.

Both the Peace Corps painting and *Freedom of Worship* essentialize ideas of united causes using a staged crowd of those facing the same the direction, indicating an ideological and moral agreement. The Peace Corps image "leads" viewers with the canonized image of President Kennedy—Camelot leading a promising group of young helping hands. This image of Kennedy and hopeful youth intersect with Rockwell's *The Golden Rule* in that both illustrations pose a strong collective cause despite a perception of individual vulnerability. Perhaps Rockwell begins engagement with such ideas of collective faith in *Freedom of Worship*. Not long after creating *Freedom of Worship*, and before *The Golden Rule*, Rockwell created an iconic juxtaposition of religious exercise in the face of opposition.

[87] Claridge, *Norman Rockwell: A Life*, 384.

Saying Grace and Rockwell's Opposites[88]

Rockwell was contacted by a woman in Philadelphia with an idea for what Rockwell, as well as scholars consider to be Rockwell's most popular cover—*Saying Grace* (1951)[89] (Figure 3) The woman mentioned that see saw a Mennonite family saying grace in an automat.[90] Inspired with that information alone, Rockwell created a Thanksgiving cover. Less than ten years following *Freedom of Worship*, Rockwell returned to prayer as an illustrative focus in *Saying Grace*, which first appeared on the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post.*[91] In *Saying Grace,* Rockwell seats the viewer at a table across from a woman and small boy blessing their food before they eat at restaurant full of sordid men. Similar to his use of contrasting figures in his first *Freedom of Worship* draft, Rockwell uses figural contrast to employ moral difference, showing both religious practice and religious tolerance in action. Viewers see two young men staring at the woman and child as they pray, as if stunned, or at least respectful. Given Rockwell's depiction of the setting and the garb of the young men, the 1951 viewers see the young men as curious, quiet onlookers while a man looks over their shoulder from the top left, with a facial expression of either cynicism or sinister intent. As Claridge posits, *Saying Grace* would be one of any number of Rockwell's illustrations of his optimism regarding the youth of the day, as opposed to the negative evaluation of the youth as ne'er-do-wells. Generally, Rockwell casts an ensemble of men who have turned their attention to the praying couple. Noting Rockwell's departure from a more prevalent composition in his work, Claridge says:

> Clearly, Rockwell reverses the conventions by which such liberal values typically were illustrated, positioning prayer, an activity most Post readers considered the correct

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[88] Rockwell, Norman, 1894-1978. Nov. 24, 1951. Saying Grace "Post Cover". https://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.bgsu.edu/asset/ARTSTOR_103_41822001160538.

[89] Rockwell, *My Adventures as an Illustrator* (New York: Harry Abrams Inc., 1960) 368.

[90] Ibid.

[91] Claridge, *Norman Rockwell, A Life*, 383.

> cultural norm in 1951, as the anomaly in danger of being treated disrespectfully. The painting narrates the right of deviants to be respected for practices that don't injure others.[92]

The subject of *Saying Grace* isn't prayer itself any more than *Freedom of Worship*. Per Claridge, *Saying Grace* is a composition that highlights respect and co-existence despite difference, as well as, an agreed upon sense of community. The praying mother and child are surrounded by ragged men and the grayness of the outdoor scene. Despite such a position as outsiders they act naturally—praying—thankful for their meal.

Instead of the ominous crowd in the diner, the prayerful worshippers in *Freedom of Worship* are surrounded by the threatening context of World War II. Rockwell moves from the less serious and less thoughtful traditional geography of the barber shop context present in his draft to focus on the group of those who optimistically look toward to a light of religious freedom. Rockwell, therefore, reiterates an aspect of American identity perhaps slightly questioned given the violence, carnage, and sacrifices of war—faith. Rockwell's distillation of Roosevelt's edict opposes the ideas of the global opponents of the United States. Moral duty fuses with civic duty as viewers of *Freedom of Worship* view a united stance toward freedom of religion simultaneously as a birthright and as a political stance against global enemies. Rockwell later posed this same sort of resilience with lesser stakes in *Saying Grace*.

If *Freedom of Worship* broadly illustrates religious choice without a context, *Saying Grace* would pinpoint such an idea with more accuracy, a reflection not lost on Dowd. Comparing the two, Dowd says:

> Rockwell would go on nearly a decade later to create *Saying Grace*, a vastly more potent take on private religion and public tolerance. It is arguably Rockwell's very finest painting, and surely one of his best three or four works. That image, which appeared on the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* on November 24, 1951, forswore pietistic

[92] Ibid.

> generalization and returned to the Rockwell wheelhouse: specific people and settings—or getting to the general by way of the particular.[93]

Dowd not only praises *Saying Grace* as a standalone painting which effectively illustrates a rather abstract ideal via contrasting American characters, he also harshly poses *Freedom of Worship* as comparatively poor in its efforts to illustrate a similar point during a prior period.[94] For this discussion, Dowd's comparison of *Freedom of Worship* and *Saying Grace* assumes the two to have the same purpose, which, given the context of *Freedom of Worship*, is not the case. Surely, Dowd's elucidation of *Saying Grace*'s juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane are in line with the consensus among scholars—that Rockwell was most effective in his ability to illustrate largely accessible, potent ideas of American identity via the utility of traditional spaces and snapshots of the ordinary. Dowd's assertion of *Freedom of Worship* as proof that "Rockwell did not have a religious sense of life" rings hollow, given, first the widespread appeal of *Freedom of Worship*, and second, the awkward transition from criticism of Rockwell's work to criticism of Rockwell's intellectual rigor, a reminder of the common practice of interweaving Rockwell as persona with Rockwell's paintings. Brief incongruity in analysis aside, Dowd's contributions reiterate the understanding that *Freedom of Worship*, while overlapping in themes of substance, is not a circumstantial example of religious practice and religious tolerance in the way that *Saying Grace* clearly operates. *Freedom of Worship* is, however, a *reminder* of American moral position a la Roosevelt's edict. Via Roosevelt, Rockwell urges a moral position of synchronicity between sacrificial efforts and devotion to a current standing of religious freedom, each a position of moral supremacy over global enemies. *Freedom of Worship* does

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[93] Dowd, "Everyman, Meet Somebody," 74.

[94] Ibid. 74. "Spatially, dramatically, and thematically, the picture is a dud. Rockwell did not have a religious sense of life, and his pictorial translation of faith conveys nothing of the essential strangeness of religion."

not magnify the sacrosanct for piety's sake alone (or arguably at all). The orchestrated demonstration Rockwell creates is a collage of wondrous speculation. American viewers are to ponder ideological assumptions about the proposed homogeneity of their religious freedom. Future artists will take cues from Rockwell's understanding of casting ensembles to project a united message.

Rockwell to Kadir Nelson – So Together, the Golden Rule

Los Angeles-based artist Kadir Nelson is best known for his cover illustrations for *The New Yorker,* as well as cover art for musical artists such as Michael Jackson and Drake, and countless illustrations for works by other celebrated figures. Citing Rockwell as an influence, Nelson creates figurative representations of American ideals in his paintings. Nelson's work appears at the Capitol, and like Rockwell, Nelson has also created portraits of noted political officials. As noted prior, it is important to understand Rockwell's work within the context of cultural predecessors. We must also understand works that came after Rockwell to see a lineage of expressions. Nelson's work features stylized black Americana that parallels Rockwell's penchant for focusing on the circumstantial and the ordinary activities of American life that are to be cherished. To the point of almost mimicking Rockwell's *The Golden Rule*, Nelson's *So Together* (2016) contains a culturally diverse group of faces intended as an idyllic depiction of a united mix of differing ideas and expressions of American identities in unity. Nelson's *So Together* contains figural representations of a variety of age groups, ranging from the elderly to the preadolescent. Unlike the Rockwell paintings discussed here, Nelson's "So Together" contains mostly smiling faces. In the composition of *So Together*, Nelson forms a stunted upside-down "T" formation, placing five heads in the foreground of the composition. At the top of this formation is a dark-skinned, black woman with full hair. In the center of the composition,

the black woman anchors the painting. Below her face, forming a line of figures from left to right, Nelson places the faces of a young black man, what could be interpreted as a woman of Middle Eastern descent, a face denoting an aging Native American man, and an East Asian man.

In a gesture reminiscent of *Freedom of Worship* and more formally, *The Golden Rule*, the aforementioned Middle Eastern woman is wearing a bright yellow-green head covering that appears to be a hijab. Perhaps Nelson intends to magnify this particular smiling face as a nod to a demographically changing America. While differing in appearance in contrast to the other figures in the frame, the bright green adorned woman connotes solidarity. She stands with the other figures, nearly front-and-center, in unison with the other faces of the crowd. As the "so" in the title indicates, this group of individuals connote a progressive movement away from the past events and cultural mores of xenophobia. In both content and composition, Nelson's offering echoes Rockwell's omission of present day complications of religious expression, diluted to unanimity in frame with more faces of color.

The absence of such contexts are cultural identifiers in Nelson's work, but Rockwell's paintings became a proxy for a generation's past idealism of success, prosperity, piety, and white American standardizations of happiness. In *Freedom of Worship*, we understand Rockwell as promoter of naiveté that Americans *believe*, either subconsciously, or in practice. Rockwell wanted his images to replace American fear and division with a visual reminder of American possession of the moral high ground, however sanguine, or more critically, incongruous with reality.

A purposeful compositional element of *Freedom of Worship* is its abstraction of context, devoid of certain visual signifiers of class, place, circumstance, or prioritization of a particular faith, despite a clear lack of cultural diversity. Rockwell depicts a group in worship, all

"believers" in unison, all same in direction. The physical perhaps points to the ideological; Rockwell wants viewers to understand this image as the ideal interpretation of unity, reminding Americans of this freedom as an integral part of American character. Support of the war effort means freedom can be restored, and re-contextualized. This freedom can be reiterated if we need a reminder of our enemies and their difference in worship, and re-contextualized if the viewer needs a new framing, which Rockwell provides via characterization of unified direction, despite differences in age and discipline.

CHAPTER 3: FREEDOM FROM WANT: THE "ROCKWELLESQUE" POSTWAR IMAGINATION OF THE AMERICAN FAMILY

I came from a small town in central California and grew up in the Norman Rockwell world of burning leaves on a Saturday morning. All the things that were in Rockwell paintings were part of my life.[95] – George Lucas

Rockwell noted a fondness for his first two paintings of the *Four Freedoms*. Each of the first two, *Freedom of Speech* and *Freedom of Worship* depict virtues publicly ascribed as elements of American identity. *Freedom of Speech* frames a moment when one individual can ideally offer expression that can galvanize American identity and exemplify the possibilities of American citizenship in practice. For Rockwell, this moment of civic duty is amplified by aesthetic distinctions of profession and class. Comparatively, *Freedom of Worship* is a more abstract composition of a perhaps even more difficult moment to collectively compose as a virtue—religious expression in practice. Through a unified positioning of men and women of various ages, Rockwell poses the commonality of religious belief as the focal point to recall or possibly create a central tenet of American identity. Both 'speech' and 'worship' can be publicly agreed upon through Rockwell's framing of these ideals. Viewers can see that Rockwell strives for diversity, to a point, in effort to create ensemble casts of human figures that will project his vision of American unity in thought. The preposition "of" (from President Roosevelt's original address) tells us that these rights of free speech and unencumbered religious expression are highlighted to remind the American public of who they (think they) are. The second pair of ideals, indicate a more cautious, but hopeful imagination of the present and the not-so-distant future.

The next two chapters of this study are discussions of *Freedom from Want* and *Freedom from Fear* as reminders of who Americans *want to be* as opposed to who we *are* in *Freedom of*

[95] Ted Johnson,. "Rockwell for reel folks." *Variety* 419, no. 7, June 28, 2010. 46.

Speech and *Freedom of Worship*. These chapters illustrate the argument that *Freedom from Want* and *Freedom from Fear* are in conversation with each other. Viewers should imagine these two paintings as staged in the same Rockwell-constructed home or neighborhood. Contemporary viewers may conflate a cursory view of this last pair of images with the sort of more recent cynical re-imagining of Rockwellesque worlds such as the film, *The Truman Show* (1998) or *Pleasantville* (1998). It is also helpful to think of these two of the *Four Freedoms* as visual predecessors to the homogenous cultural production of 1950's television sitcoms. With this in mind, the discussion of these last two paintings of *Four Freedoms* will use the contexts of popular culture and consumerism as guides in understanding some cultural trends Rockwell created and the cultural dialogues of which he was a part.

