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Norman Rockwell & Ben Shahn  
A visual commentary on American society

by  
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## Introduction





The idea underlying this thesis is that by examining the visual communication of an era, one can construct a picture of the attitudes and values, that exist at that time. This study will attempt to construct a picture of certain attitudes and values of American society at the beginning of this century by examining the work of Norman Rockwell and Ben Shahn.

Norman Rockwell and Ben Shahn were both artists - illustrators whose careers coincided, spanning the early and middle part of this century. The reasons for picking the medium of illustration in general and the work of these two men in particular to analyse social culture are quite deliberate. Firstly illustration was a major medium of communication during this period in America. Major technological advances took place in the area of print which elevated the art of illustration and which created a demand for images to supplement the pages of text. These advances included both the improved quality of the four colour printing process (full colour) and the speed with which printed material could be produced. Such major progress in production meant the





wider availability of quality printed material to American society at a reasonable price which enabled the development of mass communication. The thesis will consider the graphic illustration of this period and the attitudes they embody specifically with regard mainly to the work of Rockwell and Shahn.

Rockwell and Shahn were initially selected because of my admiration and regard for their work. But upon looking closer at these illustrators with a critical eye, I wanted to examine them in relation to their historical setting. I wanted to see how they projected their views and mental images of their contemporary American culture. Their work mirrored different aspects of American life. An attempt will be made to assess how <sup>Their</sup> work was absorbed by their audience and how it reflected the out look and behaviour of that culture.

I found a major contrast in Rockwell and Shahn's respective viewpoints. The main reason for their conflicting ideas and contrasting choice of subjects lies in their own completely diverse social and cultural backgrounds. This



point will be dealt with in a discussion of the cultural traditions to which each man belonged. Chapter One and Two will deal with these cultural traditions and the artists role within that setting.

Chapter One will deal with Norman Rockwell's white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant background (WASP). My approach will be to focus on the work of Rockwell and how through his illustration, he reflected the ideas and aspirations of the audience to whom he communicated. This WASP society which was predominant throughout America, had been built upon over much of the nineteenth century. It was the tradition of the majority.

In my opinion, this culture was made of two components. Firstly, it encompassed the old values of the nineteenth century moralists. This was a tradition of discipline and self-restraint. The black and white distinctions between evil and good were never doubted giving the foundation for a conservative hard working puritan work ethos. This Victorian ideology belonged to a particular set of





Americans. which made up Rockwells WASP society. The second component of this culture grew out of the new material advances and social changes of the early twentieth century. A new consumer society took its place within American culture through the progress of mass communication.(6p141)

Norman Rockwell's career, in illustration exists within this tradition. He took the old values of Victorian America and expressed them in terms of the new consumer society. The old values, moral standards and the puritan idea of clean living were combined with images of pleasure, attractive external appearance and achievement through consumption.(6,pp42-46) This is the context within which Rockwell will be examined. I found while reading material on Rockwell that generally not enough consideration was given to him as a "communicator" in the advertising sense of the word. He was selling a product, working as a major cover illustrator for The Saturday Evening Post in which each piece of work was seen by an average four million people.

A lot of discussion about his work was sentimental and nostalgic however





his ability to persuade in selling a product through his illustrative depictions has not been dealt with adequately in the literature. The main concern of the Art Directors he worked for was moving merchandise and his illustrations were used to support this.

Chapter one will also examine Rockwell's role within the graphic tradition to which he belonged. It will look at his technique, method and formula with which he worked, examining how these were used to dramatise the "American Dream". When looking at Rockwell's work at first one may think it to be an authentic and uncomplicated mirror of American society. Questions need to be raised about Rockwells selectively in his subject choice.

The second chapter will be concerned with an opposing cultural tradition to that discussed in Chapter One. Ben Shahn will be used to focus on the idea of social realism and how Shahn interpreted the society around him through graphic communication. It is an important consideration that Shahn was from a family which had emigrated to the United States during the first decade of the twentieth



century. He had been plucked at an early age from one cultural background and set down quite abruptly into a totally different one. This in my opinion gave him a more objective and critical eye. He was more inclined to question the values and behaviour of society. Through his drawings he wanted to make his audience reevaluate assumptions that existed as part of the consumer culture which prevailed. Shahn's approach and ideology in relation to illustration and advertising will be examined in this chapter looking at what impact he provoked through his work. Shahn worked extensively for the government during the depression years of the 'Thirties' in the W.P.A. (Work Progress Administration) and the F.S.A. the (Farmers Society Administration). His simplified technique is an important element as a method of clear communication and is a characteristic he wanted to keep throughout his career. His need to convey a sense of social consciousness to his audience was of uppermost priority. This will be seen more closely when examining the subject and content of his work.

Although the first two Chapters will examine the two cultural traditions separately





they existed and interacted together in shaping the views of American audiences. Chapter Three will contrast the traditions to which Rockwell and Shahn belonged. There will be an attempt to place both cultures into an historical prospective. Both Rockwell and Shahn's work was a response to the vast consumer culture that was taking shape. Rockwell worked within this consumer culture contributing to it through his work. Shahn was an outsider, commenting on the effects and the social divisions that formed as a by-product of consumerism.

Illustrators collect information from their visual environment which they then interpret. This Thesis will examine both men's interpretation of "reality" and how they presented it. Shahn and Rockwell took different elements from the visual environment they lived within so that conflicting perceptions of reality were expressed.

Rockwell's depictions of America can be misleading. The accuracy of his draftsmanship and attention to detail gives the impression of reality although the content of his



illustration conflicts with this view. I will examine this point with supporting references later. Ben Shahn's images give the viewer more freedom to form his own ideas on the subject matter he presents. Rockwell includes all the subtle evidence of reality in his work to persuade the viewer this is so. In contrast, Shahn leaves out unnecessary detail in the hope of achieving a simple means of communication. This point will be discussed, using illustrations of the same subject matter from each artist. The difference in how the subjects are individually handled will provide evidence as to the point of view each wanted to communicate to their audience.

Rockwell had a remarkable ability to look at the humorous trivial everyday happenings in life. He worked throughout his life to give form to positive and optimistic sentiments. This thesis wishes to show how Rockwell went even further than this. I'm not disputing that he had an optimistic, happy effect on people. An illustrator in my view has a crucial role in governing the cultural appetites of his/her day. No American of this period could possibly remain unaffected by the millions of pictures





circulated each week. Rockwell embraced the optimism and aspirations of an entire nation and in so doing played a part in shaping what is known as the American Dream.

The final theme will deal with this subject. Was the 'American Dream' a realistic aspiration? Rockwell and Shahn's work will be considered in relation to this very real phenomenon that took firm grip on the American public.



## Chapter One



## CHAPTER I

The cultural tradition within which Norman Rockwell grew up is an important consideration in examining how he communicated with his audience. He was born on the third of February, 1894 into a comfortable Anglo-Saxon Protestant middle class family. His Grandfather (mother's father) had emigrated to America from England and so his family took great pride in their English ancestry. Rockwell's father was a well to do gentleman, who often read Charles Dickens aloud to his young son. The Rockwells were a conventional conservative family and we can see evidence of the effect it had on the young Norman Rockwell as he grew up.

His domestic and formal education were always within the framework of conventional ideas and tradition that had been formed during and accepted since the early nineteenth century. Rockwell held these old fashion ideas throughout his illustrative career not questioning its assumptions.

