

● **BREAKING** MASS. REPORTS 1,097 NEW CONFIRMED CASES, 24 NEW CONFIRMED DEATHS

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ART REVIEW

Do Norman Rockwell paintings carry an urgent message for 21st-century America?

By [Murray Whyte](#) Globe Staff, Updated October 22, 2020, 1:08 p.m.



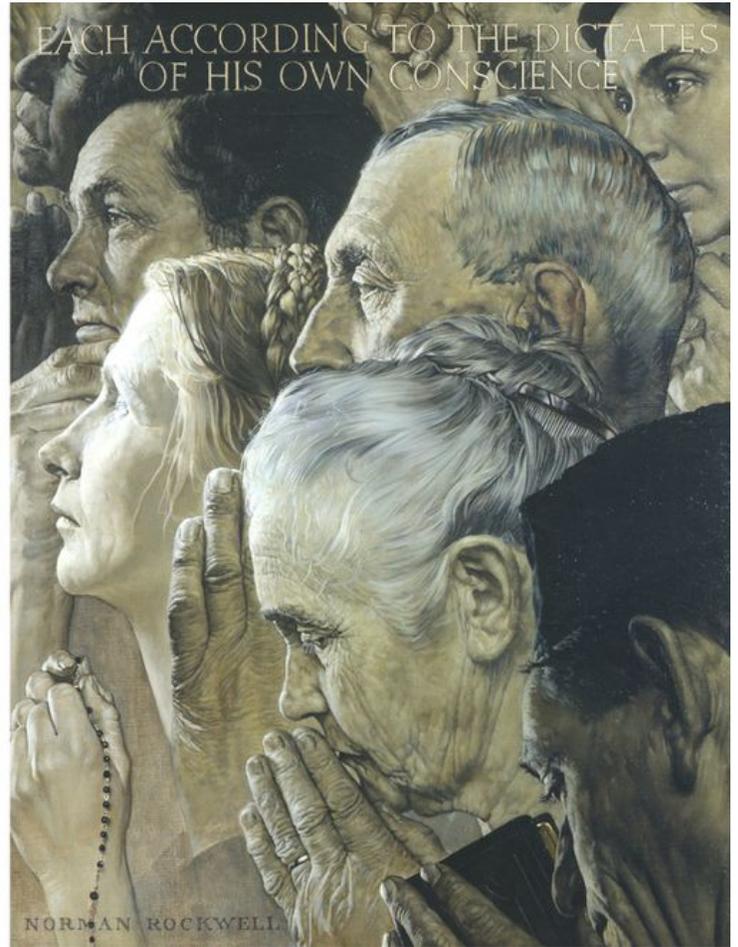
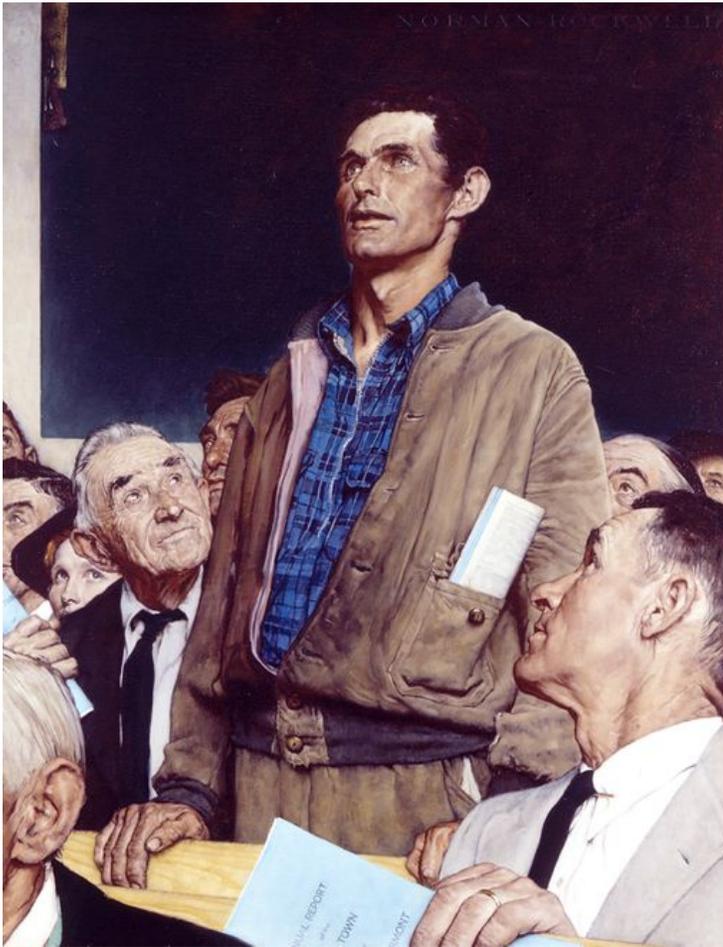
From left: "Freedom from Fear" and "Freedom from Want," both from Norman Rockwell's "Four Freedom" series. SEPS:

CURTIS PUBLISHING, INDIANAPOLIS/NORMAN ROCKWELL MUSEUM

STOCKBRIDGE — Is it even possible to think of Norman Rockwell, America’s kindly uncle of kitsch-tinged artistic nostalgia, as timely? Not long ago I wouldn’t have believed it, but how times change. Shrugged off by generations of serious art world observers, the years have been increasingly kind to Rockwell’s visions of an idealized America as they’ve aged into relevance amid a widening sense of what “art” actually is. His goofy-sweet scenes now feel less saccharine than humanistic, closer to history paintings than one-liners, just like the old masters he so admired.

History is the gauge by which we measure the present — how far we’ve traveled, how short we’ve fallen. Has Rockwell’s work shifted from sideshow to yardstick? Not always, but the case in favor, now on view at the Norman Rockwell Museum, is not to be dismissed. Last week, the museum opened “Imagining Freedom,” an era-spanning exhibition orbiting the artist’s “Four Freedoms” paintings — freedom of worship and speech; freedom from fear and want — made in 1943, at the height of the Second World War.

It’s a matter of literal fact to say the four pieces sit at the center of the show. Their permanent home is a vaulted chamber at the museum’s heart, purpose-built in 1993 to house them just so. All around them is a trajectory of context, from the moment of their conception right up to here and now. Timing is everything: After two years on the road — “Imagining Freedom” traveled to New York, Detroit, Washington, D.C., the Normandy region of France, Houston, and Denver — the show has come home in the dying days of a fractious election campaign that many believe puts freedom itself at risk. (Disclaimer: I’m one of them.)



From left: "Freedom of Speech" and "Freedom of Worship" from Norman Rockwell's "Four Freedoms" series. SEPS: CURTIS PUBLISHING, INDIANAPOLIS/NORMAN ROCKWELL MUSEUM

That's partly why walking the show last week, surrounded by a set of ideals both inspiring and under threat, left me so unnerved. It felt like a stroll through an alien landscape: The common ground of decency and shared goals, despite our differences. The stark contrast between the world of the show and the world outside is an equally stark reminder of what's at stake. In a different time, "Imagining Freedom" might feel almost quaint. Now, it feels urgent, precarious, a high bar to which we're falling dangerously short.

ADVERTISING



The show starts in a past that feels a lot like the present: The Great Depression, a country in despair. One important difference: President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's labors to uplift a nation downtrodden. Among his many New Deal projects was a program for artists, meant to provide paying work as well as to inspire. But the program also yielded a critical historical record by a generation of documentary photographers — Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans — whose work would define the field. Lange's pictures here — of destitute southern sharecroppers, of children huddled on the porch of a Mississippi shack — counterweigh whatever optimism the New Deal photography program might have yielded. The images provide the show with balance — something else in short supply these days.



Dorothea Lange's "Mississippi Delta Negro children," July 1936. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS; THE CROWLEY COMPANY/FSA/OWI COLLECTION

Rockwell, already famous as a maker of Saturday Evening Post covers, didn't need the work the New Deal provided. A 1938 self-portrait in the show, of the artist at his easel

struggling to meet his many deadlines, is Rockwell acknowledging his good fortune. And his rock star-level fame gave him another role to play, on the request of the president himself. In 1935, Rockwell made a poster inviting the Boy Scouts of America to a campout in Washington, D.C. on Roosevelt's behest. The image — jaunty, sun-bathed, an eager Scout glowing with excitement — offered a ray of light in a bleak time.

Rockwell didn't paper over hard times, though. His pictures here capture a railway station ticket-taker whose booth, plastered with sunny travel brochures, is nearly cobwebbed-over from neglect; and a woman vigorously bartering with a street vendor over a coffee pot.

As the Depression deepened and the threat of war grew, Rockwell's role would expand. Roosevelt needed a rallying point. In his 1941 State of the Union address, he cited "four freedoms" universal throughout the world. The country was limp and exhausted from economic hardship; the last world war was still vivid in the national memory. Selling a new war would be unpopular. Fighting on American ideals, he reasoned, might make it palatable.