If cultural differences of failure as constructed by norms of prosperity reveal desires that are also relatedly and equally constructed, then what are the denotations and connotations of the ubiquitous *Freedom from Want*? If, as historian Ira Katznelson's *Fear Itself*: *The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* tells us, fear is indeed a driving force for citizens and legislators alike, then how does that define or inform *Freedom from Fear?*[96] The term "social mobility" can be used to describe individual movement toward societal stability, usually referring to positive shifts in the acquisition of social status and economic prosperity. But what is the construction of such an imposition? What are the cultural meanings behind these impulses? Is it merely primitive survival cloaked in the modern language of consumerism? How can we read this language in the visual signs and signifiers of popular commercial art? In *Freedom from Want* (and *Freedom from Fear*), what representational qualities are produced as a result of established norms of aspiration, as a response to fear, as a visual attempt to quell cultural malaise, or to represent collective nods

[96] Ira Katznelson. *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time*. 1 edition. (Liveright, 2014.)

towards ideals of social mobility and American norms of stability? To what extent are the *Four Freedoms* in conversation with established understandings of American identities prior to the publication of the images? For this discussion, *Freedom from Want* serves as a template of aspirational response. Rockwell produces a version of success relative to the existing paradigms of the family gathering, enjoying a meal, everyone smiling, multiple generations relieved of their fear of malnourishment as a sign of broader realms of prosperity, i.e. the family automobile and the American home. Building upon multiple notions of the Thanksgiving table as a physical site of American prosperity, Rockwell depicts a scene of American desire so attractively consumed in its plainness, that *Freedom from Want* would later be a serially revised palette of homogenous Americana, while simultaneously dismissed along with other products of kitsch during the second half of the 20th century. The proliferation of symbolism produced from this painting would symbolize cynical imaginaries of American pride, consumerism, and identity.

In Chapter 3, *Freedom from Want* will anchor a discussion of arguably Rockwell's most well-known painting and perhaps one of the most popular memes of the 20th century.[97](Figure 4) The interest here is to understand *Freedom from Want* as an inspirational set of visual objects projecting American familial relationships via mass media. While textual analysis and examination of other scholarship will provide a helpful understanding of Rockwell's approach; his "staging" of this moment, and the history of criticism of this well-known work, this will also be an investigation of succeeding popular visual culture of the American family including film, television, and the newspaper comic strip, each one a medium that would see major success in the years after World War II, due to "Rockwellesque" cultural productions.

[97] Norman Rockwell. 1943. Ours...to fight for Freedom from Want. https://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.bgsu.edu/asset/LOCEON_1039797907.

Family Circus and the "Rockwellesque"

Beginning in 1960, illustrator Bil Keane created the family-friendly comic strip, full of innocent hi-jinx and parental quips called, *The Family Circus*. While earning national fame, Keane's strip was often criticized for being too safe or devoid of the sort of complexity or conflict on display in other media and in American homes. On the topic of *The Family Circus* and its nod toward simplicity, contributor for Smithsonian.com, Kat Eschner offered the following:

> Saccharine images of familial togetherness…are what *The Family Circus* is known for. A lot of hugs and cutesy learning moments take place in that little circle of newsprint each week—and the long-running strip has had success with this formula. The comic, which was drawn by his son Jeff Keane, had a Rockwellesque humor that remains a staple of newspaper comic sections.[98]

Eschner uses Rockwell as a reference point of American family interaction often devoid of the less-than-pleasant moments typical within familial relationships, as well as any peripheral challenges of employment or current events. Like Rockwell, Keane used his family as models for his characters. Like Rockwell, Keane used a bit of real-world circumstance and imagination to "stage" the scenes of *The Family Circus*. To implicate a Rockwell-like humor, as Eschner does, is to note a similarity in the boundaries of incongruity Keane employed to create light-hearted entertainment. Keane's scenes are never without resolution, never without a smile, never without comfort, and never without isolation from the turbulent realities of the 1960s and 1970s. Much like myriad Rockwell images, "The Family Circus" has a place in American culture alongside much of early sitcom television. In the comic strip, many of the narrative arcs are not too dissimilar from an episode of *The Donna Reed Show* (1958-1966), *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960), *My Three Sons* (1960-1972), *Leave It to Beaver* (1957-1963), or other family sitcoms set

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[98] Kat Eschner, "Why 'The Family Circus' Was Always So Sentimental," Smithsonian.com, October 5, 2017.

in suburbia, isolated from the reverberations from assassinations, protests, landmark legislation, or cultural revolutions in motion outside the television studio doors.

This discussion understands the "Rockwellesque" as a collection of platitudinous narratives of the nuclear family, a phenome itself that Rockwell's work predates. The Rockwellesque belies intimate assumptions about American family relationships. The Rockwellesque requires the modeling of family members as characters, carefully articulated via real life inspiration or mediated character traits—character actors a la film. If Bil Keane later centralized these carefully edited ideals of the postwar American family, Eschner poses Rockwell as the progenitor of such magnification. As voluminous as Rockwell's works are, his oeuvre is clearly defined in popular culture as a collection of anodyne American visual fiction. *Freedom from Want*, one of his most recognized paintings is a template for such expression as model of American prosperity.

The prevailing scholarship of Rockwell's work neglects the possibility that *Freedom from Want* contains metaphorical signifiers because the painting uses figural realism as the protagonist of sentiment, as if such scene construction was not present in Rockwell's work prior. Many scholars primarily note the popularity of *Freedom from Want* and vaguely connect the painting to Thanksgiving as a simulation of American's collective celebration of sacrifice via consumption and nourishment. The cynicism of critics' assessment of Rockwell's depiction of "realism," both contemporarily and through revisionism, restricts viewers to believe they are viewing a "snapshot" of 1943 instead of an abstract Rockwellesque visual construction of the future. The traditional anti-Rockwell stance from the avant-garde is as simplistic as it implies Rockwell's images are if such a stance says that multiple figural smiles equate to the depiction meaningless emotions, devoid of direction, devoid of construction, devoid of intent, and devoid

of compartmentalized, complex thinking. The anti-Rockwell criticism thereby places *Freedom from Want* as an establishmentarian co-sign of the status quo, and therefore unable to reveal any progressive statements on culture.

Rockwell illustrates an optimistic end to a means of financial and moral sacrifice for the war effort. But such optimism is relative to established norms of 20th century economic mobility. Because the representational scene perhaps resonates with a broad spectrum of individuals, including scholars and critics, we collectively bypass certain possibilities of viewership in *Freedom from Want*. Viewers see the standing couple, the large turkey, the smiling crowd, seated and enjoying each other's company, as the truncated face who gleefully and mysteriously stares at us. In *Freedom from Want* it must be emphasized that dinner hasn't begun, but through the efforts and sacrifices of the able, a feast can be shared. The turkey, a symbol specific to the popular early American manifest destiny origin story of capitalism and dominance, has yet to be placed on the table to be consumed.

The Standing Couple

At the top-center half of the *Freedom from Want*, viewers see a gray-haired woman, perhaps a grandmother; wearing an apron that matches the whiteness of the tablecloth, the sheer, centered background drapes, and the light that meticulously drenches the majority of the composition. The woman's hair is slightly disheveled and sleeves rolled, as if viewers should assume she worked hard to prepare a glorious spread. She is gently placing a large turkey on the long table extended beyond the paintings frame (to viewers). As the turkey centers the composition, the woman tops a secondary triangulation of the painting. This matriarchal representative is the only figure without the jubilant smile, a nod to the possibility of her role as a hired domestic worker. Rockwell painted the woman based on Mrs. Wheaton, the Rockwell

family cook, who also prepared Thanksgiving dinner for the Rockwell family.[99] Behind *Freedom from Want*'s "Mrs. Wheaton" stands a man, perhaps a grandfather, who anxiously awaits the settling of the turkey on the dinner table. The man smiles modestly, looking over the shoulder of the woman, with his pausing but at-the-ready right hand inches away from what appears to be a carving knife, typically an official tool of the family patriarch at the time of *Freedom from Want*'s initial publication. Viewers see the man in coat-and-tie and the woman in a dress and apron, while only the facial expressions of the seated family can be seen as they all seem to be leaning over a slightly too-elevated light-washed table. If Rockwell detractors accuse Rockwell of pandering to viewers with the superfluous in his framing of American life, *Freedom from Want* does the opposite. These figures are not placed whimsically to present aimless jubilation. Rockwell abstractly objectifies with purpose. The standing middle-aged couple represent a past generation who suffered at great lengths to survive American economic depravity. As *Freedom from Want* was published in 1943, it is reasonable to assume this couple to be born before the turn of the 20th century, placing them chronologically as having "seen it all" compared to the child (center, left), who knows little of the current international turmoil of World War II. Accepting the couple as the past and present, the seated, younger attendees at this gathering represent present and future Americans who reap the benefits of service.

The white-haired woman (bottom, right) and the brown-haired woman (bottom, left) , who appear to be in conversation, were modeled after Rockwell's mother and wife, respectively.[100] Viewers engage with a triangular symmetry of *Freedom from Want* anchored at the bottom right by one face which peers outside the picture frame. Adding conjectural perspective about the peering face in the corner, Solomon opines:

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[99] Solomon, *American Mirror*, 209.
[100] Ibid.

> He glances out at us with playful, slightly conspiratorial expression, an implicit wink-wink. He has the air of a larksome uncle who perhaps is visiting from New York and doesn't entirely buy into the rituals of Thanksgiving. He seems to be saying, "Isn't this all just a bit much?" In contrast to traditional depictions of Thanksgiving dinner, which show the premeal as a moment of grace—heads lowered, praying hands raised to lips—Rockwell paints a Thanksgiving table at which no one is giving thanks. This, then, is the subject of his painting: not just the sanctity of American traditions, but the casualness with which Americans treat them.[101]

Solomon identifies the man in the right corner as a cynic. This perspective ignores the man in the context of the complete composition, as well as the placement (and meaning) of viewers. Viewers are also seated at the table as the man engages us in conversation. In a limited assessment of Rockwell's intentions, Solomon projects contemporary cynicism onto the cornered figure, leaving no room for understanding Rockwell's interpretation of Roosevelt's *Freedom from Want*. As viewers we see the corner of the man's smile, and at a cursory glance, we may see him before we see the turkey. In President Roosevelt's original speech, he cites freedom from want as, "economic understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants."[102] If we are to understand that Rockwell felt 'called' to illustrate Roosevelt's high ideals out of his duty to encourage citizens to focus on elements of American pride, why would Rockwell place a cynic within the composition when that would be incongruous with his many works? Solomon's misreading of "casualness" is actually contentment on the faces of our Thanksgiving Day family in *Freedom from Want*. They are proud to receive. Solomon claims that "no one is giving thanks" because their jubilation appears causal, or representative of secular expression in lieu of familiar religious gratitude in unison (praying hands). But no figure in the seated crowd looks toward the couple or the turkey, a nod to the notion they have yet to see the fruits of the past/present sacrifice and labor. They are

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[101] Ibid, 210.
[102] McCabe and Murray, *Norman Rockwell's Four Freedoms*, 110.

jubilantly hopeful at the prospects of their future meal, but do not take the moment for granted. Rather, they are enjoying this day via a snapshot; a staged scene from Rockwell. *Freedom from Want* shows viewers an example of a future prize—the ability to enjoy an American family tradition, absent the struggles of the decades past entanglement with the Great Depression, and the peering man in the right corner serves as a tour guide; he says, "Look at what Americans can have! Look at what we have to share! Look at what collective sacrifice will bear!" The collective scholarship of Rockwell's oeuvre often pejoratively describes Rockwell as an illustrator of serially transmogrified scenes of Americana, an assumed category of transmogrification itself. Many scholars and critics see Rockwell's depictions as perverse saturations of realism, as if to assume an essentialized American identity that Rockwell defames, saturates, or exploits on his canvases. Within *Freedom from Want*, however, there are more abstract ideals.