The old values of this tradition had a firm base in the Victorian ideology of order







and stability. This was the English spirit of discipline and self-restraint. The home featured as the protector against vice, bad habits and immorality. These values were mainly expressed through the white middle class Protestant majority that prevailed (5pp157-158). Such old traditional ideas became more important in a culture that was subject to the changes of the twentieth century. The physical and economic climate were being radically transformed. With such fast moving changes comes a feeling of apprehension. People like to be well informed and in control of what's happening around them. Mechanisation and technology were invading every sphere of American life. To counteract such radical upheaval many people kept a firm grip on things that were recognisable and approachable - tradition. Rockwell provided a continuity of tradition through a period of many upheavals and changes of ideas. (But) He applied this subtly within the context of twentieth century consumerism. In Advertising the American Dream Roland Marchand discusses how the modern meaning to the "American Dream" meant subtly redefining the terms of its fulfilment. This idea can be applied to how Rockwell incorporated old fashion tradition



with advertising to give his audience the ideology of The American Dream.

The age of consumption was born through the advances of technology which in turn, lead to better communication and the development of mass media. The mass-media (in particular printed magazines, bill boards and posters, which this thesis deals with) were responsible for advertising the thousands of new products that were appearing on the market each year. Consumerism is the cultural term, applied to American Society and directly applies to the period of discussion which primarily concerns post World War I. American production moved faster than demand which led to competition. This is where advertising was needed. While looking back to a tradition of virtue and goodness the American public could go forward without sacrificing the fruits of progress. This is what the advertising people worked with in their attempts to persuade. Rockwell's job existed within this sphere. Rockwell reinforced his audience's sense of tradition when they looked at the cover illustration of The Saturday Evening Post. Let us consider Rockwells work in this light.







Illus. 1.1 Colgate tooth paste advertisement, Norman Rockwell, 1924 Literary Digest





Colgate toothpaste advertisement(illus. 1.1) is an image which goes with the caption 'If your wisdom teeth could talk, they'd say "Use Colgate's"'. Here we have a good example of the traditional values used to advertise a brand of toothpaste (the consumer product). It appeared in Literary Digest 1924. The illustration has no relationship to the product without the copy line, where toothpaste is equated with the virtues of the past. The nostalgic sentimental image of Youth and Old age is persuading the audience that the past is valued. This idealised image of the aged man passing on his knowledge to the young boy supports the optimistic notion of the American Dream. The image is acting upon the traditional needs of an audience in a consumer society. The Victorian ideology of 'The home, featuring as the protector against Vice, bad habits'(5p46) has been directly applied to the product of toothpaste. The aim, through using such a campaign was for the consumers to associate the product with more fundamental aspirations for their lives.





Graphic communication was providing the structured stability and tradition that may not have existed in real life. In a way it seems as if the visual images were a remedy for any defect in everyday reality by providing a more desirable reality. (Sp145) Norman Rockwell's theme of stability and tradition shows a defined methodology both in technique and formula. This will be discussed in relation to his ability of persuasion.

#### TECHNIQUE

The sheer quality and quantity of work carried out by Rockwell stands as evidence as to how professional and meticulous he was in his approach to illustration. His reputation does not stand merely on a few masterpieces but on the production of thousands of images produced over a period of sixty years. By taking a closer look at how Rockwell constructed an illustration one will learn some of the devices he employed in creating his images. He had many considerations in choosing subject matter. His illustrations, each edition of The Saturday Evening Post, were seen by over four million people each week spanning the whole of







Illus. 1.2 Doctor & Doll, Saturday Evening Post cover Norman Rockwell



Illus. 1.2b Boy with Baby Carriage, Post cover Norman Rockwell





the United States. The subjects needed to be universally applicable to American Society without offensiveness. Doctor and Doll (illus. 1.2) is a good example. We can see at first observation, Rockwell's respect and sympathy in his treatment of both characters. The doctor allays the fear of the child by examining her doll with a sincerity in his face that makes him very likeable. But consider this illustration as a piece of commercial art. This is one of over three hundred Post covers he did and is in the true Rockwell spirit. He had a remarkable talent for projecting a 'perception of reality'. The front cover of a magazine is its initial selling point and it is there to create an impression on the consumer. In the year 1900 the Post was selling about three hundred thousand copies a year. In ten years this number rose to five million copies sold a year. Rockwell had a part to play in the increase of its popularity. He made his debut issue in 1916 with Boy with Baby Carriage (illus. 1.2b). Doctor and Doll (illus. 1.2) shows how selective he was in choosing subject matter. There is no statement on society being issued. The surrounding environment in which the characters are set suggests conservative old fashioned tradition.





There are no conflicting ideas that question the assumptions presumed by society. This is the preconceived assumption of what a doctor's room should look like. The draftsmanship of the execution here removes any doubt in the viewer's mind regarding the reality of the depiction. All doctors in society are reassuring, conservative, humorous and old fashion in tradition? I doubt it. But maybe Rockwell's depiction of a cliché can suggest to the audience that this is so. It becomes a slick generalisation which the audience might consequently impose on real life.

His technique firstly involved collecting visual information that was needed to make the illustration. This included gathering props and commissioning suitable models to pose as the characters. If we study the (illus 1.2) by letting our eyes wonder around the work, we find that every last detail has been included, from the buckle on the doll's shoe to the facial expression on the doctor. Nothing has been forgotten. The inclusion of every piece of visual detail, in my opinion persuades the audience that this is an "authentic" picture. No detail is left unresolved, no loose brush stroke obstructs the meticulous detail.





