

Freedom of Speech, *The Saturday Evening Post*, 1943

After Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, America was soon bustling to marshal its forces on the home front as well as abroad. Norman Rockwell, already well known as an illustrator for one of the country's most popular magazines, *The Saturday Evening Post*, had created the affable, gangly character of Willie Gillis for the magazine's cover, and *Post* readers eagerly followed Willie as he developed from boy to man during the tenure of his imaginary military service. Rockwell considered himself the heir of the great illustrators who left their mark during World War I, and, like them, he wanted to contribute something substantial to his country.

A critical component of the World War II war effort was the creation of visual images based on Franklin D. Roosevelt's appeal to the four essential human freedoms he spoke about in his State of the Union address on January 6, 1941—freedom of speech and expression, freedom from want, freedom from fear, and freedom of worship. Yet, by the summer of 1942, two-thirds of Americans still knew nothing about the Four Freedoms, even though government agencies had disseminated photographs, prints, and even a textile design referring to them. It is unclear whether Rockwell or a member of the Office of War Information suggested he take on the Four Freedoms.



19-A Norman Rockwell (1894–1978), *Freedom of Speech*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, February 20, 1943. Oil on canvas, 45¼ x 35½ in. (116.205 x 90.170 cm.). The Norman Rockwell Art Collection Trust, Norman Rockwell Museum, Stockbridge, Mass. www.nrm.org ©1943 Norman Rockwell Family Entities. Printed by permission of the Norman Rockwell Family Agency.

What is uncontested is that his renditions were not only vital to the war effort, but have become enshrined in American culture.

Painting the Four Freedoms was important to Rockwell for more than patriotic reasons. He hoped one of them would become his statement as an artist. Rockwell had been born into a world in which painters crossed easily from the commercial world to that of the gallery, as Winslow Homer had done (see 9-A). By the 1940s, however, a division had emerged between the fine arts and the work for hire that Rockwell produced. The detailed, homespun images he employed to reach a mass audience were not appealing to an art community that now lionized intellectual and abstract works. But Rockwell knew his strengths did not lie in that direction: “Boys batting flies on vacant lots,” he explained in 1936, “little girls playing jacks on the front steps; old men plodding home at twilight, umbrella in hand—all these things arouse feeling in me.”

Rockwell's ability to capture something universal in the commonplace is behind the success of the Four Freedoms pictures. For *Freedom of Speech*, the first painting he completed, the artist attempted four different compositions in which a man dressed in work clothes, the community's “Annual Report” folded in his pocket, stands to give his opinion at a New England town meeting. In this, the final version, Rockwell depicts him from slightly below eye level, encircled by his fellow townspeople and by us, the viewers, who take our place two benches in front of him. The timeless properties of this work are the result of Rockwell's classical sense of composition: the speaker stands at the apex of a pyramid drawn by the upward glances of his neighbors. The warm, light tones of the speaker's skin glow against the matte black chalkboard in the background, giving him a larger-than-life, heroic appearance. The work also exudes a sense of immediacy. A snapshot effect is achieved by the inclusion of fragmented forms at the painting's borders: the partial head of the man in the lower left and the glimpse of two faces in the right and left back corners (the one on the left is Rockwell's own). Rockwell's eye for detail (he used ordinary people as models and had scores of photographs made before beginning to paint in order to remind him of things as small as a folded collar) gives each inch of the painting a sense of the accidental and familiar.

In 1943, the four canvases were published in *The Saturday Evening Post* before being sent on a nationwide tour called the “Four Freedoms War Bond Show.” More than a million people saw them in sixteen cities and over 133 million dollars in war bonds were sold. This painting—Rockwell felt it and *Freedom to Worship* were the best of the four—helped galvanize the nation to action during the war. Long after that conflict, its message continues to resonate; time has revealed that the value of the Four Freedoms series lies not simply in the ideas it presented, but in Rockwell's exceptional ability as an artist.

DESCRIBE AND ANALYZE E | M | S

Ask students what these people are doing.

The standing man is speaking and others are looking and listening to him.

Have students find the words TOWN and REPORT.

They are located on blue paper near the lower edge.

Where might these people be?

They are attending a community meeting. Because MONT is visible on the paper, it may be a town meeting in Vermont.

Ask students to describe the expression on the speaker's face.

He seems very intent and serious. He looks up as if he is speaking to someone above him.

Ask students to describe the textures and patterns of the standing man's clothes and hands. Have them compare his hands and clothing with that of the other men. What do their hands and clothing suggest about their professions and financial status?

The speaker wears a slightly rumpled, zippered, plaid shirt and frayed jacket. The other men wear smooth, white buttoned shirts, ties, and suit jackets. The speaker's hands are darker and rougher than the lighter, smoother hand of the man on his right. The speaker is probably a manual laborer and the others, wealthier businessmen.

In what ways does this scene seem real?

The closely observed details and the composition with some faces only partially shown are almost like a photograph.

Who is attending this meeting?

We see young and old men and a woman in a black hat.

Who is the youngest man? *The speaker is.*

How do you know? *His hair is dark rather than gray and his face isn't as wrinkled as the others'.*

Describe the reaction of the other people in this scene to the speaker.

They are all listening respectfully to him.

How did Rockwell emphasize the speaker?

His light face contrasts with a plain black background. Light shines on his forehead and most of the people are looking at him.

M | S

Where is the viewer of this scene?

The viewer is seated two rows in front of the speaker, looking up at him.

How does this viewpoint influence our understanding of how Rockwell felt about this man and what he was doing?

We look up to this man, making him seem important.

INTERPRET E | M | S

Encourage students to imagine what the speaker might be saying. Discuss recent town meetings or hearings in your community where citizens voiced their opinions.

M | S

What is the paper in the speaker's pocket?

It is probably a town report.

Because the men in this scene have town reports, what does Rockwell assume about Americans and their form of government?

Ordinary American citizens can read and are capable of understanding complex issues concerned with government.

What inspired this painting?

Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1941 State of the Union address. Roosevelt appealed to four essential human freedoms.

Explain why this scene shows an American freedom. Why did Americans believe there was a connection between this image and World War II?

An ordinary working-class American citizen is able to voice his opinions without fear of censorship. Americans were fighting totalitarian dictatorships that did not allow this freedom of speech.

CONNECTIONS

Historical Connections: World War II; war bonds; Pearl Harbor

Historical Figures: Franklin Delano Roosevelt; Dwight D. Eisenhower; Winston Churchill; Adolph Hitler

Civics: Bill of Rights; U.S. Supreme Court cases: *Whitney v. California*, *Stromberg v. California*, *Brandenburg v. Ohio*, and *New York Times Co. v. United States*; structure and function of local government

Literary Connections and Primary Documents: "Four Freedoms" speech, Franklin Delano Roosevelt (secondary); "Death of the Ball Turret Gunner," Randall Jarrell (secondary)