The Crowd of Freedom from Want and The Gossips

As discussed, *Freedom from Want*'s popularity has placed the painting as a template for parody and expression of American group dynamics and family relationships within popular culture. *Freedom from Want*'s association with sentimentality reveals Rockwell's ability to use existing "scenes" of the American holiday gathering to stage a postwar visual construction of American essentialism of the American home. For postwar American viewers, *Freedom from Want* reiterated Rockwell's prominence as visual rhetorician of illusions of desire. As viewers, we understand his visual language, regardless of Rockwell's collection message. In discussion of the seated crowd in *Freedom from Want*, we understand the collage of faces as just that, a sea of smiles floating over the dinner table, intimating their entertaining discussion of nothing in particular. Viewers see their faces, but Rockwell chooses to only show us their side profiles,

disconnected from a representation of a three dimensional floor plane. It is important to understand Rockwell's use of faces and facial expressions in an abstract sense, revealing elements of the Rockwellesque visual language—compositional elements repeated in his work. In *Freedom from Want*, the prevailing scholarship prioritizes discussion of the turkey, and the metaphorical presentation of boundless reward for sacrifice. But Rockwell also uses dynamic facial expressions to communicate sentiment beyond the context of the Thanksgiving table. The course of Rockwell's work employs expressive side profiles as a narrative tool. In analysis of Rockwell as a visual rhetorician, this discussion isolates the side profile as an element of communication. In Rockwell's work, facial expression is as important as his New England scenery. Just as Rockwell's compositions are American expressions, so too are his renderings of American faces in his effort to convey emotional resonance with American viewers.

Five years after *Four Freedoms*, Rockwell published *The Gossips* (Figure 5) in the *Saturday Evening Post,* another of Rockwell's mimetic pieces featuring similarly featured side profiles, some inspired by family members.[103] *The Gossips* provides viewers with a strong illustration of the Rockwellesque—we are given a collection of dynamic faces without context, relative to Rockwell's oft-used, recreated New England scenery. Viewers are given enough visual clarity to assume a serial narrative of conversation. Beginning at the top left of the grid of faces there are the expressive faces of two women. The distance of their faces relative to working norms of conversation is close, as is the case with the other pairs in the composition. Rockwell simulates the movement of a single thread of conversation. Viewers read pairs of faces from left to right and top to bottom. Because of the string of duplicated faces, viewers may

[103] Rockwell, Norman, 1894-1978. Mar. 7, 1948. The Gossips "Post Cover". https://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.bgsu.edu/asset/ARTSTOR_103_41822001160496.

assume a singular narrative to be passed from one individual to the next. Is *The Gossips* one conversation, several conversations, or a staged scene of aimless chatting?

The Saturday Evening Post published hundreds of Rockwell illustrations on its cover over its decades of broad readership. Rockwell biographer, Solomon tells us that *The Gossips* was Rockwell's "most mordant cover."[104] Like *The Gossips*, *Freedom from Want* features a collection profiled faces, creating a visual rhetoric of "talking" but not conversation. There is no implied subject of discussion. Instead, the viewer provides assumptions about the discussion between talking heads.

Critics typically mention *The Gossips* as a slightly more abstract composition but still in line with Rockwell's nod toward the circumstantial moments of so-called everyday American life. The most prevalent interpretation of *The Gossips* is that a message is being passed from each body-less character to the next. But more importantly, Rockwell's composition is an illustration devoid of a subject, per se. Instead, one should view this painting as a set of character sketches. If we then understand these as characters, we can understand the seated crowd in *Freedom from Want* not as a family necessarily but as a similar set of character sketches composed outside the geographic boundaries of photorealism and as a default version of American identity. The seated group represents Americans after the achievement of victory in World War II. Via the sacrifice illustrated in President Roosevelt's manifesto, Rockwell presents generational stand-ins illustrating a post-victory, post-sacrifice harmony, and a utopian future scene of celebration at a time when expectations of victory, or even survival, was uncertain. Just as the turkey poses as a representational sign of the exceptionalist fruits of American labor, the seated crowd represents the collective jubilation of an American populace

[104] Solomon, *American Mirror*, 252.

who, in the face of deadly war, held steadfast due a to belief system of American duty married to consumption as a reward system for patriotism.

For the sake of understanding how the details of *Four Freedoms* are contributions to the overall compositions, the identity of real-life models used for the individuals are of subsequent importance to the overall meanings of the group as a portion of the composition and the collective sense of celebration. Rockwell's use of use of side-profiles in *Freedom from Want* operates similarly to that of *The Gossips*. In each work the facial expressions are an aggregate of a singular emotion. In each work, are figures are on one accord. Also in each work, the viewer understands collective emotional response without the limitations of a specific topic of communication. In either work do viewers know *what* is being communicated, but viewers can infer how everyone feels.

Relative to the resonance of *Freedom from Want*, the crowd's united jubilation is Rockwell's interpretation of victorious relief. Together, this collection of figures appears to be enjoying sameness in their happiness, as if hearing the same joke. Our "tour guide" of sorts, the grinning half face we see staring at us, includes us, and welcomes us to believe the idea that our Thanksgiving, similar to the mythology embedded within American cultural narratives of the Pilgrims, is a divine right—a 20th century manifest destiny—the opposite of the past American decade of depression, starvation and a lack of freedom from want. In *The Gossips*, Rockwell uses what he thinks American viewers know as a universal truth and modulates this truth identifying a connective tissue of resonance. In *Freedom from Want*, Rockwell similarly identifies the familiar, extracting a new context for viewers. Instead of giving thanks for forbearers of a distant, mythological American past, these characters give thanks for a more immediate cause.

During the period of World War II, Rockwell wants to imagine a sweet gathering in victory, absent the troubles and sacrifices of the Great Depression and the looming fear of defeat in war.

Via Rockwell's composition, "want" is the enemy as much as any national foe. *Freedom from Want* tells us that a defining trait of American identity is that we are never without, and our possessions and access to consumption are what American can and should covet as a result of our collective teamwork in support of the war effort. The scene of *Freedom from Want* illustrates who Americans can be in tandem with what Americans can have. *The Gossips* show viewers emotional expression without the complicated details of conversation. A sign of the content of conversation itself is deleted for the sake of revealing emotional reaction. Viewers only see reaction, without the context clues of full body language, or a sense of place and space. The strong parallel between *The Gossips* and *Freedom from Want* is the similar absence of a communicated subject, servicing the portrayal of a collective emotional moment. While these works contain ensemble casts, each of these two works illustrate the Rockwellesque tendency to point figures toward a singular emotional voice, an indication of Rockwell's much documented theme of democracy.

Dinner is Not Served

As the opponents of kitsch would explain, Rockwell arguably clutters the composition with flat characters and the plainness of obvious photorealistic familiarity, garnering viewer engagement in egotistical empathy with the individuals in the painting. Through detailed reevaluation, the collective iconography; the turkey, and dining room setting, each underscore Rockwell's message of modest triumph. At first glance, viewers may interpret the seated crowd or the standing couple or the dinner table as photorealistic projections or happenstance, or Rockwell's composition of the ordinary. This interpretation holds but Rockwell also uses the

viewer's assumed framing of the image to mediate a collective expression. As historian D.B. Dowd states, *Freedom from Want* "merits sustained looking."[105] Because of the relative familiarity of the setting of the composition, either by aspiration or experience, postwar viewers bypass certain textual details in lieu of overall sentiment. Dowd provides insight beyond the contemporary generalization of *Freedom from Want* as a signifier of consumption or commercial gluttony, stating:

> …Freedom from Want is a painting about an austere feast, a celebration of light. Dramatic though it may be, the uncarved turkey seems to be it for food, aside from blanched-looking celery, an aspic, and some fruit. We confront empty plates and colorless water. No heaping bowls, no spilling cornucopia, no bottles of wine. But the restraint does not suggest self-denial—far from it. Rockwell paints an airy blanket of white light, sourced through the curtained window, that settles over the table, linens, china, silver, and glassware. Light suffuses everything, conferring grace on the gathering.[106]

Here, Dowd clarifies his declaration of *Freedom from Want* as serving up "the most satisfying aesthetic experience by withholding bounty.[107] Dowd details the relative discernment in Rockwell's composition by noting that despite attribution of *Freedom from Want* to later cultural associations with endless material consumption, mass culture, and other common denominators of postwar, middlebrow taste, Rockwell is actually *careful* in his delivery of sentiment. Per Dowd, the scene Rockwell frames is the very beginning of the depicted formal celebration. The places are set, the group is happily assembled in anticipation of the feast but, the feast has not begun. Rockwell could have chosen to include a full table of main courses and side dishes. To illustrate such a bounty would be the most opulent of choices, obscuring the realities of the not-so-distant past of the Great Depression, as well as the 1943 realities of food rations and other shared sacrifices pressed upon the first American viewers of this painting.

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[105] Dowd, "Everyman, Meet Somebody," 71.
[106] Ibid.
[107] Ibid.

Contemporary criticism of *Freedom from Want* is obscured by cynical assessments of Rockwell as a conjurer of blinding innocence, revisionist co-opting of past postwar symbols as myth-making tools of conservatism, and the compartmentalization of Rockwell's works as working parts of corporate advertising machines of the mid-20 century. But *Freedom from Want* does not exist only in the popular imagination of contemporary cynicism. At the end of 1942, the time Rockwell was creating and finishing *Four Freedoms*, gas shortages were widespread in the United States.[108] In 1941, sustainable sources of labor were rare, and more workers were on strike than any previous year.[109] Despite the retrospective framing of the period through a romantic lens of sacrificial virtue, at the time of *Freedom from Want*, marriage rates were up, as well as divorce rates.[110] The "abundance" projected onto this seminal painting is false in light of its times, and its reality is more in line with Dowd's assessment of Rockwell's sparse spread and abundant light. Again, Rockwell gratuitously illuminates a scene of the future celebration but not so far in the future that material abundance (food) is fully realized in the way that sentimentalists falsely recall the scene.

The symbolism of a turkey at the Thanksgiving table not only harkens the time of Pilgrims and American natives, a period itself wrapped in a web of myths and falsehoods. The context of *Freedom from Want*'s large turkey symbolized other sorts of capitalistic squalor, relative to its time. Scholar Kenneth Rose details the period, explaining a resulting phenomenon of scarcity, stating:

> By early 1943 the practice of "meatlegging' had begun. Meatleggers would buy cattle from farmers at prices over market value and would rent a barn to serve as a slaughterhouse. The meat would then be sold to butchers at 1 to 3 cents over the legal price, who would in turn raise the retail price. Thus butchers could get more, and better, cuts of meat than they were entitled to by paying wholesalers a premium. This shortfall

[108] Rose, *Myth and the Greatest Generation*, 87.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Ibid, 105.

> could easily be made up in the course of a day by selling customers packages of meat that were a few ounces short.

The popular imagination of the *Freedom from Want* turkey is that of celebrating a well-earned, distinctly American meal. Rose's comments indicate just what it would mean to have a turkey on your table at that time. In retrospect, many imagine this Thanksgiving table as filled with food. The table, however, barely has enough food to feed the number of people happily crowded in the dining room.

Freedom from Want and the Popular

The auteur of myriad popular films of the 1980s and 1990s, John Hughes (1950-2009) used his own Midwestern upbringing as the inspiration for many of his characters. In such films as *Home Alone* (1991), *Sixteen Candles* (1984), *Mr. Mom* (1983), and *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles* (1987), Hughes created a universe of characters, complete with suburban malaise or teenage angst, but with relatable, quaint narratives, and quirky families. Actor, Steve Martin once described John Hughes as "a modern Norman Rockwell."[111] A la Martin's sentiment, following the release of *Sixteen Candles*, *Variety* magazine reviewed the film as:

> Cream puff of a teen comedy about the miseries of a girl turning 16 turns out to be an amiable, rather goldilocked film. Tone of the film, despite some raw language, brief nudity in the shower and carnage at a high school party, actually suggests the middle America of a Norman Rockwell Saturday Evening Post cover.[112]

While it was unclear as to whether Hughes sought inspiration from Rockwell, the point remains, that Hughes "in the greatest possible sense…was a sentimentalist."[113] Hughes was not the lone Baby Boomer who would draw comparison to Rockwell. In 2010 directors George Lucas (1944-present) and Steven Spielberg (1946-present) produced an exhibition of their respective private collections of Rockwell paintings.

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[111] Kirk Honeycutt. *John Hughes: A Life in Film*. (New York: Race Point Publishing, 2015), 14.
[112] Ibid.
[113] Ibid.

Rockwell's work has often been magnified as the essential collection of American imagery of the American family. Freedom from Want is perhaps is most well-known painting among a catalogue of iconic illustrations. It is Thanksgiving. A glorious light shines through the background as the elders of the family present the Thanksgiving turkey. The younger generations of the family sit at the table, looking at us, the viewers. Are they simply happy to "see" us at the table with them? Is their googly-eyed exuberance just another of Rockwell's patronizing paintings, giving us what he thinks we want?