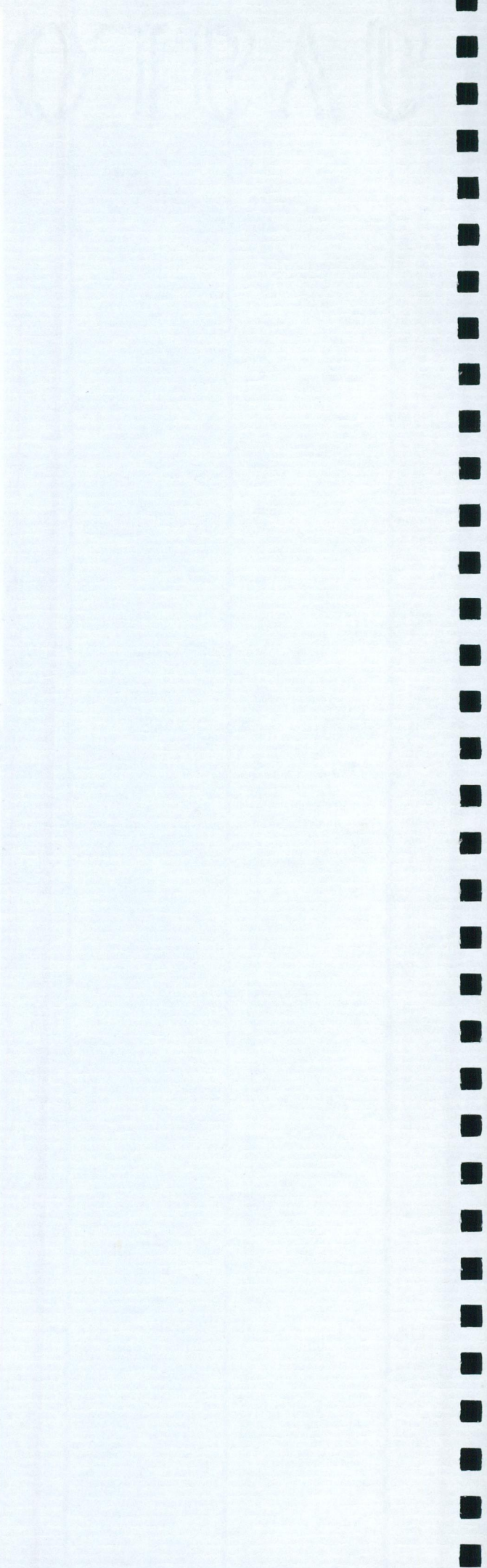
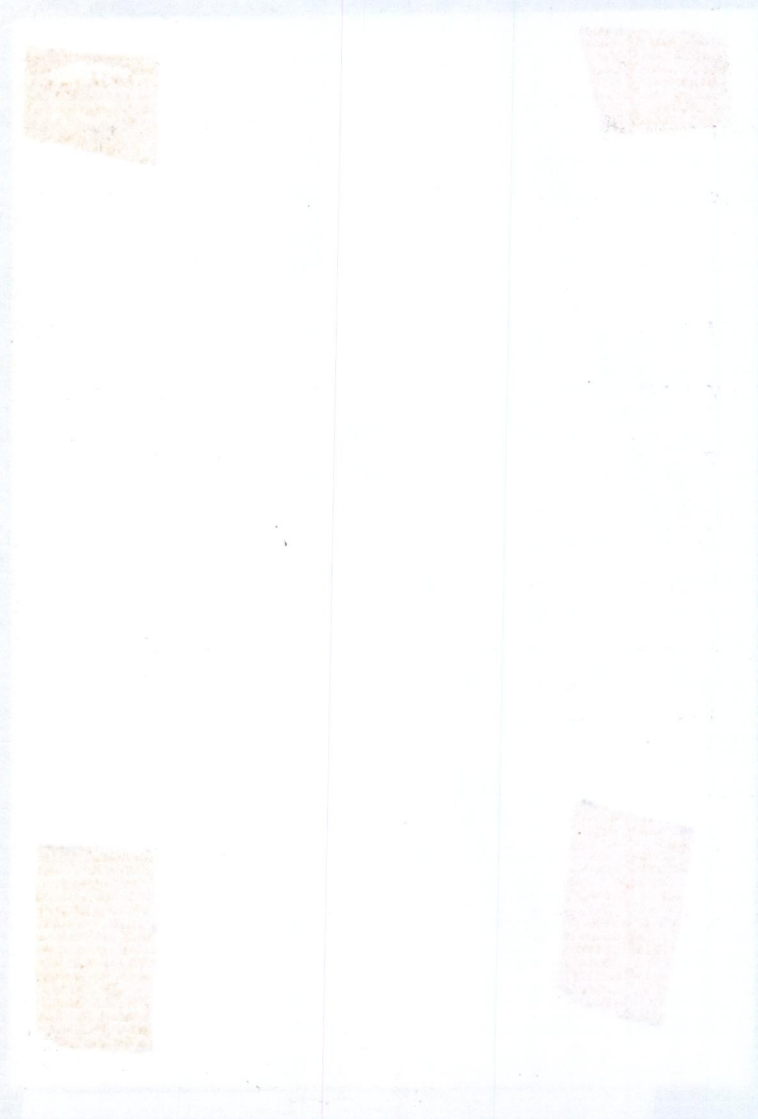


Illus. 1.4 The Gossips Post cover Norman Rockwell 1948



Illus. 1.3 Man painting flag pole Post cover Norman Rockwell





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Nothing has been left to the audience's imagination.

The people who bought the magazine became the consumers of the tradition Rockwell promoted in his illustration. The urban city environment had replaced the small towns and farming communities which meant a large number of people became isolated and lonely in the upheaval. Rockwell provided a sense of familiarity and friendliness through his portrayed of the helping professions and the next door neighbour characters. The Gossips (illus 1.4) gives an example of the humorous interaction between friends and neighbours that possibly gave the consumer a sense of belonging and familiarity. Also, the previous illustration (illus. 1.2) is of a helping profession; medicine (a popular theme Rockwell used over and over again) gives the audience a sense of therapeutic ministry (4p 207). These people portrayed were the ordinary people you'd meet everyday and often the characters Rockwell used appeared in many different forms and vocations. Man painting flagpole (illus. 1.3) was a familiar character who appeared from time to time in many different situations.





From the illustrations used as examples, there are no pressing social and moral questions being asked. Rockwell mentioned in his autobiography that it was not within his sphere to comment on social or controversial issues (18,p1-2). He fitted well into a profession where nobody was to be offended as everybody was a potential 'buyer'.

His art directors at the Post wanted to divert attention away from the idea that they were 'sellers' whose aim was to lure their consumer into buying the Post.

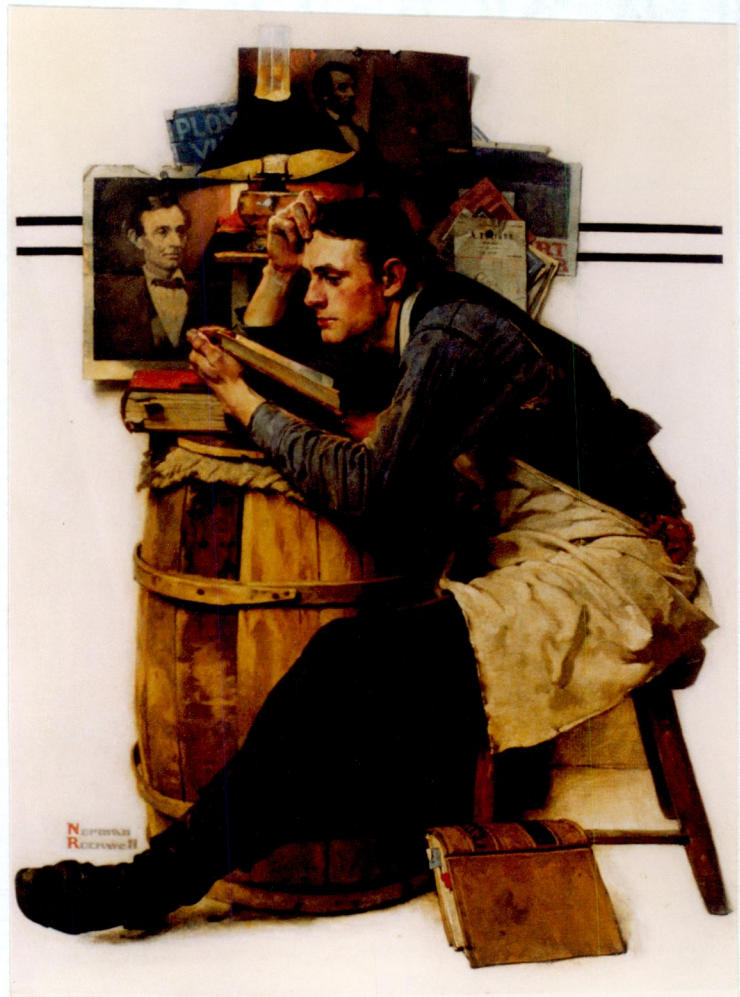
#### ROCKWELL AS STORYTELLER

Rockwell employs another technique to persuade his audience by reinforcing his perspective of American Society.