An entire gallery here is given over to what you can fairly call propaganda, and Rockwell played his part. One richly detailed picture from 1944 features a graying man in sweater vest and spectacles who has his ear pressed to the radio, with maps of Europe splayed over his lap. (He's tracking battles where each of his three sons, their photos pinned to the wall, might be.) Another, from 1941, stars Rockwell's fictional soldier Willie Gillis marching happily along with a care package from home, trailing his entire company. But his "Four Freedoms" might be the ultimate propaganda coup.

Rockwell had been commissioned in 1942 by the Ordnance Department of the US

Army to paint a machine gunner running low on ammunition — “Let’s Give Him Enough Time!” it read, a plea for factories to up their production — but he wanted to do more. Roosevelt’s “four freedoms” played on his mind. Rockwell offered that same year to do a series based on the president’s words as a fund-raiser for the federal Office of War Information, but funding had run out. He took the idea to Post editor Ben Hibbs who agreed to give the artist three months off to deliver the idea for the magazine instead.

As soon as the paintings were published, starting in February, 1943, the magazine was flooded with reprint requests by the thousands — a demand it struggled to meet. That runaway popularity led to a deal with the US Department of the Treasury to tour with the works to sell war bonds. The tour would be the rallying point Roosevelt had long sought, galvanizing the public with parades and poster signings with Rockwell himself. At the end of it all, the tour raised \$133 million for the war effort — more than \$1 billion in 2020 dollars.

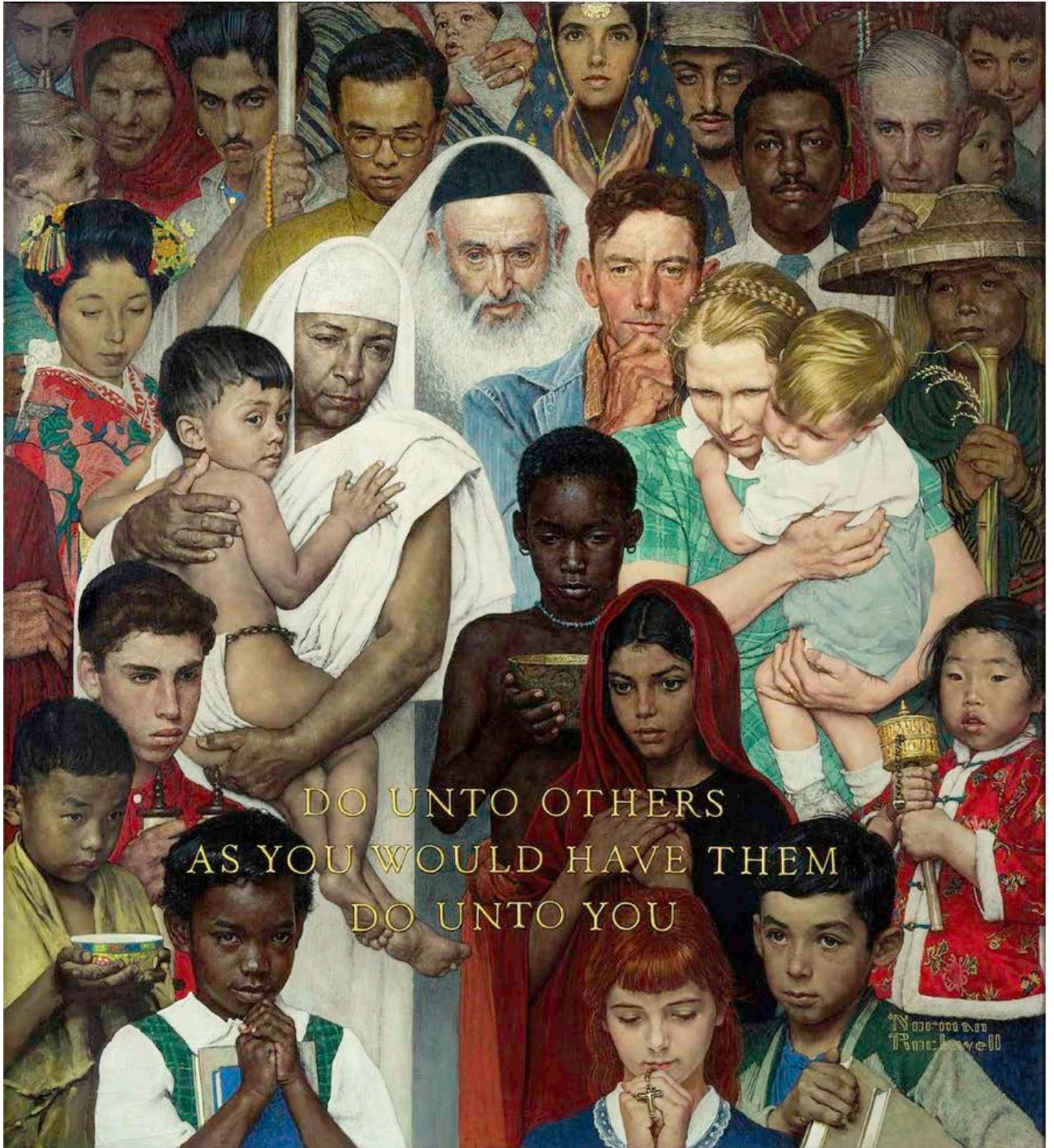
Propaganda? No doubt. But in this divisive era, the project’s goal — unity, through freedom — feels like a noble relic of a faraway time, and merits wistful rose-colored nostalgia more than cynicism. When common goals are so elusive as to be unimaginable, a country has to question everything, not least its leadership. That makes “Imagining Freedom” more timely than it ought to be.