The dream that Rockwell creates here is that of prosperity—not wealth—but the economic status that allows happiness as related to the Puritanical gathering of Thanksgiving of Thanksgiving. The turkey symbolizes the modern postwar future. Rockwell hopes for the viewers through illustration. He also shapes hopes for the viewers as we are to see this piously-lit family, sitting at the very moment they have received that they have been waiting for, hoping for, and blessed with. Rockwell begins the "scene" of the painting at that very moment when you see the turkey (prosperity). We know, or think that the payoff is coming. We recognize signs of it. For Rockwell, in 1943, the turkey is the American reward for our collective hard work and sacrifice. The sacrifice therefore draws parallels from one modern domestic metaphor to the mythology of the past. Rockwell's Thanksgiving dinner emanates whispers of 20th century mythology of the Pilgrims and what would be the postwar obsession with cars in the driveway, a green front lawn outlined by a white picket fence, vacation time, trips to the mall, and a full pantry. The *Freedom from Want* represents freedom from need and the freedom to want any and all the prosperous trappings of middle-class comfort. *Freedom from Want* is Rockwell's signposting of capitalistic splendor for the generation of the American working class. He reminds American viewers, in a time of apocalyptic questioning, that this war is a fight for

Americans' ideological freedom *of* full bellies, freedom *of* comforting bank accounts, freedom to have all the trappings of leisurely shopping, and freedom *of* knowing that our enemies will no longer be a threat to our agreed upon mythologized claims of manifest destiny toward capital.

Many viewers imagine *Freedom from Want* as a marvelous spread of dishes, sprawling through the center of the frame. As several scholars note, the table is actually quite sparse, as the turkey hits the table. How does such a seemingly unimpressive table of food become such a symbol and template of the Thanksgiving table? Perhaps the revisionism of this painting performs the representational qualities of an endless bounty to assuage repeated fears of Great Depression-era hunger. In *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*, historian Liz Cohen tells us that *Freedom from Want* is lockstep with its mid-World War II context, looking toward the future during an uncertain present relationship between buying and civic duty. Referring to a developing postwar ideology in the making during the war, Cohen names the United States a "Consumers' Republic," a hybrid culture, and socio-political construction of mass consumption, both in consideration of material culture, as well as, democracy and freedom.[114] For Cohen, *Freedom from Want* posed a more laissez-faire imagination of the American consumer as opposed to a past model. She posits:

> Conveying a common understanding of FDR's message, Rockwell depicted "freedom from want" not as a worker with a job, nor as government beneficence protecting the hungry and homeless, but rather as a celebration of the plenitude that American families reaped through their participation in a mass consumer economy. Rockwell's Americans free from want were members of a large extended family gathered around an overabundant, elegantly set Thanksgiving table in their own private home. Despite an enormous mobilization on behalf of the citizen consumer ideal in liberal government circles and in communities throughout the country during the 1930s, the less politically threatening conception of the consumer—as a purchaser consumer buying his or her way to "freedom from want"—held growing appeal to those wielding economic and political power in American society.[115]

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[114] Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (NewYork: Vintage Books, 2003) 7.

[115] Ibid.

As discussed here, Cohen views Rockwell's projection of American consumerism via Thanksgiving as a framing of the future. Cohen describes an interpretative leap that Rockwell makes from Roosevelt citizen consumer to Rockwell's purchaser consumer.

CHAPTER 4: A SMUG IDEA: FREEDOM FROM FEAR, AMERICANA AND OTHER MYTHS OF AMERICAN SECURITY

Much of the mythology of Tom Brokaw's book, "*The Greatest Generation*" includes the narrative of collective subservience to the American military and the notion of the American nuclear family as a monolithic, healthy social construction, not only unaffected by sacrifices, but strengthened during the Second World War. This narrative begets the erasure of social unrest prevalent during the war, i.e. Jim Crow, Jane Crow, internment camps, and a bevy of other forms of injustice prior, during, and after the war. Brokaw's popular contemporary revisionism echoes wartime Americana, conflating steadfast support of military efforts with consumer behavior. Rockwell's *Freedom of Fear* serves as an early template of idealism, with creative focus on the American family in the home.

Americana, as it relates to mid-20th century American consumerism, functions as a collection of propagandistic consumer choices marketed with a polished luster of authenticity that eschews certain "conflicts" of being the cultural other. The image of the American family in *Life* magazine or the *Saturday Evening Post*, was separate from cultural narratives displayed in *Ebony* or *Jet*, yet Americana's pervasive meanings today represent a small subset of the American population, idealized through film, television, advertising, and the revisionist idolatry of such media.

Through Americana, authenticity is thereby an agreed upon doctrine—a belief system of self-esteem with tenets of belief in oneself as unique, exceptional, but simultaneously plain, earnest, innocent, and morally just as a Westernized citizen. Americana sentimentalizes the essentialism of a mythological set of core ideals usually through the lens of the faux-quaint, so-called middlebrow culture of white Americans.

Rockwell, as a part of this overall discussion, was one of the most prolific creators of commercial visual Americana. Much like the work of his mentor, famed illustrator J.C. Leyendecker (1874-1951), Rockwell's art is a dialect that explicitly articulates euphoric American aspirations. Rockwell stages moments of ideological intimacy—his work acutely demonstrates resonant moments of American sentiment towards itself, with the editing of certain complications present in reality.

This discussion of *Freedom from Fear* (Figure 6) explicates American consumerism as it relates to Rockwell's construction of fear, the American home, popular culture, and the image itself as a meme of American familial relationships to class status and idyllic forms of citizenship.[116]

Rife in Rockwell's visual dialect of Americana as anathema to reality, is the notion that Rockwell's work excludes many, while circumstantially romanticizing others under the pretense of displaying a moment of the everyday. *Freedom from Fear* is no different in this regard, in that its exceptionalism contradicts everyday realities of Americans in during World War II. Cognizant of the times, Rockwell's incongruity allows for this discussion of *Freedom from Fear* as a marker of economic development goals and the desire for cultural capital.

Fear and Other Constructions of Response

For *Freedom from Fear*, the fourth of President Roosevelt's commandments, Rockwell illustrates a couple tucking in and looking over their sleeping children as the father holds a newspaper hedging towards a bombing in Britain. While Rockwell reportedly had little trouble creating *Freedom from Fear* (and *Freedom from Want*), Rockwell claimed that the final painting

[116] Norman Rockwell. 1943. Ours...to fight for Freedom from Fear. https://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.bgsu.edu/asset/LOCEON_1039797908.

was insensitive to international concerns in conception.[117] Rockwell's intent was for viewers to be thankful that they could put their children to bed without fear of being killed.[118] Scholars of Rockwell and his *Four Freedoms*, Stuart Murray and James McCabe explain Rockwell's inspiration from the past, stating:

> The painting had held close to its original concept as Rockwell had first thought of it during the 1940 air war known as "The Battle of Britain," according to Dorothy Lawrence, the model for the mother. Mrs. Lawrence posed twice for this subject in that year, and moved away from Arlington in the summer of 1942, before the final version was painted as Freedom from Fear. Rockwell asked the local newspaper, the *Bennington Banner*, to mock up a dummy edition with the headline about bombing as a prop.[119] Staged in the children's bedroom, Rockwell opens the curtain as a couple ensures the

comfort of their sleeping children, a moment highlighting the children's innocence, and the parents' duty to protect and comfort. At this moment, the parents could be checking on the children before the parents rest for the night. The mother carefully places the bed covers on the children. The mother reinforces her children's warmth as the father flanks her, stoically posing with a newspaper in hand. The newspaper headline notes a bombing in London. Rockwell nestles all four human figures in front of a diagonal stripe moving from the top right of the composition to the bottom left. The dark background stripe allows viewers to see the light tones of the bed sheets and the father's dress shirt to wedge the mother as a visual fulcrum of the painting. The figures of the mother and father appear with a type of awkward closeness in step. Citing anatomical missteps by Rockwell, D.B. Dowd identifies two areas of peculiarity:

> First, neither has room for *hips*. Unless they occupy space the geometry of a pair of bedside tables, it is difficult to see how they could take up the minimal floor spaces assigned by their stances. Second, the woman bends over her children, leaning to the right over the bed. A figure so extended in one direction must make a corresponding adjustment in another to maintain her balance. Either her feet would be oriented differently, or her left foot would be stuck out to keep her from falling onto the bed. But her husband's position prevents her from doing so. Had the two models posed together,

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[117] Murray and McCabe, *Norman Rockwell's Four Freedoms*, 51.
[118] Ibid, 50.
[119] Ibid, 51.

> subtleties of positioning would have prevailed. Their adjustments to each other would have affected the visual and spatial rhythm of the painting.[120]

Dowd describes Rockwell's lack of anatomical accuracy but notes the importance to the composition as a unit. Perhaps such flawed figures in the composition are proof of limitations to Rockwell's method in staging and referencing photographs for his works.[121] In their respective biographies, Claridge and Solomon dedicate little analysis to *Freedom from Fear*, as opposed to extensive discussion of the other three Rockwell offerings. Describing this fourth image as "the most anecdotal, Solomon notes that *Freedom from Fear* contains some compositional elements that are similar to a Rockwell illustration published in *Literary Digest*.[122] Published in 1921, the image features a young mother, tending to two sleeping children in bed. The mother figure in the painting was Irene Rockwell, Norman Rockwell's first wife, who rarely modeled for her then-husband's illustrations.[123]

Published in 1993, Stuart Murray and James McCabe's *Norman Rockwell's Four Freedoms: Images That Inspire A Nation,* the first publication specifically dedicated to *Four Freedoms*, barely provides much textual analysis of *Freedom from Fear*. Murray and McCabe offer speculation that Rockwell was "grappling with weariness," according to Shirley Hoisington, a 6-year-old model for *Freedom from Want*.[124] The prevailing scholarship notes Rockwell's bias toward his first two paintings. Scholars also note the cultural relevance of *Freedom from Want*, its many spin-offs and renditions of mockery. But *Freedom from Fear*, the most traditionally intimate of the *Four Freedoms* series, leaves much to understand beyond Rockwell's nod toward war elsewhere in a newspaper headline. Presented in light of

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[120] Dowd, "Everyman Meet Somebody" in *Enduring Ideals*. 72.
[121] Ibid.
[122] Solomon, *American Mirror*, 210.
[123] Ibid, 104.
[124] Murray and McCabe, *Norman Rockwell's Four Freedoms*, 50

Roosevelt's expressions of declarations, the corresponding painting allows discussion of the American family as a collection of metaphors, for fear itself during World War II has its own context, created in terms of economic mobility as well as terms of civic responsibility.

David Kennedy's *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* is helpful in understanding a historical point of view of the period of *Four Freedoms*. One of the themes throughout is Kennedy's repeated evocation of the comprehensive instability of the moment for American citizens and officials. Kennedy's particular descriptions of the emotions of the moment point to the madness of the 1930s. In "The Ordeal of Franklin Roosevelt," Kennedy discusses the terms "volatility" and "disaster" in description of the nature of FDR's challenge to quell the intensity of wholesale affliction across the country. Kennedy effectively detailed the emotional climate in tandem with the changing policy details. Notably, Kennedy mentioned the changes of the family structure during the Depression, noting that marriage became less certain, but divorce less a possibility due to lack of mobility, and insecurity. It is from this context that *Four Freedoms* is a visual script of calm. Regarding *Freedom from Fear*, Rockwell dictates reassuring values and replaces the volatile uncertainty of the moment with the anesthesia of American myth through circumstance, perhaps ahead of the curve on the mythmaking of postwar America, eventually littered with stereotypes of democratized opportunity for all.

Rockwell's reference to his ineffectiveness in *Freedom from Fear* as "a smug idea" opposes assumptions of Rockwell's disingenuous motives in his work.[125] His method of sentimentalist staging ask questions of authenticity and ulterior motives of patronizing parody and condescending to Puritanical values within American twentieth century mythology. Either such questions of Rockwell's authenticity assume the idea that definitions of American lives are

[125] Rockwell, *My Adventures as an Illustrator*, 315.

finite constructions outside of Rockwell's casting or they assume that Rockwell's images are somehow too complicit in illustrating ideals of American life. In the case of *Freedom from Fear*, Rockwell intended to create a sincere expression of Roosevelt's edict for an American future. As it relates to *Freedom from Fear*, Rockwell's "sincerity" is defined by a goal to illustrate distance from fear—security. Rockwell's version of American fear reveals vulnerability with the distant specter of international violence.