'Storytelling', he said was what he enjoyed doing most - giving the audience a story through images. Looking at this characteristic storytelling becomes a vehicle for providing a moral code of living. The advertisers wanted to associate a way of living





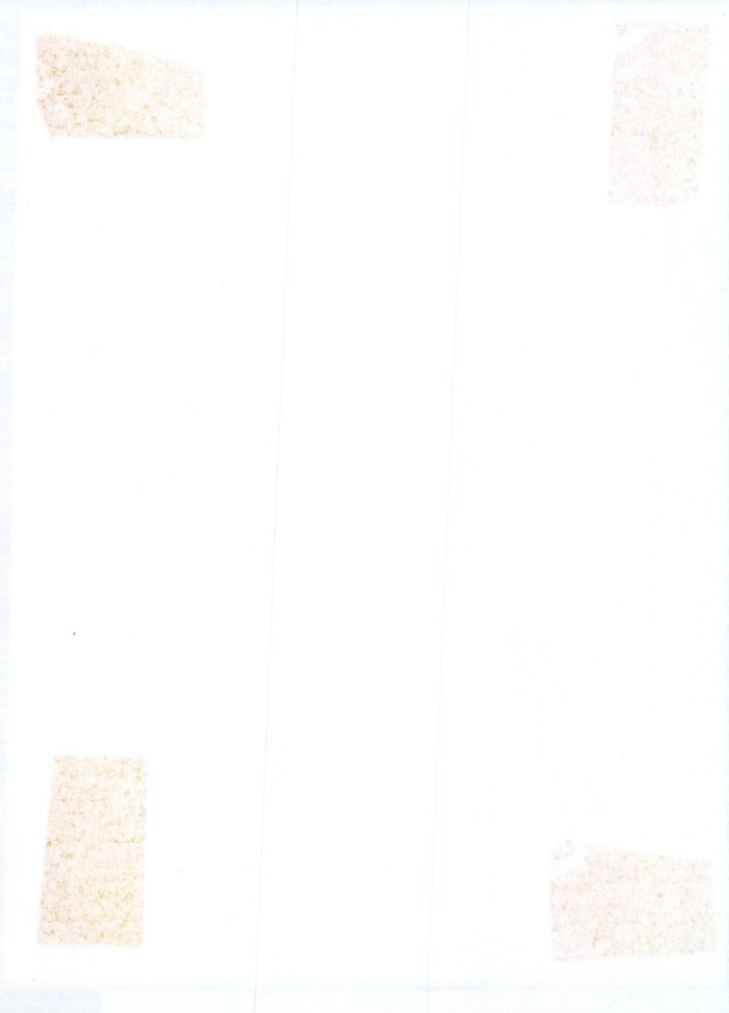
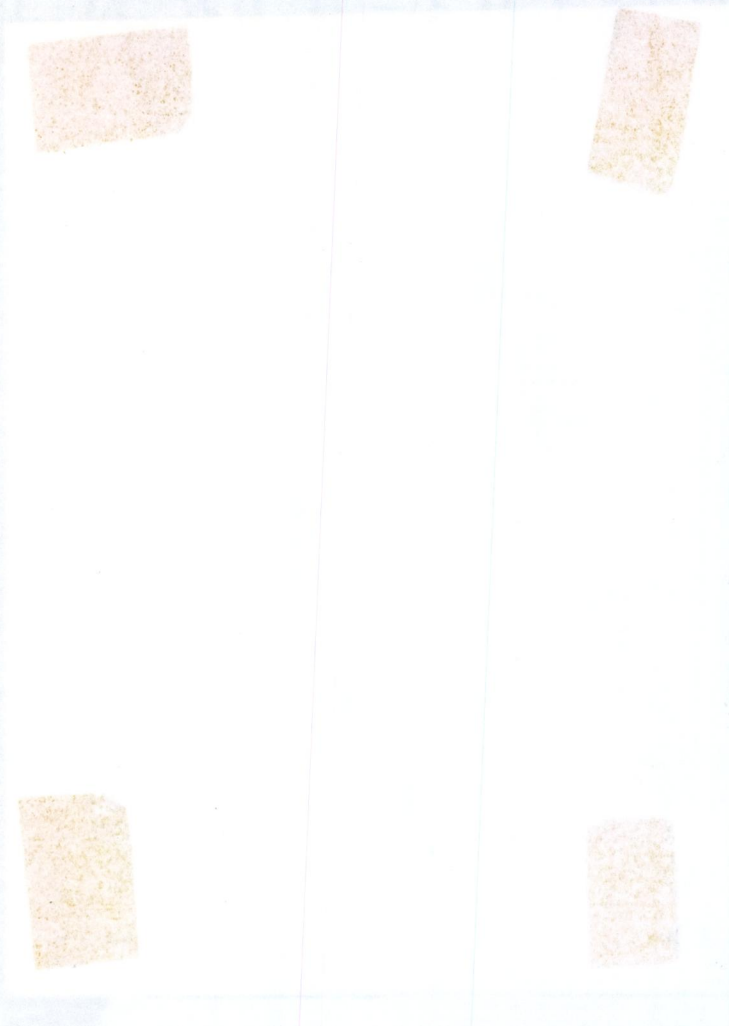


Illus. 1.5 The Law Student Post cover Norman Rockwell 1927



Illus. 1.6 Woman at Vanity Post cover Norman Rockwell 1933





with their product. It was a parable for the consumer.

The law student (illus. 1.5) is a good example to show this point. Here, there is more than a story in Rockwell's illustration. The old tradition of hard work and discipline is combined with American history. On the wall, behind the young man are images of past presidents of the U.S.A. The books he reads have an old and traditional look about them. Such icons from the past are acting as inspiration for this young law student. The parable within this work, communicates to the audience that tradition and hard work are the most important ingredient of success, gives us the view that anybody can be anything in the U.S.A. no matter what social background they come from. There is no evidence of the technology and machine world that existed at this time. This Post cover appeared in February 1927 but from the evidence of the law student's surrounding this could easily be 1827.

Such mystification of American history in a twentieth century setting of consumerism asks





the question - what is a truthful attempt at authentic portrayal? Excellent technical draftsmanship is not the only component needed for a truthful presentation of reality. "Advertising the American Dream " discusses that (the concept) to persuade people you don't change their ideas radically, but incorporate their ideas in some wider dimension of meaning (4px1x). This concept can be applied to how Rockwell worked. Rockwell incorporated the conservative middle class puritan work ethos into a culture of consumerism, through this storytelling technique.

It mentions in Norman Rockwell Artist and Illustrator that one could 'regard Rockwell's work and career as a popular History of American Society (2p27). If this statement is true this account of American history would be very misleading. Rockwell himself admits his themes were based on what he wanted the world to be like (18p2). (By critically examining what he wanted the world to be like.) However if you were to regard Rockwell as a documentation of



what American society was like, the mirrored image would be one of distortion. In his work there is no evidence of the 'thirties' Depression, the machine age only manifested in the odd automobile or telephone and cityscapes were very rarely illustrated.

The main reason his work has very little relationship with actual events and happenings is because he was selling the people what they wanted. Many books concern themselves with 'his devotion to average America' (2p21) but you could say likewise that they were the target market in an advertising strategy.

Rockwell has the whole idea worked out before he starts the process of executing the work. The technique is not, in my opinion, a creative struggle but a means to a preconceived illustration. The creative aspect appears to be of secondary importance to the outcome of the work. The subject matter can be included under the heading of a formula as the themes are very selective. They're always optimistic, trivial, attractive and humorous. The subject matter and content in his work maintain their consistency through all the historical





happenings in American Society. All the illustrations I have used so far as references have the same common denominator in relation to a particular style and formula.

Woman at Vanity (illus. 1.6) is a Post cover from October 1933. The glamorous young woman is in direct contrast to the cultural climate of this period: America was in the midst of economic depression. This illustration doesn't project what was happening in American society at this time. It does give a clear idea of the tastes and hopes of that society. The Stock Market had crashed in 1930 most of the farming land in the midwest and south of the United States had suffered terrible soil erosion. A large amount of people were left poverty stricken, yet Rockwell presents an optimistic almost perfectly utopian world. For consumers Rockwell provided escapism from the less pleasing reality of everyday life.