Of course, there’s plenty about Rockwell’s “Four Freedoms” that makes it less timely and more of its time. The show includes a selection of letters the Post received after the paintings were published, and some from Black rights groups pointing out how “freedom” was a relative term. “Your posters,” wrote Roderick Stephens, chairman of the Bronx Interracial Conference, “[visualize] so magnificently the Four Freedoms ...

two of which, more particularly, have crystallized in the minds of Negroes the realization of freedoms denied in large measure to most of them.” (To be clear, Stephens was referring to the freedoms from want and from fear.)

Was this moment the start of a slow shift, realized much later in Rockwell’s career, when his work engaged with the Civil Rights movement and advocated for equal rights for all? In the early part of his career, Rockwell’s America was thoroughly white, a fact the museum doesn’t fail to apprehend. In every gallery, the show’s curators were sure to represent Black Americans: A photograph of a regiment of Black Americans in World War II hangs between Rockwell’s cheery Gillis pictures, a reminder that the armed forces were segregated. Then there’s Gordon Parks’s portrait of Langston Hughes, displayed alongside the poet’s “How About it, Dixie” from 1942: “If you believe/In the Four Freedoms, too,/Then share ’em with me — / Don’t keep ’em all for you ...”

Rockwell’s later work is here, too: “New Kids in the Neighborhood,” from 1967, of two Black kids standing alongside a moving truck, the awkward gulf of just a few feet between them and their white neighbors feeling as vast as the Grand Canyon; and “The Problem We All Live With,” his 1964 picture of 6-year old Ruby Bridges being escorted to school by federal marshals at the height of the New Orleans school desegregation crisis. Also included is “The Golden Rule,” with a rainbow coalition of figures — Black, Asian, Arab, white — Rockwell painted for the cover of the Post in 1961, only to see its publication delayed several months by editors leery of depicting nonwhite Americans.