Rockwell's choice of the children's bedroom frames vulnerability to reiterate a future goal of protection for American viewers. In light of the historical context of a rising number of absentee parents and delinquent children, *Freedom from Fear* frames a brighter future when such vulnerability is relegated to these quiet moments at home with the full protection of human figures of materialism and paternalism, as well as the security of a paternal nation state. Daisy Rockwell, the granddaughter of Norman Rockwell, and contemporary public authority regarding the Rockwell estate, explains the paternalism of *Freedom from Fear*, stating:

> The depiction of freedom from fear painted by my grandfather, Norman Rockwell, picks up on a promise to Americans: his painting seems to point to a benign paternal regard on the part of the government. We, the citizens, are the innocent little children, able to fall into a blissful slumber after a day of play, despite the violence and evil playing out, far off, on the war front. Our government, well informed (see the newspaper in the father's hand) and responsible, solicitously tucks us into bed. The government wants us to be free of the worrying fears that plague the grown-ups, and we, in turn, should trust in its ability to take care of these grown-up things safely, out of view and hearing.[126]

That Rockwell chooses this scene of protection and security frames a relatively obvious parallel to the protection of the government, as Daisy Rockwell mentions. The "grown-up things" Rockwell mentions here are the sacrifice at home and military engagement with war abroad. But as Daisy Rockwell tells us, the American citizenry is to assume a position of innocent follower

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[126] Daisy Rockwell, "Finding Freedom from Fear," in *Enduring Ideals: Rockwell, Roosevelt and the Four Freedoms*, edited by James J. Kimble and Stephanie Haboush Plunkett (New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 2018), 197.

of our government so that we can live a comfortable future—a "blissful slumber…despite the violence and evil playing out, far off, on the war front."[127] This visual reiteration of reassurance is similar to *Freedom from Want*—Rockwell uses the familiar as a metaphor for American sentimentalism.

From Want, From Fear: Two Sides of the American Dream

The prior discussion of *Freedom from Want* included an understanding of American consumerism as a site of social identity, patriotism, political ideals, and a broad template of mimetic interplay. With similar implications, Rockwell's final painting of the *Four Freedoms* contains a version of an intimate traditional setting—the children's bedroom. Despite its relatively accessible subject of the American family, much of the prevailing scholarship of the *Four Freedoms* provides little discussion of *Freedom from Fear*, and certainly lacks discussion of the symbolism of the American home as sign of consumer values and the then newly minted sentimental desire for popular projections of the American family, against the current of a volatile reality. Such a lack of discussion could be due to Rockwell's placement among the kitsch creators, relegating *Freedom from Fear* to be too sentimental for the scope of textual analysis critics produced for *Freedom of Speech*, for example.

For *Freedom from Fear*, myths of the American nuclear family during the postwar 20th century contains a backdrop to what critics (and Rockwell himself) believe to be an otherwise ineffective or lackluster painting from Rockwell, particularly compared to *Freedom of Speech* and *Freedom of Worship*. *Freedom from Fear* and *Freedom from Want* are two paintings relative to aspiration, American consumerism and certain cultural memes within popular culture during the period following the original publishing of the *Four Freedoms* in the *Saturday Evening Post,* posing a tandem of opposites to their titles. Rockwell shows viewers the opposite

[127] Ibid.

of "want" via jubilant, if not divine abundance in *Freedom from Want*. *Freedom from Fear* projects a metaphor of security, the opposite of fear, in *Freedom from Fear*. Therefore, the second pair of Rockwell's *Four Freedoms* illustrates goals despite challenges, however imagined.

Freedom from Fear and the American Home

The American family home is as central to the rapid development of postwar American consumerism and economics as any other commercial twentieth century product. The marketing of and to the American family is arguably the foundation of American twentieth century economic prosperity via inheritance, investment, debt, criminality, segregation, integration, education and architecture. The postwar twentieth century home, its acquisition, location, and marketing relationship to security, poverty, or affluence catalyzed the advent of broadcast television programming, the proliferation of news media growth, and their respective relationship to commercial advertising. The experience of the American dream through the lens of the cliché includes the idyllic family home, the idiomatic white picket fence and suburban middle class security that would define Brokaw's Greatest Generation, would later be a source of rebellion for some Baby Boomers, and a measurement of loss, departure, and criticism for future generations. Postwar, American socio-economic success would be defined by the financial health of the housing market. In light of such developments in American economics and culture, Rockwell's *Freedom of Fear* is one of the earliest images portraying the American home as a metaphorical accessory of citizenship to permeate American culture. To the extent that it serves the creation of a mythology of American cultural repression, the imaginary of the American public (often negatively) associates Rockwell's most palpable cultural relevance with other mainstream mass products of the 1950s and 1960s, great decades for sprawling suburbs, whose

suburbanites who identified themselves by the details of their consumerism. But the height of Rockwell's influence in this regard, perhaps predates our cultural memory. The period of prosperity for consumer products: entertainment, fast food, household cleaning supplies, and the American automobile peaks during the 1950s and 1960s, decades after Rockwell's rise to notoriety as an arbiter of kitschy mass culture.

The relationship between place, space, and American identity is an important element of Rockwell's work throughout his career. Rockwell's depictions of New England and distinct visual language of jovial character actors in his works display compositions of Americana. Rockwell's understanding of human interaction as displayed in his works of the everyday, heightened by facial expression or anatomical exaggeration, indicate relationships between movement within a composition, and the expression of character choices, leading to a collective participation in viewership of his works. Viewers are invited to experientially inhabit Rockwell's created spaces. Inhabitation via viewership means acknowledgement and approval of Rockwell's characters as familiar, "correct," or "incorrect." Accuracy is thereby measured based on traditional understanding of photographic realism. Rockwell's staging of the dramatically lit spaces of the American home seen in *Freedom from Fear*, inform viewers. Rockwell's iconographical rhetoric merges a visual language with nod toward the real world implication of housing as security, a complex term of Westernized, and subsequently Americanized ideals.

While part of the popular present day narrative of the American family during World War II is the framing of American stability, the reality for many Americans was more complicated than image of the proud GI and the brave Rosie the Riveter. Kenneth Rose offers insight on the complications and fears of parenting during the war:

> Of the American women who joined the labor force between 1940 and 1944, 3 million were married and half of these women had children under the age of 10. Of this latter group, 280,000 had absent husbands in the military as of February 1944. What followed was an alarming spike in juvenile delinquency and "reports from all over the country of neglect of small children, locked in the house, the apartment, or the trailer during the hours the mother is employed in war industry" James Madison Wood, president of Stephens College put it bluntly: "We have thousands of underfed neglected children tied to clotheslines, locked in cellars or left to run wild, while Mother wields a blowtorch. We have courtesans, schoolgirl age, diseased in mind as well as body.[128]

If such turmoil is a part of the American wartime experience, how do such Americans then view *Freedom from Fear*? In light of wartime uncertainty and local dysfunction, *Freedom from Fear* becomes a standard bearer of familial relationships. Fear is not only relative to the war. Viewers see Rockwell's poster of hope as a reminder of overall sacrifice made during war. American viewers can see *Freedom from Fear* as the depiction of family goals or a framing of a dream scenario. By 1943, cases tried in juvenile courts increased 56 percent from 1940.[129] In 1944 the Department of Labor reported that the average weekly salary of a factory worker increased 80 percent since 1939 while the cost of living increased only 24 percent.[130] During the war, homeownership increased 15 percent.[131] Many in Rockwell's early viewership of Four Freedoms were beginning to experience a new moment of prosperity and a new aspiration of home ownership. Crystallizing the specific prominence of the American home as a dual object of consumer citizenship, Cohen posits:

> At the center of American's vision of postwar prosperity was the private home, fully equipped with consumer durables. By 1945 a decade of depression and half decade of war had left the country with an acute housing shortage. Hence, it was not surprising that GIs bunking in close quarters and civilians doubled up with relatives would fantasize a peacetime prosperity built around more spacious and modern dwellings. But images in government publications, advertisements, and popular culture were even more specific:

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[128] Kenneth D. Rose, *Myth and the Greatest Generation: A Social History of Americans in World War II* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 111.

[129] Ibid, 112.

[130] Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic*, 69.

[131] Ibid, 73.

> the overwhelmingly depicted "home" as a detached single-family house in a suburban setting. To some extent, traditional American symbolism of "home sweet home" was being invoked, but the message was more specifically geared to the times.[132]

Cohen's offering illustrates an unprecedented presence of the American home as not only a symbol of economic prosperity, but also a symbolic reward for civic duty. Government war propaganda created to boost morale reinforced to American exceptionalism of the family home. For example, the Office of Civilian Defense awarded citizens with the V-Home Award, a certificate for those families who had "made themselves into a fighting unit on the homefront" by regularly buying war bonds and stamps, consuming responsibly, and salvaging materials.[133]

Future Influence of a Snapshot

During the decades following World War II and Rockwell's *Four Freedoms*, the American living room and dining room would be featured in American situation comedies on television and elsewhere in American popular culture. The familiar scene of the mother or father sitting bedside, eloquently recounting the lessons from the day to their misbehaving, or bewildered child would be a go-to plot device, often comfortably landing an episode of mainstream television during the first couple of decades of the medium's prominence. Following suit, many companies during this early postwar period achieved success by marketing to some feature of domesticity or facet of the consumer's American dream. Rockwell's *Freedom from Fear* serves as popular precursor to the phenomenon of the American home as metaphorical symbol of shelter from vulnerability, by means of economics and patriotism.

For many, the image of a parent comforting a child at home echoes the ideal parent-child relationship. Often with a comforting nod towards humor Rockwell created many works featuring American children playing as well as family scenes of innocence. Adult viewers of his

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[132] Ibid.
[133] Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic*, 73-74.

works identified with Rockwell's voyeuristic casting of everyday events. Young viewers were also able to grasp Rockwell's central themes of American family identities.

When director Steven Spielberg first saw *Freedom from Fear* on his father's pile of *Saturday Evening Post* covers, he grasped an immediate sense of Rockwell's oeuvre of the American family as a morally precious institution, in jeopardy of disruption. Noting an intimate accuracy of *Freedom of Fear* and its relationship to American identity, Spielberg states:

> I remember having a sense that when the mother and father both come into the children's bedroom to tuck in the boy, they must really love him. It must be a solidly happy family, a family unit, that hasn't been shattered by divorce on illness. That has always been the American dream, the great concept of the American unit, the American family. The fact that they are both there in the room, and the father's holding a newspaper with bad news about the war overseas—they're looking at the boy, thinking, if the war keeps going, in a few more years he could be drafted or enlist, and also thinking that we are here, living in freedom and at this moment our child is safe because our country is protecting all of us. But they're not smiling; they're not flaunting that freedom. They're very solemn, and very respectful of it.[134]

While Spielberg's rosy recounting of *Freedom from Fear* parallels similar sentiments of the time, many families during the period of *Freedom from Fear*'s publication, did not live such charmed lives particularly associated with Rockwell's (or later, Spielberg's) work. Spielberg here provides us with the common exercise Americans engage upon viewing Rockwell's work, a subjective projection of values, sentiments, and actions. Spielberg also echoes Daisy Rockwell's assessment of the Freedom from Fear as a testament to paternalism. Spielberg projects the possibility that the parents could be thinking of their son enlisting in a seemingly never-ending war. What difference would be made had Rockwell constructed this family moment with smiling parents and without a newspaper with a headline of international violence? Compared to Walt Disney, who Dowd considers to be a "melodramatist" like Rockwell, Dowd illustrates how

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[134] Virginia M. Mecklenburg, *Telling Stories: Norman Rockwell from the Collections of George Lucas and Steven Spielberg* (New York: Abrams, 2010) 111.

Rockwell generally falls short of depicting fear in his work. Dowd also questions if perhaps Freedom from Fear is no more than a newspaper headline away from being relatively meaningless. Dowd states:

> Consider that other beloved mid-twentieth-century American melodramatist, Walt Disney. He could scare the bejeezus out of his viewers, and routinely did; consider the near murder of Snow White and her headlong flight, the transformation of boys to jackasses in *Pinocchio,* the forest fire in *Bambi*, the hallucinogenic pink elephants in Dumbo. Nothing in Rockwell comes close. So it is, then, that the representation of fear boils down to a newspaper headline and an allegorically limp doll. Subtract the comforting genre scene and you are left with a lazily conceived editorial cartoon.[135]

Plainly, Dowd provides an explanation for the absence of research and criticism about *Freedom from Fear*. Rockwell's assessment of the painting as "smug" summarizes Dowd criticism of *Freedom from Fear* as lacking in compositional impact, compared to the other three images. Dowd's comparison of Rockwell to Disney notes Freedom from Fear's inability to project American desire for safety, comfort, and emotional distance from war.