## Chapter Two





## CHAPTER 2

Ben Shahn existed within a cultural tradition different to the one which Norman Rockwell belonged. Shahn was born in 1898 in Lithuania and emigrated with his family to the United States in 1906. His beginnings in Russia gave him an appreciation for letter making and drawing. The heritage was an apparent influence on his approach to his career as a visual communicator. He moved to the United States at the age of eight which changed and questioned a lot of the traditional Hebrew tradition to which he was accustomed. The rural life of Lithuania seemed timeless to the young Ben Shahn, while in New York he found the people never seemed to have enough time, most of their time was spent rushing around. He had to learn the English language and alphabet (which he later grew to love) and found it strange that his young contemporaries couldn't carve or draw.

This upheaval of beliefs and culture to which he was accustomed gave him the enquiring, questioning mind that became well exercised in



his work throughout his career. He wanted to comment on society around him:

'I have heard and seen my environment being built around me and above my head' (5,p.184).

This in my opinion sums up adequately Shahn's ideology about the tradition within one exists. He sees it as important to take from your surroundings making you observe life as it happens. He had been plucked from one cultural background and set down in a completely alien one. This meant he had no preconceived assumptions about this new American society. His culture existed in the present tense and his concerns were for the changing environment as it happened before his eyes.

We look at Rockwell living within a particular social class that had distinct cultural ideas and ties. Let us consider the social surroundings of Shahn in New York.

Life was difficult for the Shahn family at first. Along with many immigrants in New York at the time, Ben Shahn's parents worked





hard in often dangerous and unhealthy factories. When arriving in the States they entered the hierarchy of class structure at the lowest level, experiencing a lot of the inequalities and poverty first hand. By the time Shahn reached his early teens it was decided by his parents that he would begin a lithographic apprenticeship. This provided Shahn with an assured income throughout the beginning of his career which he could depend on while examining his direction as a communicative artist. His appreciation for lettering and draftsmanship was reaffirmed during his time as apprentice. This beginning in life gave Shahn an attitude towards life that interacted with his Jewish immigrant culture.

His approach to each new problem was not in terms of his own style but in the terms the particular problem demands (5, p128). He thought observation and perception to be two of the most outstanding qualities of the human being for communication. These are the two characteristics which stand out most in his work when he commented on American society. These will be looked at in detail. All his



inspiration came from the happenings in everyday life which he constantly observed and studied. He gathered information through photography, reading, travelling, writing and drawing. He saw every form of human interaction as visual material for communication. This will be discussed further in examining how Shahn's technique allowed him to communicate with society.

During Ben Shahn's apprenticeship with a lithographer which he commenced at the age of fourteen, he learned respect for technical skill and dedication to detail. During this period Shahn attended the National Academy of Design and New York University by night. He studied science at New York University where he won a study scholarship (which if he'd taken, could have changed the whole direction of his career). During the twenties he spent four years living and studying in Paris. During this time he spent much of this time travelling Europe and North Africa and while in Paris he studied the French style of painting and drawing. At the end of the decade Shahn reevaluated his career. At this stage in his life he felt he had read the right books



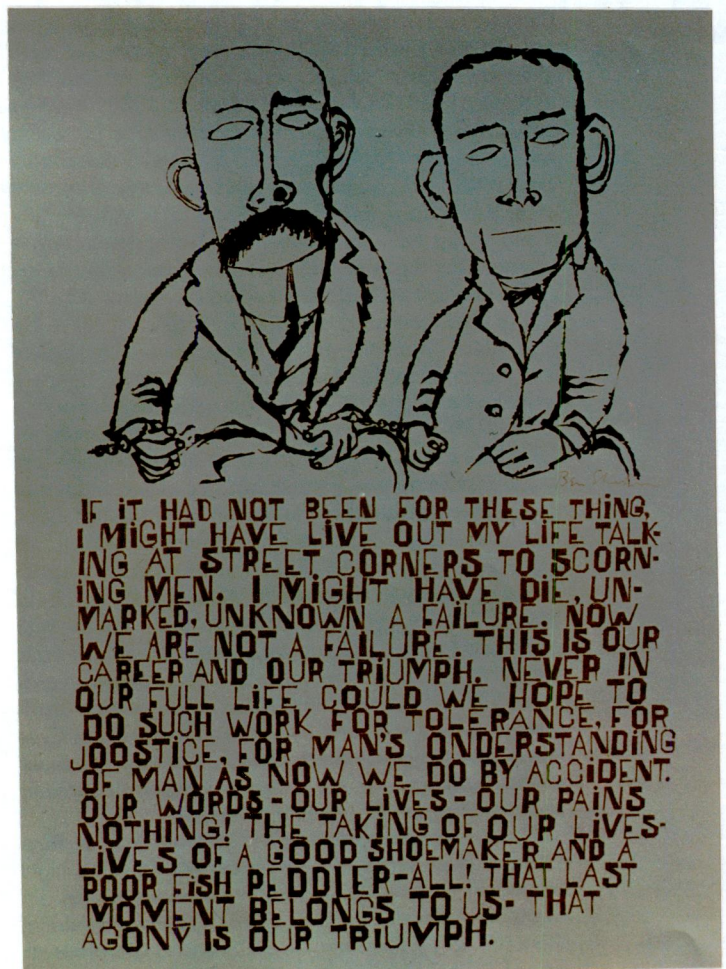


been to the best museums and travelled most of Europe and North Africa. His real passion was for storytelling and communicating to an audience. It was while in Paris he came across the Dreyfus case. He collected newspaper cuttings and photography about the case becoming very interested in the plight of the two immigrants.

Bartolomeo Vanzetti and Nicola Sacco, both Italian immigrants, were accused of killing a paymaster and his guard in South Braintree New England and stealing \$16,000. The two men were found guilty even though the evidence against them proved contradictory.

It was through the portrayal of this subject that Shahn found his true gift to communicate to an audience. Before this time he had been searching for the perfect subject but he began to realise through communicating what was ordinary that he could heighten a subject to make it extraordinary. Shahn made 23 gouach paintings based on the theme of the Dreyfus case in 1930. The prints he made inspired by these paintings mark a distinct style and show many overall characteristics of

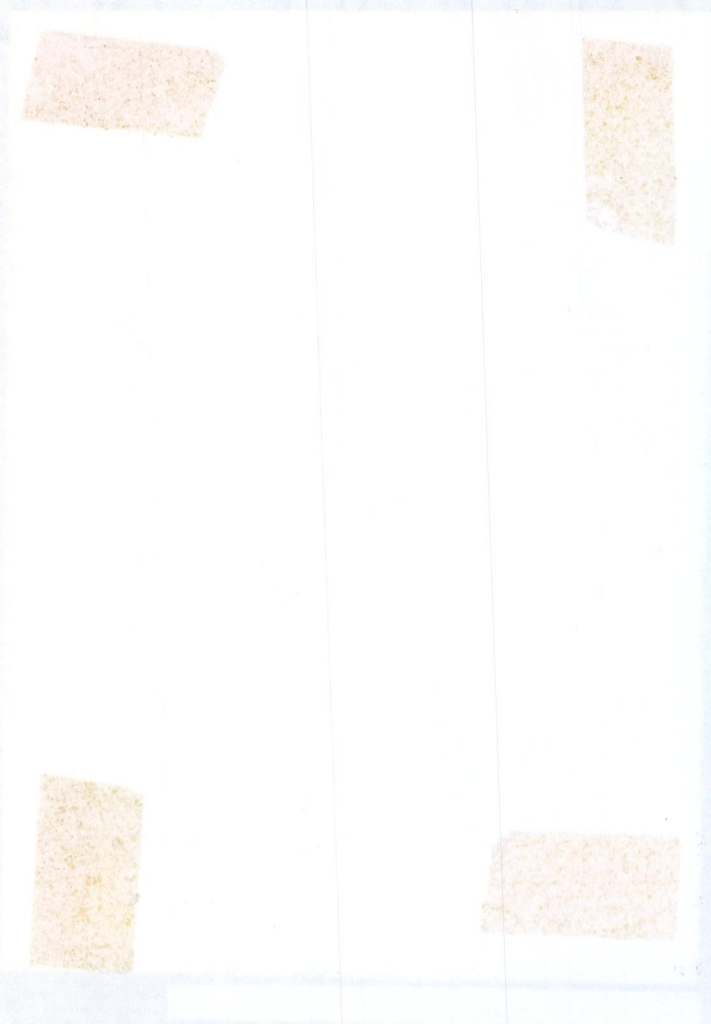




Illus. 2.1

Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti Ben Shahn





his commitment to direct communication.