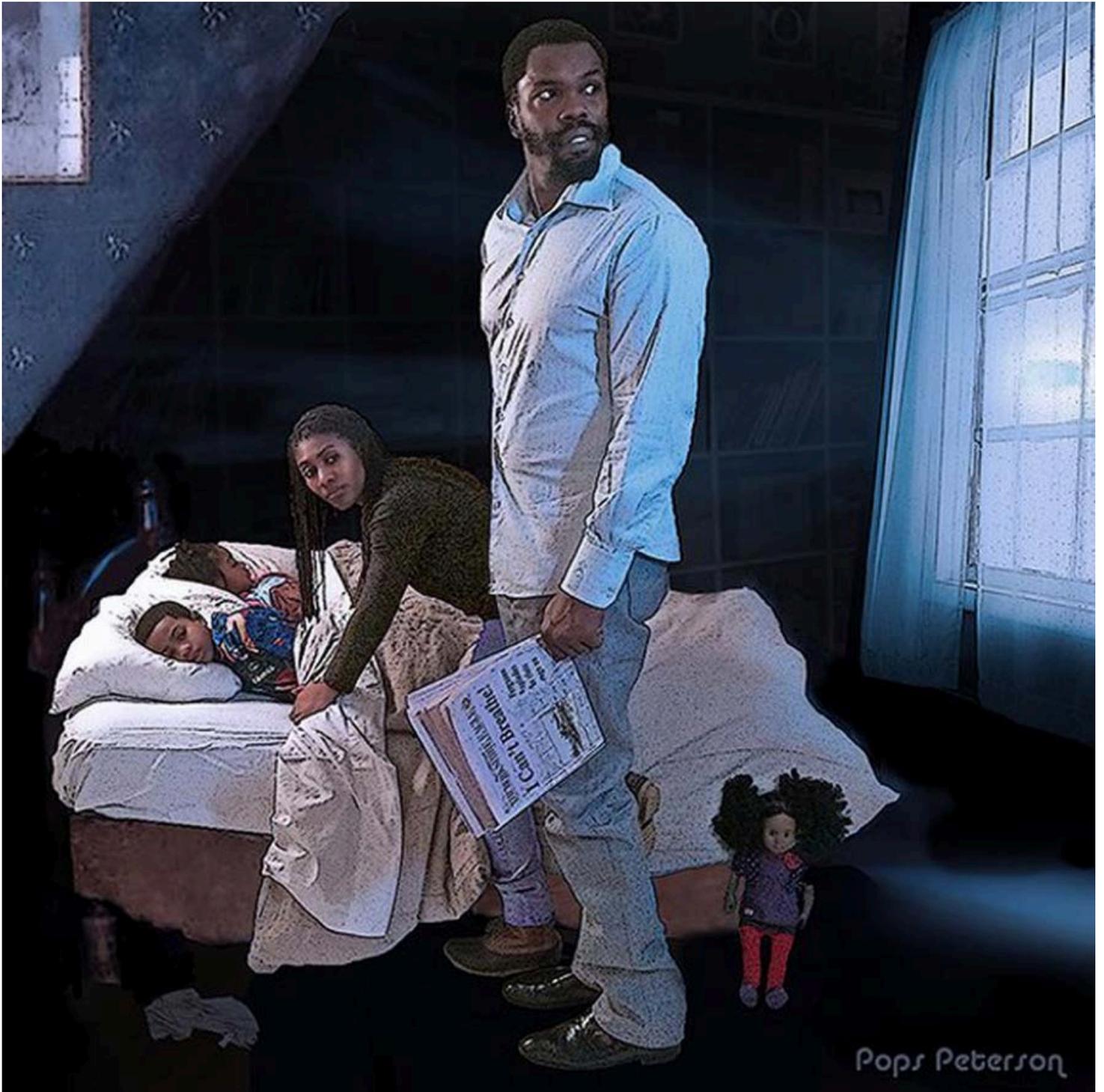


Norman Rockwell's "Golden Rule," from 1961. SEPS: CURTIS LICENSING, INDIANAPOLIS/NORMAN ROCKWELL MUSEUM COLLECTION

For as long as there's been an America, "freedom" has been less fact than idea, and

most often narrowly applied. It's a truth that Rockwell, I think he would admit, took a while to learn himself. Did that make him any less than a man of his times? Sadly, no, though using his platform to advocate for change in his later years finally made him much more.

Closing the circle, the museum includes several works by an artist of *these* times, Pops Peterson, who takes over most of a gallery with vivid digital photo-collage updates on Rockwell's images: "Freedom from What?" the placid bedtime ritual of a white family from "Freedom from Fear" replaced by a Black family, dad looking anxiously over his shoulder; and "Thanksgiving Gay Dinner," a gleeful take on "Freedom from Want," hosted by an interracial same-sex couple.



Pops Peterson's "Freedom from What?" from 2015. POPS PETERSON/COURTESY NORMAN ROCKWELL MUSEUM



Pops Peterson's "Thanksgiving Gay Dinner" from 2014. POPS PETERSON/COURTESY NORMAN ROCKWELL MUSEUM

Peterson picks up where Rockwell left off: An American ideal, made for right now. But Peterson's ideals aren't universal or shared, and that's the problem. Freedom was never as simple as the "Four Freedoms" suggested. But has it ever been more complicated? At its heart, "Imagining Freedom" addresses its own shortcomings and makes space for a wide band of liberty, in the broadest terms. As we hurtle toward Nov. 3 and beyond, it's fair to wonder how much longer we, as a nation, will be able to say the same, and if we ever really could.

IMAGINING FREEDOM

At the Norman Rockwell Museum, Stockbridge, through Jan. 20, 2021. 413-298-4100, www.nrm.org

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