Rockwell's wants viewers to think that if one's children are secure, then too are their neighbors, friends, co-workers, and other citizens. But, as Dowd opines, only newspaper provides a context for such appreciation, diluting the message. If we view *Freedom from Want* and *Freedom from Fear* as Rockwell's prognostications of social rewards, the scene of a couple in their children's bedroom represents the American psyche in tis yearning for comfort and reaffirmation. *Freedom from Fear* is Rockwell's reminder to viewers that the sobering violence and present sacrifices are justified by an American future articulated by consumer comforts unavailable to predecessors. Compared to the other images of Four Freedoms, viewers have to work a bit harder to receive such a message.

During the decades following Rockwell's staging of the American childhood bedroom, the American home was a site of myriad 20th century cultural phenomena. Popular culture

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[135] Dowd, "Everyman, Meet Somebody," 73.

would later feature the kids' bedroom as a birthplace of creativity and a site of an American paradox—the American adolescent, armed with newly found, commercially exploited independence, and still lives within the means of the American parent, itself a late 20th century characterization rife with various myths and commercial iterations.

CONCLUSION: FOUR FREEDOMS AND CONTEMPORARY AMERICA

> The American people had tamed a continent, achieved prosperity, and secured peace for our Nation. They were a hard-working, churchgoing people, filled with spirit and faith. It was this America that Norman Rockwell so deeply loved. For decades, he shared that love with us all…He pictured old men with round bellies and red cheeks singing Christmas carols; lanky boys plunging into swimming holes; shy young couples lost in the wonderment of new love; and family scenes of contentment and joy—serving the Thanksgiving turkey, tucking the youngsters into bed, and the homecoming of the brave young soldier.[136] – President Ronald Reagan

On August 30, 2019, pop singer Lana Del Rey released her fifth studio effort entitled, *Norman F*cking Rockwell*. In her usual vacillating between references to mid-century popular culture and the superficiality of contemporary romance, Rey's latest project uses the skewers contemporary American life with eye-rolling cynicism and a robust palette of Americana references. Rockwell in name serves as an assumed symbol of nostalgia, a mix of a realistic past and misappropriated reality for Rey to dismantle. It is such ideological disapproval that led me to this investigation.

This study began after finding Rockwell's name noted within scholarship as a marker of proof of cultural repression of the American midcentury. To scholars, Rockwell has represented middlebrow commodification as well as a revisionist timestamp of nostalgia for the American conservative establishment. These assumptions of Rockwell's work together lead toward an investigation of into *Four Freedoms*, four paintings which have been mass produced, viewed, idolized, criticized, denigrated, revised, and in the twenty-first century, revisited. As tomes of American culture, these works themselves operate as standalone memes of sentimentalized American wartime identity. They also serve as cultural objects used as reference points for multiple views of American publics, even those unrepresented in *Four Freedoms*.

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[136] Ronald Reagan, foreword to *Norman Rockwell's Patriotic Times,* ed. George Mendoza (New York: Viking, 1985), Foreword.

Some American viewers want Rockwell's illustrations to be idealized depictions of real life. Other Americans want Rockwell's works to be unreal depictions of real life. Norman Rockwell wanted Roosevelt's Four Freedoms to be serviceable motivations of patriotism, as framed by these four visual statements. This discussion is a collection of various cultural paths to and from these four paintings to complicate assumptions about Rockwell's larger themes in his work, and to complicate assumptions of Rockwell's skill as an artist. Through such inquiry, this is an examination of Americana writ large; revealing a ubiquitous yet underserved set of American cultural texts.

Chapter 1 is a discussion of *Freedom of Speech*, a painting based upon Rockwell's staging of a real-life event, a town hall. Through the investigation of textual analysis, this discussion concluded that *Freedom of Speech* is a culmination of Rockwell's admiration for Abraham Lincoln as a symbolic figure of the underdog outsider, as opposed to the establishment front runner, represented in the seated crowd around the standing speaker. Through comparison to Dorthea Lange's *Migrant Mother*, Freedom of Speech features a central figure who Rockwell casts as triumphant despite odds against him. Finally, we understand *Freedom of Speech* as a composition of complex geometries, exploiting movement as a vehicle of drama to fully dramatize a canonized action of civic duty.

Chapter 2 features *Freedom of Worship*, the compositionally standout painting of the four. The discussion explores similarities between Freedom of Worship and other Rockwell works to understand intersections of expression between Rockwell's works, in terms of theme as well as composition. The first two freedoms, as judged by Rockwell, were the best works of the four as well as the paintings that Rockwell used the most time to complete. Together they represent idyllic notions of monolithic American morality compared to other nations, as well as

other wartime propaganda. The first two paintings revise, as opposed to the last two paintings, which project a future American bounty of consumption and protection.

The second two chapters feature two courses of thought. Chapter 3 explores *Freedom from Want*, not just repeating the well-tread approach of Rockwell as celebrant of over-consumption. Beyond the obvious, *Freedom of Want* begs questions of Rockwell's casting, representing various generations a time when, as Kenneth Rose tells us, the family unit was much more complicated than it is commonly valorized in revisionist narratives. In light of historical context, *Freedom from Want* is Rockwell's vision of the fruits of devotion to American wartime sacrifice.

Like Chapter 3, Chapter 4 peers into the intimate moment of sentimentalism represented in *Freedom from Fear*. The children's bedroom with parents tending to sleeping children leads to an investigation of metaphors for a nation state, and the historical context of floundering marriages and child delinquency up against the revisionist (and the 1943) view of security as a result of sacrifice while mayhem is nearly a newspaper headline partially covered by a paternal figure. *Freedom from Fear* also centralizes a setting often featured and recalled during the early postwar moment of relative American prosperity—the American home. The discussion of Rockwell's final freedom investigates the cultural placement of much of Rockwell's early work into the context of the 1950s through a revisionist lens of nostalgia. Such a nostalgic framing is usually executed via earnest political affinity for kitsch as opposed to the complexities of contemporary times.

This study could have been a discussion of Rockwell's broader influence as an artist—his myriad collaborators, and other artists who created similar images for the *Saturday Evening Post*. The *Saturday Evening Post* is an institution steeped in American mass cultural mythmaking and

advertising history, adding to the breadth of scholarship central to Rockwell criticism. Unaddressed in this study are questions about Rockwell's prolific work for corporations. One could research an exhaustive, focused investigation of Rockwell's hundreds of paintings of American children, the American family and/or myriad other works exploring American identity, popular culture, morality and aspiration. It is the view here that *Four Freedoms*, as a site of investigation, is an effective crystallization of American identity because of its threads of culture, art, and history and propaganda.

Four Freedoms and 9/11

In late 2001, following the tragedy of 9/11, the *New York Times* published representations of Rockwell's work, including his *Four Freedoms*. Between Friday, November 2 and Saturday, December 1, *The New York Times* used five altered Rockwell images on seven separate days: 2, 4, 5, 6, 9, and 14th of November, and on December, including *Freedom from Fear*.[137] All of these altered images were printed on the last page of the same section, which was still prime real estate for advertisers despite the latter decline of newspaper readership and diminishing size to the paper itself. On other days, the same page was used for different purposes, from photographs of Afghanistan to advertisements.[138] During November these images produced a temporary site of patriotism to which another was added. On November 22, the last page of 'A Nation Challenged', previously occupied by four in the series of altered Rockwell images, contained a message from the Whitehouse: 'Thanksgiving, 2001.' It was signed by President George W. Bush and Laura Bush, as a nod to *Freedom from Want*. As a reminder of the early context of Rockwell's work, Frascina offered the following:

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[137]Francis Frascina, "The New York Times, Norman Rockwell and the New Patriotism." *Journal of Visual Culture* 2, no. 1 (2003): 99–130.

[138]Ibid.

> By 1939, images describable in terms of 'art anecdote' or of 'realism' were subjected to an intense critique in the face of a particular notion of the 'avant-garde': for Clement Greenberg (1939), writing in *Partisan Review*, Rockwell's images, and particularly those on the cover of *The Saturday Evening Post*, were examples of kitsch in its most manipulated capitalist form. Such covers, Greenberg argued, provided the 'uncultivated' spectator, the 'peasant' in industrialized societies, with what they want or, rather, with what they have been conditioned to want. These products of the culture industries provide easy pleasures and distractions depriving spectators of the critical rigors and complexities of avant-garde art. To be so deprived ensured a passive audience content with the media's moralizing narratives and stereotypes.[139]

Frascina's reminder views Rockwell's work as a cultural catch-all, emanating reminiscent images of a happier, calm, period of American stability—an image mostly created by Rockwell, the advent of the television family sitcom and other visual "myth-creators" of the mid-20th century. As Frascina notes, Greenberg avant-garde was threatened by the more malleable kitsch, a mass-produced formulae of production machines, used to anesthetize the masses and distract them from the rigor of engagement with more sophisticated explorations of high art. Frascina's offering allows for further investigation of the multiple meanings of Rockwell's work.

In 2018, The Norman Rockwell Museum celebrated the 75th anniversary of Rockwell's *Four Freedoms* with a traveling exhibition and a contest where competitors could create their own version of the four paintings. In much of the public discourse about the paintings and about Rockwell's work in general, has been the enduring idea of Rockwell as an earnest creator of American idealism. Rife with this assumption, current day public assessment of Rockwell's *Four Freedoms* characterizes the paintings as idyllically patriotic, solely connected to President Roosevelt's speeches, and devoid of any commentary relative to American society at the time,

[139]Ibid.

besides a caricaturized projection of wartime values.[140] One of the goals of this research is to re-assess Rockwell's seminal work as a marker of Rockwell's *creation* of postwar American idealism via: civic duty (*Freedom of Speech*), moral conscience (*Freedom of Worship*), consumerism (*Freedom from Want*), and national security (*Freedom from Fear*). These works are not flat caricatures without reference or meanings. *Four Freedoms* operate within the canon of Rockwell's visual rhetoric, as well as the canon of twentieth and twenty-first century Americana. These four paintings are each cultural catalysts within the continuum of American self-image through popular visual narratives.

Today, the mentioning of Rockwell's name serves as a flash point of quaint innocence, much like Walt Disney. We mention Disney and Rockwell as patron saints of corporatized kitsch, as creators of the culturally anodyne, and arbiters of sanitized conservatism. When we refer to an element of American culture as "Rockwellian" or "Disnified," we castigate our myths of the 1950s as unilaterally suppressive. This practice itself in mythmaking incites revisionist criticism of that which didn't exist for large swaths of the American public.

For years to come, authors, scholars, and other critics of American culture will dissect and analyze the slogan, "Make America Great Again" as a political propaganda of right-wing extremists, white supremacists, and myriad other factions of American provocateurs dedicated to cultural mythologies of past prosperity and homogenous simplicity, be it explicitly racialized or not. For *this* study, it is important to think of Rockwell revisionism as the result of a similar phenomenon. Rockwell guides viewers toward the valorous and shallow recesses of their American identities to inoculate fear and imbue the citizenry with carefully, clearly guided patriotism. In current times, investigation of re-imagined nostalgia must include discussion of

[140] Solomon, *American Mirror*. In much of the biography, Solomon reiterates a disdain for what Solomon asserts as simplicity in many of Rockwell's works while duplicitously noting Rockwell's notoriety and importance to American culture.

the "Rockwellesque." Current understanding of the recent American past within popular culture leads us to believe that different groups of Americans are believe different narratives of American cultural trajectories, and such belief systems contribute to their political leanings and economic choices. This study explicated four cultural texts of note within an ongoing lineage of appropriated themes of American mass culture.