Direct communication with an audience was the most important consideration for Shahn (5,126) Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti (illus 3.1) can be considered in relation to this statement here Shahn presents a very simplified line drawing of the two accused. At first observation it may seem naive or even crude. The quality of his line drawing is rough and almost reluctant looking. Why has Shahn been so minimal in his portrayal of the two accused? In his hope to communicate Shahn has left out all unnecessary detail; he is getting back to the simplest statement possible. The viewer of his work, I feel has to become actively involved in forming an opinion on the subject and completing the rest of the picture. Shahn combines the image with a personalised folk-lettering type-face. This type-face was based on a collection of hand lettering Shahn compiled while travelling the States in the thirties during the depression. The uneven weight of the lettering halts the readability of the piece which makes the reader focus on the meaning of each word. Because Shahn was an immigrant himself maybe it made him feel more responsible to communicate the plight of





minority groups.

His consideration of a graphic problem is first priority. He approaches the problem by clearing the ground of previous assumptions about the subject and try's as best he can to look at the subject as if he is looking at it for the first time (6pp xx-xxi). In the growing technological and advertised world around him he felt there was a growing distance between the senses and the 'real world'. He supported this idea in many talks and writing about art by saying that the machine can absorb our emotions and contain our soul. He thought that so much we live with and experience today has become devoid of personality (11p467). Shahn's hope through communication was to bridge the gap between our environment and the human spirit.

Let us consider The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti in this regard. Shahn's treatment of the figures seems odd and disproportionate. The head's seem over sized in relation to the rest of their bodies. Shahn disregards the





idea of what the human figure should look like. The emphasis on their heads heightens the vulnerability and pathetic fate of the two immigrants. His treatment is a very personalised statement.

What kind of feeling is Shahn giving his audience through such a portrayal? Shahn totally avoids the aesthetic approach so as not to give an advertised feeling to his subject. In a world where most visual communication existed in the form of advertising, a distinct difference needed to be made. Shahn wasn't selling a product or a particular way of life. He presented the ordinary and often unnoticeable with a humanist input. Shahn relied heavily on newspaper photographs to create his portrayals. To the newspaper reader of the day, the facts of the trial would have been readily identifiable. Therefore, his aim was to give his audience a new way of seeing the trial. Shahn always considered the relationship between the subject he portrayed and his audience. When one views a photograph the message is literal, it is more objective than an illustration. Shahn demands more of a response from the viewer through such a



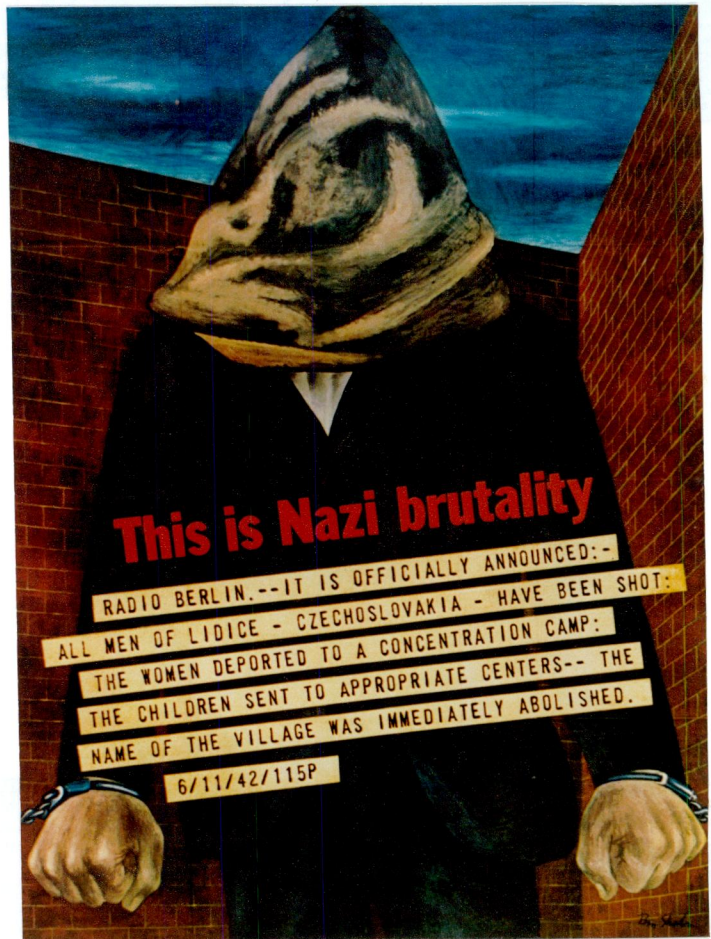
simplistic portrayal.

Shahn spent many years during the 'thirties' depression in Government employment, highlighting and documenting the devastation of the depression. During this time he worked with Walker Evans on the FSA (Farm Security Administration) in the photography unit. This photographic period between 1935 and 1938 will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three. Let us consider his poster design. One of his most powerful posters was This is Nazi brutality (illus. 2.2) Shahn has captured emotion remarkably well. The hooded man stands enclosed surrounded by a red brick wall showing a vanishing skyscape disappearing in the distance. Tragedy and despair are emphasised by the hood on the victims head. The intensity is read in the emotion of the man's clenched fists.

Shahn shows immense ability for perception and observation by his treatment of hands. Cats Cradle (illus. 2.3) is in direct contrast to the weightily aggressive hands depicted in This is Nazi brutality (illus. 2.2). This simple yet complex game of Cats Cradle is brilliantly

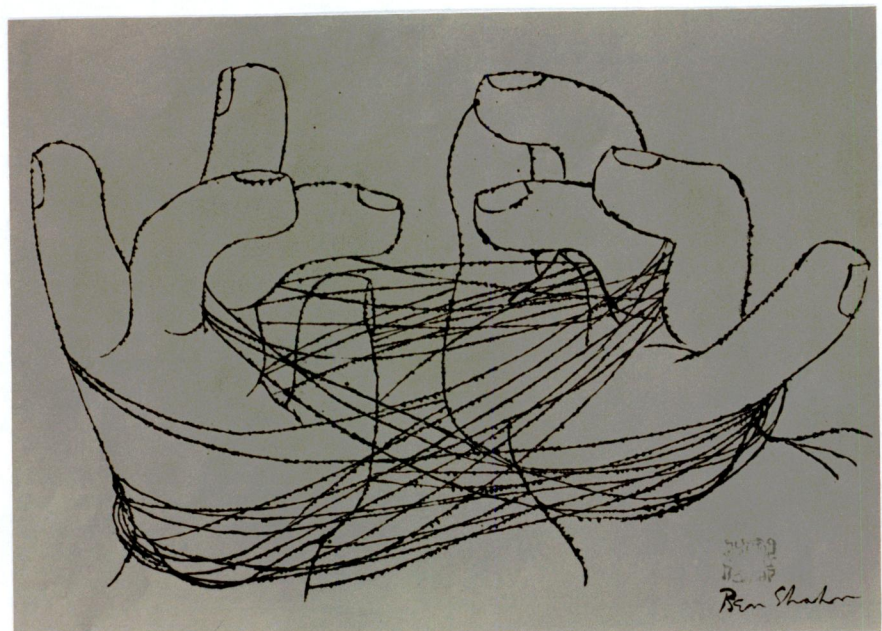






Illus. 2.2

This is Nazi Brutality F.S.A poster Ben Shahn 1942



Illus. 2.3

Cats Cradle Ben Shahn print





Illus. 2.5 Seward Park Ben Shahn painting 1936



observed. A painting which encompasses Shahn's sympathy and humanism for the many underprivileged minority groups, that didn't really fit into the ideals of the American Dream, is Seward Park (illus. 2.5). This whole painting is devoid of all unnecessary detail. This painting was completed in 1936 during the depression and focuses on the plight of the 'little people'; jobless, middle aged men on street corners and sitting on park benches, sharing tales of their misfortune.