Arthur Danto and other critics panned Rockwell as a cultural symbol of "middlebrow" America. Today, critics pan Rockwell's work as a landmark of repression and white kitsch. While these perspectives parallel, they each ignore certain works by Rockwell that highlight perspectives of the American family, as well as, Rockwell's engagement with the Civil Rights Movement in his work. Flattening his voluminous catalog of creative works into an archetype of the mainstream is as intellectually inconsiderate and dishonest as detractors have accused Rockwell of being. Early art historians who characterized his work as part of "ooze" on one hand but claimed other artists of the avant-garde to create more meaningful work, were limited by their own naiveté. Describing the place and credibility of Rockwell within the context of his contemporaries, Solomon offers the following:

> Though ridiculed by art critics and literary critics for much of his life, Rockwell commanded respect among painters and sculptors across the stylistic spectrum. Willem de Kooning openly expressed his adulation for him. Andy Warhol bought two of his paintings. Much about Rockwell's approach to art—the storytelling, the jokiness, the staged scenes and costumes, the reliance on photography—is standard practice among artists today. You cannot make a modern artist out of Rockwell. But you can make a postmodern artist out of him; he shares with the current generation a historically self-conscious approach to picture making.[141]

Did Rockwell give the masses their identity cues by creating their self-image for them, or did Rockwell, regardless of agenda, patronize the American public? Early critics missed the

[141] Solomon, *American Mirror*, 11.

moment of Rockwell's impact by discounting the non-elite American, a claim that resonates with current day assessments of political alignment and cultural associations.

Famed filmmaker-George Lucas claims that Norman Rockwell's work was Lucas's introduction to art.[142] In thinking productions by Lucas such as *American Graffiti* (1973), a Rockwellesque re-imagination, the *Indiana Jones* franchise or the *Star Wars* franchise, one can see the correlated mythmaking DNA. Whether in relation to fine art contemporaries such as Grant Wood, Andrew Wyeth, Thomas Hart Benton, or other more broadly acknowledged creators of mass consumed visual Americana such as Frank Capra or Walt Disney, Rockwell's ubiquity tells us that his work resonates in a way that transcends ideas native to Americans' distanced, hierarchal relationships with high art.

To deny the importance of the ubiquity of Rockwell's *Four Freedoms* is to ignore prevailing ideas of patriotism during the middle period of the country's uncertainty about the Great War. This is particularly important in context with the easy criticism of Rockwell's work for its lack of cultural diversity. Through a contemporary lens, favoring multicultural representation and expression, what is lost is the ability for *Four Freedoms* to succeed in its original goal to inspire, manipulate, and reflect deep-seated areas of the American ego. By contemporary standards of commercial art, much of Rockwell's early work did not contain visual representations of all Americans. This has been explicitly documented and has little room for expansion as an exhaustive point of emphasis, if one is to understand comprehensively Rockwell's visualization of American *values,* which is why his lack of representation was not of interest in this study. This is not to say that representation is not important, but the artistic responses to whiteness in *Four Freedoms* leave much to be desired, further "flatten" Rockwell's

[142] Mecklenburg, *Telling Stories,* 17.

artistic choices, and do not, in composition, match Rockwell's original purpose and artistic method of quelling the masses amidst apocalyptic times.

Whether it is Charles Schulz's illustrations in *Peanuts*, countless Walt Disney productions, or John Hughes' oeuvre of adolescent tales, the American postwar imaginary contains a visual language of cultural consumption values via definitions of taste, and articulations of the popular via emotional resonance minus the politics of traditionally marginalized voices. A repeated theme of American exceptionalism includes consumer abundance, usually accompanied by the accoutrement of white, middle-class, values. It makes sense that John Hughes would place the star character, a precocious child outcast in Manhattan, roaming the streets of a sterilized New York City in *Home Alone 2* (1992). It is fitting that said character; a blonde-haired, blue-eyed, diminutive white boy could not only survive in one of the most expensive cities in the world, using only his father's credit card, but live at the Trump Tower, itself a stylized caricature of affluence and its namesake, a similarly towering figure of predestined capitalism, however feigned. *Home Alone 2*'s "Kevin" (Macaulay Culkin) is the boy at the soda shop sitting with a police officer in Rockwell's *Runaway*. Viewers know that despite the presence of law enforcement, all is secure, and safety is preserved. The Rockwell visual language requires an articulation of (usually white) middle-class whimsy. The *Four Freedoms* focus on the only the fears of Rockwell's visual world—real world annihilation. One can attach Rockwell's expressions of American identity with that of disingenuously composed ideals of innocence, repression, sameness, the commercial boom of the 1950s. But such attachment assumes such several monoliths of American identity and culture formation.

A cynical contemporary assessment requires the belief that Rockwell's *Four Freedoms* as a collection could not have resonated with broad swaths of American citizens because only white

New Englanders are represented in these works, or that even if identified as a popular collection of representations, such a happening is unrelated to "true" or inclusive American values. These views neglect the legacy of Rockwell's work, particularly after the release of *Four Freedoms*. Such myopia also requires that representational works only resonate with those who are represented.

If Rockwell's works fit the criteria of Baudrilliard's "hyperreality," the idea of reality as a transformed, modified, or even perverse contrivance of consumer culture and commercial interests, *Four Freedoms* represents Rockwell's penchant for the "hyper-American." The hyper-American is the expression of known ideals, stylized to the point of broad agreement, mass appeal and obligatory allegiance. The tenor of criticism from Rockwell's detractors reveals disdain for engagement in the everyday, assumed as *known* expression of egotistical aspiration. Rockwell's critics decry Rockwell's wallowing in the muck of self-congratulatory sentiment and American pride, complete with seemingly stale territory of civic duty and family security. For adversaries, *Four Freedoms* invokes disingenuous constructions of exceptionalism. This disapproval implies that Rockwell heightens the imagination of a "feel-good" narrative, and super-imposes a caricaturized identity against the backdrop of the mundane. American ordinariness, constructed via earnest expressions of post-Great Depression capitalism (*Freedom from Want*), individual civic duty (*Freedom of Speech*), submission to faith (*Freedom of Worship*), and the aspiration of security, absent the violence of sacrifice (*Freedom from Fear*), communicate accessible, yet high-achieving versions of socio-political choices. Rockwell illustrates these choices; flattening the complexities of American free speech across ethnically and financially diverse communities, simplifying religious freedom as one simultaneous action of faith, canonizing a group celebration of consumption, and an idea of paternalist national

security. The resonance, amplification, dissemination, and replication of these four expressions illustrate a consensus within the American populace, highlighting both affirmed character traits and re-affirmed goals.

The cultural production of American kitsch demands critical eye-rolling, not only from those who desire further (read: avant-garde) complexity of expression but also those who desire distraction from an infatuation with self-identity within the continuum of colonialized scripts of conformity. So-called high art requires a collective discernment; the editing process requires the exclusion the popular at a bias, usually toward the tastes of Anglo American, northeastern elitism. In contemporary times, such an allegiance is an idealized doctrine of elitism as opposed to individuals or geographical boundaries per se. Within constructions of postwar, mid-twentieth century lowbrow, the pretense is the consumption of the overtly expressive as a political act. Rockwell is the preeminent trafficker in such a politics of emotion, and a distinction of taste defines whether his illustrations in *Four Freedoms* are simply a derivation of his other visual constructions of kitsch, or more outstanding articulations, separate from his other works.

Rockwell: The Ad Man

In addition to Four Freedoms, Norman Rockwell created popular artwork for corporate brands, a logical transition given Rockwell's prolific commercial work for the *Saturday Evening Post*. Despite clear boundaries of negative criticism of Rockwell's illustrations, the prevailing scholarship, criticism and general consensus does not contain analysis beyond the surface. If Rockwell is to be considered a commercial artist, separate from the fine art world, defined by and wholly successful as it relates to the supposed marginalia of Dwight MacDonald's ooze of

American middlebrow, then there should be more scholarly consideration of Rockwell as a contributor to American advertising as Art Director, or an "ad man."

For the American advertising campaign of bond sales and morale enhancement that was necessary during World War II, the success of Rockwell's *Four Freedoms*, equaled, if not surpassed the success of the most memorable advertising campaigns of the twentieth century. With the ad copy provided by Roosevelt's speech, Rockwell's art direction encapsulates both an effective framing of ideas as well as identifiable messages. Distanced from the re-imagining and misappropriated view of Rockwell's illustrations during the twenty-first century, one must view *Four Freedoms* as a collection of directions. Distanced from the biased view of Rockwell's works as pejoratively kitsch, one must understand *Four Freedoms* as detailed visual constructions of Americana, itself a set of connotations on par with the avant-garde's oblique observations of culture.

The condemnation of *Four Freedoms* as propaganda disallows the investigation and textual analysis revealing understandings of how American visual culture functions. As such, Rockwell's *Four Freedoms* reside in a space of avoidance from designations of fine art *and* scholarly investigation of visual culture, each spaces that claim to engage interdisciplinary approaches and widespread ideas. In the during the late twentieth and into the twenty-first century, individuals, organizations, and institutions from the fine art world have begun to at least reevaluate their position on Rockwell's work. The academy has made no such concessions, largely because entry points of discussion of Rockwell's work seem to be singularly bound within the context of past detractors, skepticism for the period and spaces where Rockwell's illustrations originally flourished, or present day conflation of Rockwell images with discriminatory expressions of American conservatism. It is worth re-iterating the importance in

the investigation of the popular, not only in its relationship to youth culture, as is typical today, but also investigations in what can be categorized as kitsch, un-youthful, corny, saccharine, or other designations of un-hip American mass culture. Scholarship of American culture prioritizes niches of fandoms, showing a penchant for the selectively popular and resisting exploration of the actual mainstream, including that which could be deemed as propaganda. Intellectually, this is a political choice of idealized inclusion over a mythologized "big business" making of cultural products which excludes whole ideas of cultural tastes most prevalent in American society.

The *Four Freedoms* series is a set of propagandistic paintings, in historical terms, in art historical terms, in terms of popular culture, and in terms of cultural criticism. Rockwell himself is a career propagandist. These two declarations are neither revelatory, nor do they demote Rockwell's contributions so much as they exalt these works to the likes of any otherwise duly examined collections of American advertising, if such investigations are to understand that mass consumerism includes both politics and 'big P' Politics and that the creators of that which is most quantifiably consumed is worthy of as much examination as that which is deemed most qualitatively robust, however methodologically different or similar.

Rockwell and Four Freedoms Today

In the April 2000 issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, highly touted sociologist Herbert J. Gans, opined on the endurance of Rockwell's work in new millennium. Within the context of the then-new retrospective of Rockwell selections from 2000-2002 at the High Museum of Art, Gans pitched potential future outlooks for Rockwell. Noting some typical characterizations of Rockwell's work, its audiences, and its detractors, Gans notes:

> Rockwell's obvious affection for small-town America may strike a sympathetic chord among upper-middle class people who are sentimental about the past, or who are not entirely happy with contemporary urban or suburban upper-middle-class life. Rockwell may also attract art audiences who are weary of cynicism and seek a respite from art that

> shocks, while his nearly always sunny view of America may also go over well with patriotic audiences and with boosterish types cheered by the country's current economic boom.[143]

Gans' framing of the inclusion of Rockwell into upper-middle class tastes in contrast to the present day, speaks to the American myth-making of Rockwell paintings. American contemporaneity requires the belief in a simpler, less socio-culturally complicated post-World War II America. During the years following Gans' 2000 offering, when Laura Claridge's definitive Norman Rockwell biography, *Norman Rockwell, A Life* was published, museums and other institutions featured new exhibitions of Rockwell's work, and the *Four Freedoms* paintings saw a revival of their own in the 2018 publication of *Enduring Ideals: Rockwell, Roosevelt and the Four Freedoms*, in honor of the traveling exhibition of the four paintings.

In 2018, artist Hank Willis Thomas and photographer Emily Shur completed a series of reinterpretations of *Four Freedoms*, called "For Freedoms," complete with a casting of culturally diverse models for the photography shoot, mimicking Rockwell's placement of figures in *Four Freedoms*. Thomas and Shur's rendition of *Freedom of Worship* was used for the November 26, 2018 cover of *TIME* magazine. Thomas says that he initiated the project to "shine a light on the fact that artists' work is often political and shapes culture and society."[144] The original *Four Freedoms* paintings were created to project images inextricably tied to the American war effort during World War II, as preempted by President Roosevelt.

To simply replace the original figures, both diminishes Rockwell's work and only forms a new composition of characters, play-acting diversity for the sake of the type of anodyne image-making often alleged of Rockwell, Disney, Capra et al, with new feel-good replacements,

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[143] Herbert J. Gans, "Can Rockwell Survive Cultural Elevation," Chronicle of Higher Education 46, no. 33 (2000): B8.