Shahn has simplified the figures of the four men into basic shapes of colour and heaviness. Illus 2.5 shows the forgotten people in the rush towards capitalism. He observed the strengths and frailties of the human character, viewing with a critical eye the relationship of man to society around him. Shahn understood the social power of images and wanted to use communication as a weapon. We can see the direct contrasts between slick commercial advertisement and the dull shabby image of these men in Seward Park.





## Chapter Three



### CHAPTER 3

Norman Rockwell and Ben Shahn have been considered individually in Chapter One and Two but with regard to their relationship to society they need to be compared and contrasted. This chapter will discuss the contrast between the cultural tradition to which Rockwell and Shahn belonged in the context of American society at this time. Each man reflects a different message through his work mirroring different aspects of American life. Already discussed in this thesis are Rockwells and Shahn's cultural backgrounds and how this dictated their respective direction as communicators.

Rockwell belonged to the realm of publicity and advertising. Over his lifetime he illustrated over three hundred Evening Post covers and accepted commissions from more than one hundred and fifty companies. Looking at this enormous amount of work, there are many similar characteristics in style and content. Shahn's work reacts against the Utopian world of advertising and Rockwell's type of illustration. The overall theme in Shahn's





work attempts to reaffirm the relationship of man to his environment, whatever this environment may be. Through observation and perception he wanted to give back to his audience a statement about themselves. His hope in each image was to raise questions to the viewer about the image.

Because Rockwell and Shahn are communicators there are social implications in their work. A most distinctive characteristic in Rockwell's work is the nostalgic and traditional aspect. What sort of message does this give his audience and why was he so successful with his approach? Rockwell makes associations with the past in his illustrations because it suggests cultural authority. The consumer products for which he illustrates acquire a form of dignity which seems superior to any vulgar material interest.

John Berger reiterates this point in his general views on publicity. He explains that publicity in essence is nostalgic, selling the past to the future. It cannot itself supply the standards of its own claims and so all its references to quality are bound to be



retrospective and traditional (1,p57). But by looking to the past a whole range of values and meanings which are active in society have been left out which makes the content of the work selective (3p12). How has Rockwell done this? The vast majority of Rockwells characters are the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant Americans (WASPS) who exist predominantly within the middle class. James Guimond, in talking about American culture of this period, makes the point that selecting and organising certain values and meanings from the past becomes a process of incorporation and exclusion in which the values and social practices of some citizens are repeated and included while those of others are excluded or neglected (3,p12). This selection of one particular race, tradition and social class was referred to in American photography and the American Dream as having the power of creating a corporate culture (3p12). This idea is very evident in Rockwell's illustration. A Scout is Loyal (illus 3.1) is one of many illustrations Rockwell did on the subject of American boy scouts. Here we have an image of a young boy scout with the half-tone dream imagery of the American flag; Abraham Lincoln, George







Illus. 3.1

A Scout is Loyal Norman Rockwell, Boy Scout Calender





102. *The Yarn Spinner*. *Post* cover,  
November 8, 1930

103. *The Letterman*. *Post* cover,  
November 19, 1938

Illus. 3.2 The Letterman *Post* cover Norman Rockwell 1938



Illus. 3.3 100th Year of Baseball *Post* cover 1939

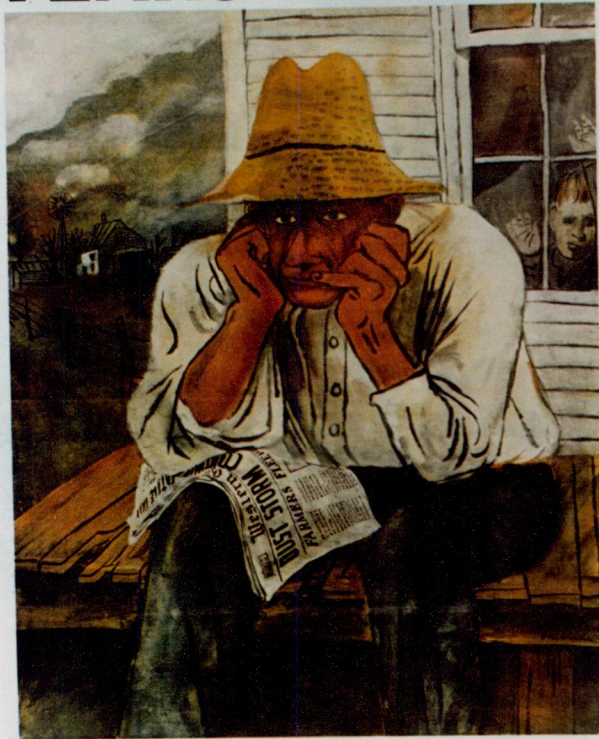
Washington and the American eagle behind him. This is pure glorification of American history. The Utopian idealisation in this image is the type of work that made society believe in the American Dream.

The American dream encompassed the idea that all Americans were part of a huge network of entities despite the fact that American society was made up of many different racial cultural and economic entities(3p217). Rockwell strengthens this belief The letterman (illus. 3.2) and The 100th Year of Baseball (illus. 3.3) are just, two on the subject of the sports community. In Rockwells work his subjects always belong cheerfully and willingly to a society that makes them happy and prosperous. But is this an honest depiction of society? In a society that incorporated 13 million immigrants from Europe during the first three decades of the twentieth century was it naive to portray such a 'corporate culture; such an ideal monocultural society? If Rockwell was catering for an audience that made up the majority of society then he equally excluded the minority groups.