[144] Fayemi Shakur, "Updating Norman Rockwell's 'Four Freedoms' for a Modern, Diverse America," New York Times, Mar. 12, 2018.

including celebrities for the added punch of irony. Much like one could view Rockwell's *Four Freedoms* as condescending; we can similarly see the Thomas reiteration as visually patronizing with a different pretense, except that the *Four Freedoms* are simply a springboard for a larger ethos through art. Starting in 2016, For Freedoms has grown into platform of over 800 artists nationwide.[145] In description of the cause and goals of For Freedoms, the organization's website states:

> Inspired by American artist Norman Rockwell's paintings of Franklin D. Roosevelt's Four Freedoms (1941)—freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear—For Freedoms' exhibitions, installations, and public programs use art to deepen public discussions on civic issues and core values, and to advocate for equality, dialogue, and civic participation. As a nexus between art, politics, commerce, and education, For Freedoms aims to inject anti-partisan, critical thinking that fine art requires into the political landscape through programming, exhibitions, and public artworks. In 2018, For Freedoms launched the 50 State Initiative: the largest creative collaboration in U.S. history.[146]

While the initial the renditions of *Four Freedoms* by the For Freedoms organization are similar to popular stand-in works inspired by *Freedom from Want*, the For Freedoms organization itself set a clear agenda, pivoting from Rockwell's originals.

At the outset of this research project, the many parodies and remakes of Rockwell's *Four Freedoms* were examined as possible focal points in understanding the original four images. *Freedom from Want* seemed to be a consistent go-to palette of cultural remaking since it has been manipulated and reintroduced most of the *Four Freedoms* paintings. A large portion of this research could have been such a project of remaking. But questioning such one-offs departs from the creative universe and visual rhetoric of Rockwell and perhaps produces diminishing understandings of *Four Freedoms* as a serious progenitor of American self-conceptualization during World War II. Such examination of redone illustrations also neglect questions of the

[145] Ibid.
[146] "About." For Freedoms, accessed May 8, 2019, http://www.forfreedoms.org/about.

symbolism inherent in the original works, their historical context, and the machinations of their cultural relevance to American art, and their legacy as war propaganda. The interest of this research was to investigate Rockwell's notable series as four cultural touchstones, understanding each as reflections of either morality or aspiration, each political conditions framed through illustration and mediated from the written boundaries of the speech, and mediated by Rockwell's temporal context of World War II.

What is important about Rockwell's *Four Freedoms*, relative to contemporary American culture is the effectiveness of these paintings to project elements of nationalistic crisis. Known for particular stylistic leanings toward photorealism, the "realism" of his work, along with the seemingly quaint themes within his paintings have mislead some critics and viewers to interpret his work as simplistic, narrow, "easy" depictions of American life, rife with sentiment, and G-rated for maximum inoculation of American publics who wish to imbibe upon such intoxication. Buy this assertion, the assumption that Rockwell only characterizes American people by way of a repeated caricature that is familiar to viewers, and the assertion that viewers believe this imagery despite its mythology, assume that there are certain tenets of American cultural identity that Americans want to self-superimpose. An indictment of Rockwell as a trafficker in cultural "low hanging fruit" simultaneously indicts viewers, the civilians who consume culture outside (or below) the boundaries of the avant-garde for a crime of gullible indulgence in satiating that which they identify.

While carefully crafted as a speech, the ideas inherent in the *Four Freedoms* as introduced to the populace by President Roosevelt, was not an itemized piece of legistlature. To the contrary, Roosevelt's *Four Freedoms* describe American identity traits that are essential to the American mythological trajectory of progress. These "freedoms" reiterate delineations of

identity, vocation, and the collective, self-defined resultant of prosperity and the supremacy of white, male American predecessors. Rockwell's four extractions of American values and their subsequent resonance reveal freedom in moral terms.

Four Freedoms identifies American identity as a medium itself. Whether a Disney production, a Frank Capra film, Thomas Kinkade's enterprise of mass produced works, or a Hallmark Channel production, each manipulate, present, and represent American struggle as requisite experience for global triumph, part and parcel with the achievement of moral and economic dominion. Rockwell's *Four Freedoms* reiterate American self-esteem and the distance between a current view and victorious postwar future. As documented by scholars of his work, Rockwell felt called to illustrate Roosevelt's spoken ego boost to the American public. As a reminder, Rockwell's illustrations, or images, or set of visual cues were created, published, and subsequently printed as posters once World War II progressed. Mass consumed forms of entertainment outside of the avant-garde are the nexus of American culture. This investigation could have contained more comparative analysis between Norman Rockwell and his contemporaries in fine art, or more specifically comparisons to Rockwell and other fine art artists who sought to depict the American experience. This investigation could have decided that Rockwell was an illustrator only and thus, should only be compared to other illustrators. But this study began to better understand that which is deemed as kitschy American sentimentalism—to explore assumed notions of nostalgia and creations of "feel-good" products.

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APPENDIX A: FIGURES

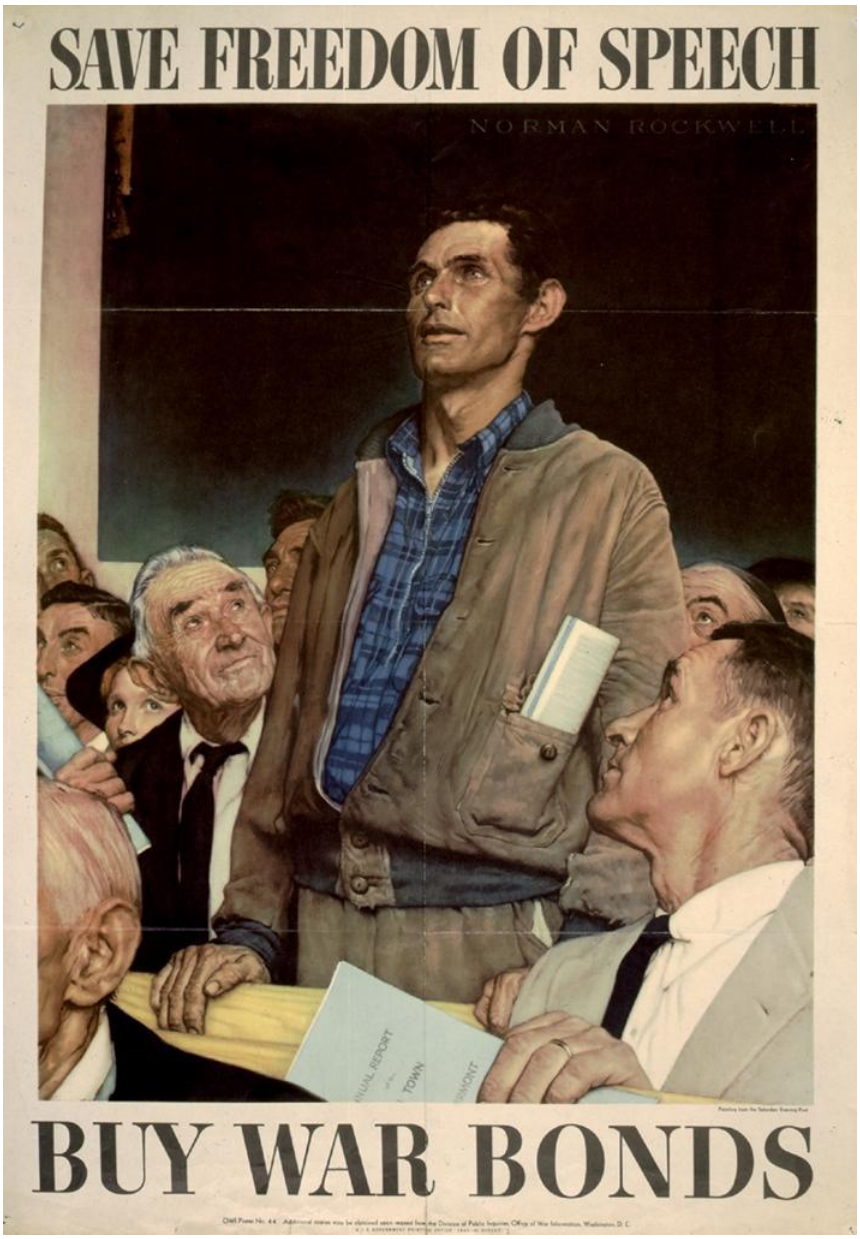

Figure 1 – *Freedom of Speech* (1943)

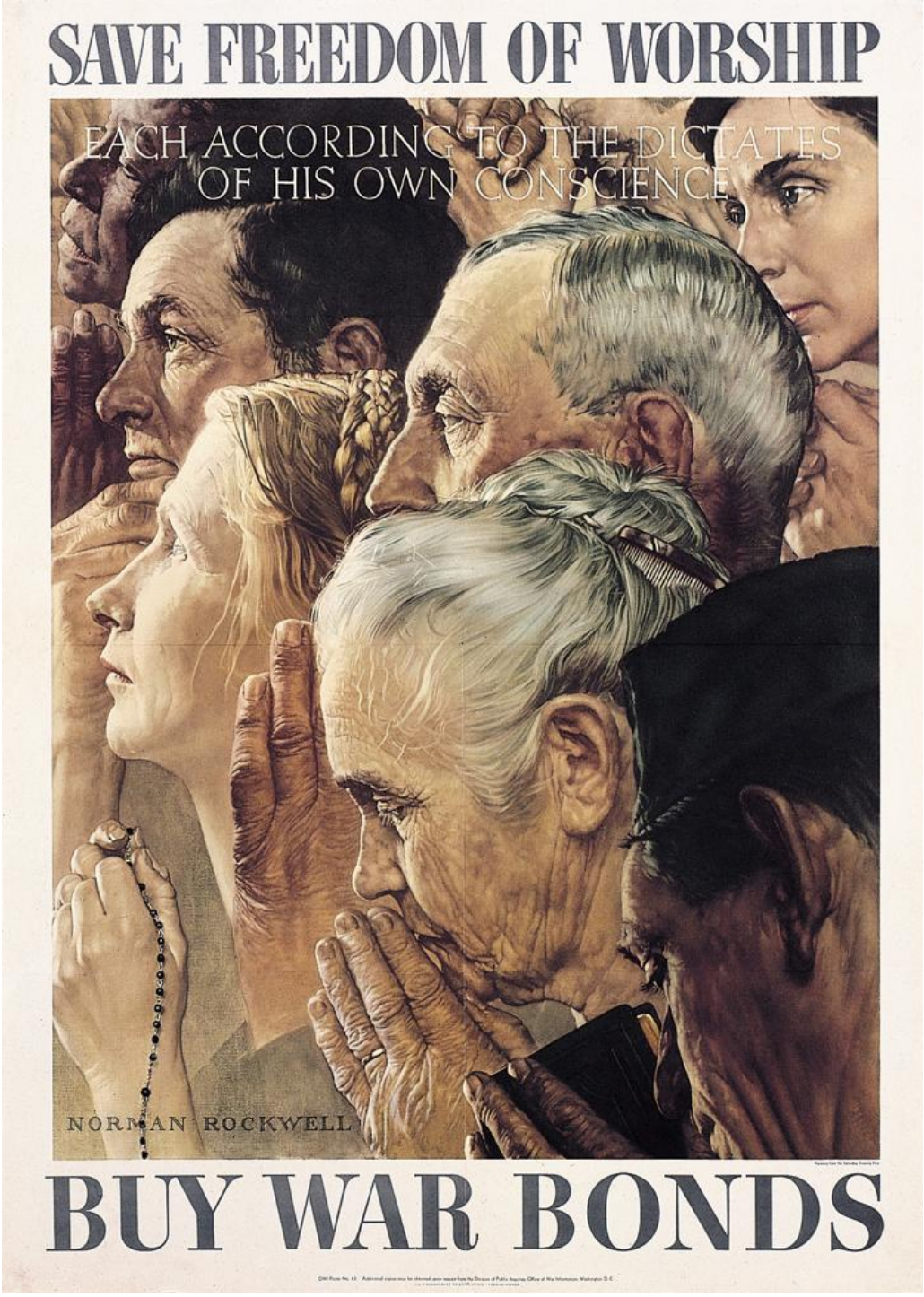

Figure 2 – *Freedom of Worship* (1943)

Figure 3 – *Saying Grace* (1951)

Figure 4 – *Freedom from Want* (1943)

Figure 5 – *The Gossips*

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Figure 6 – *Freedom from Fear* (1943)