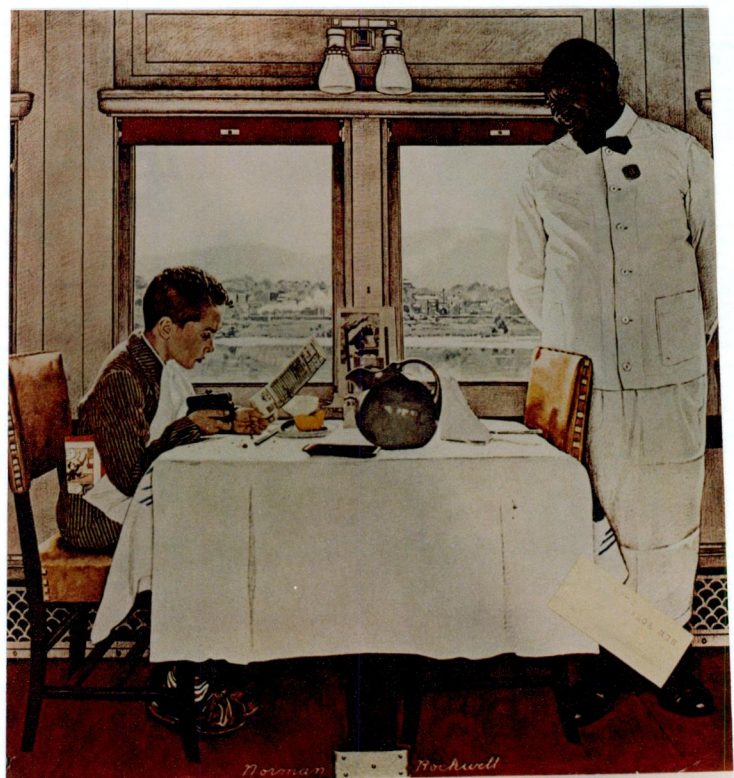


# YEARS OF DUST



**RESETTLEMENT ADMINISTRATION**  
**Rescues Victims**  
**Restores Land to Proper Use**

Illus. 3.5      Years of Dust F.S.A. Poster Ben Shahn 1936



71. New York Central Diner. Post cover, December 7, 1946

Illus. 3.4      Boy and Servant Post cover Norman Rockwell 1946





Ben Shahn spent much of his later life lecturing to students. These lectures are based mainly on his observations of his career as a graphic artist. On a talk he gave in 1950 at the Franklin School in New York City he spoke out against glamourisation in Advertising calling it the 'sacharine prettification of fact' (Sp126). He went on to say that some advertising art has immunized the public against communicating public information (Sp 126). Rockwell in my observation presented narrow visual clichés. Take the example of the Post cover, December 1946 (illus. 3.4) This seems to be the first illustration Rockwell did including a subject that was black. But the portrayal here is consistent with the ingrained beliefs of Rockwell's WASP community. He shows this black waiter to be happy and content within his social status while he attends to the upper class boy. No questions are asked and no challenges are made to the long held attitudes of social status at that time.

Ben Shahn's attitude on commercial art seems quite opposed to the ideology of what Rockwell illustrated. Shahn accused such work to be spoiling public taste (Sp126). Shahn





believed the public audience would respond more readily to a bit of brilliant observation than they would to the idealisation of fact. Throughout his career he saw authentic communication to be his main responsibility. Shahn saw every aspect of life and human experience to be worthy of attention in the hope of honest communication. Rockwell left an impression on his audience that society was made up of well ordered contented groups. Shahn in contrast took a look at the world, challenging the long held notions of justice, freedom and prosperity. Shahn observed the plight of the little people, the minority groups that were outside the accepted version of Rockwells American Dream. During the thirties Ben Shahn was part of the FSA which highlighted the devastation of the depression on great numbers of American Farmers. Years of Dust (illus 3.5) was a poster Shahn illustrated in 1936 concerning the problems facing a hopeless farmer. In contrast with Rockwells work there is no glamourisation of this scene. I feel Shahn is trying to put across the idea in an anti-aesthetic way. His use of muddy browns and greys certainly doesn't lend aesthetic appeal to the portrayal. Where in



the American Dream does this man belong? The community of this impoverished farmer was not a society Americans looked to, to cheer them up during the depression (3p106).

This farmer doesn't fit neatly into the aspirations of the American Dream. Instead, by showing one individual farmer and his despair, Shahn hopes to provoke public concern and sympathy. The farmer is seen as more than a statistic in the newspapers. Families are involved.

Shahn and Rockwell both have conflicting ideas in their interpretation of reality. Their interpretations act as a defining force on how their respective images were read. What sort of attitudes do Rockwell and Shahn reflect to American society? In 1949 Shahn and Rockwell covered the same subject matter, both illustrating for front covers of magazines. Television was the topic. Shahn's illustration appeared on the front cover of Fortune and Rockwell's work was for the Post. Their individual answers to the same brief are interesting and in many ways support my assessment of how they communicate to American

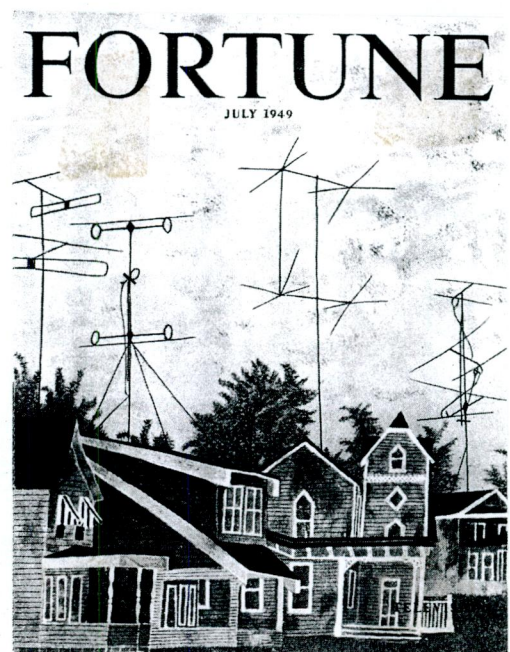






Illus. 3.6

Man with Television Aerial Post cover Norman Rockwell 1949



Illus. 3.7

Television Aerials Fortune cover Ben Shahn 1949



Society. Rockwell's illustration (3.6) is literal. We see the workman on the roof of this jolly mans house in the act of installing this new and exciting form of entertainment, the television. Every last detail has been included in the work. Rockwell paid as much attention to illustrating, the flower box as he did to the subject of the work, the television antenna. The representation is practically photographic. Ben Shahn's illustration (3.7) in my opinion, provides the viewer with more information. The viewer is not given the same wealth of detail as Rockwell has given but Shahn provides a more direct form of communicating an idea to the audience. This group of houses, each with their enormous antenna is caricatured to emphasize the effect television was having on the lives of the American people at this time. Shahn has observed the television aerals as clutter in the environment. The protrayal of the aerals is the simplest possible, using minimal line drawings in their representation. My personal preference is for Shahn's perspective on the subject.





Rockwell and Shahn used photography quite extensively for collecting visual information. Shahn, while working for the government, transferred from the Graphic Communication sector of the FSA into the photographic department where (after) he became an unofficial member of the team working under Roy F. Stryker. Shahn worked with Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Russel Lee, about a dozen in all, to produce some 270,000 negatives documenting the life patterns of American society during the years of the depression. Between 1935 and 1938 Shahn travelled over most of the South and Midwest of America documenting the lives of farmers, miners, cottonpickers - everybody affected by the plight of the depression. This project was to document how the American Dream went wrong. They communicated the conditions under which the poor Americans lived and showed the effects the nations hard times had on actual men, women and children. Shahn was very well suited to this form of work. He opposed mass communication that stereotyped public information. The relationship of man to his environment was always foremost in his mind. He helped Styker understand that it was not enough to photograph factual 'conditions' clearly. The photographer,



Shahn believed, had to try to show the effects they had upon human beings. Looking at a picture of bad land for example, he explained 'You're not going to move anybody with this picture of eroded soil, but the effect that this eroded soil has on a kid who looks starved, this is going to move people' (3p111).





## CONCLUSION

Rockwell and Shahn have been considered within their social surroundings. Their work was a response to the changing culture that moved toward consumerism during this period in American society. An attempt has been made to show each man's work within their respective social and cultural surroundings. Contrasts have been made on what Rockwell and Shahn took from society as visual information for their work. Shahn hoped to act as a social consciousness, portraying social, economic and racial injustice. His concern for minority groups is evident in such work as Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti, Seward Park, and this is Nazi brutality. Rockwell portrayed the world, not how it was, but how he wanted it to be. The ideal of the American Dream was always portrayed in images of love, happiness, nostalgia and prosperity. It would be difficult to assess the actual effect their work had on American society, this thesis hopes to show that a picture can be constructed, by looking at Ben Shahn and Norman Rockwell's illustrative careers, on the tastes, values and aspirations of American society, which they lived within.



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