The Rise of an American Art

by Michael Zakian

THE GOLDEN AGE OF AMERICAN Illustration remains one of the most fascinating chapters in the history of American art and culture. It was a period that saw the practice of illustration rise from humble beginnings to become a dominant and sophisticated art form that touched the lives of almost every American. The best artists of this movement—a long list that includes such illustrious names as **Howard Pyle (1853–1911)**, **Charles Dana Gibson (1866–1944)**, **Maxfield Parrish (1870–1966)**, **J.C. Leyendecker (1874–1951)**, **N.C. Wyeth (1882–1945)**, **Dean Cornwell (1892–1960)**, and **Norman Rockwell (1894–1978)**—gained national fame. They won the hearts of the public by giving visual form to the country's hopes, dreams, and ideals. The images they produced have entered the canon of American popular culture and still have the power to captivate the public one hundred years after their creation.

This era arose from a confluence of various factors—technological, social, political, economic—that came together to produce a meteoric rise in American publishing at the turn of the twentieth century. This revolution began in 1879 with the invention of the halftone photoengraving process. This innovation allowed printers to reproduce a painting on the printed page. Around the same time improvements in mass-mailing dropped the cost of magazine subscriptions. In order to compete in the new, larger, and more dynamic marketplace of the early twentieth century, editors turned to illustrators, commissioning them to create new, inventive images that would attract a growing population of eager consumers. An upward spiral of increasing demand motivated artists to create art of higher and higher quality which in turn was enthusiastically embraced by the public.

By its very nature, illustration was an art form designed to be accessible. The goal of these artists was to create an image that would capture and convey the essence of a book, magazine story or advertising campaign. The goal of using art to reach people was the prime motivation of Howard Pyle, who has been called the "Father of Modern Illustration." Not only did Pyle produce thousands of acclaimed illustrations, he also founded the **Howard Pyle School of Illustration Art** in Wilmington, Delaware, where he taught the next generation of illustrators, including **Frank Schoonover (1877–1972)**, **Mead Schaeffer (1898–1980)**, **Harvey Dunn (1884–1942)**, **Jessie Willcox Smith (1863–1935)**, and N.C. Wyeth. Pyle also founded **The Brandywine School** as well as an artists' colony in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, near Brandywine Creek where he and his top students developed a style of illustration that became widely published in adventure novels and romance magazines.

As a young boy growing up in a Quaker family, Pyle was captivated by books with woodblock prints and engravings—and was moved by the drama captured in these images. When he became a professional artist he ignored the possibilities of fine art, which he saw as narrow and elitist, preferring to become a storyteller in paint.

Joseph Christian Leyendecker (1874–1951)
Woman Kissing Cupid, 1923
Oil on canvas   27 1/2″ × 22 1/4″
The Kelly Collection of American Illustration

A man of uncompromising standards, Howard Pyle always sought to raise the standards of both his own work and his field. In order to create powerful illustrations that captured the crux of a complex story in a single riveting image, he focused his attention on one key component—narrative composition. His skills are evident in a masterpiece such as *Dead Men Tell No Tales*. This painting depicts a dramatic moment when a group of five pirates have rowed to shore to bury their treasure. After shots were fired, three witnesses fell dead, inviting the viewer to ponder the fate of the last two. Through his brilliant placement of key elements within a largely empty expanse, he uses isolated mass and distance to create a sense of time and tension. Pyle's great gift to American illustration was his high-minded ideals regarding the integrity of storytelling and the importance of historical accuracy that set the standards for his field.

Pyle's most illustrious student was N.C. Wyeth, who went on to become one of the most recognized and highly regarded illustrators of the 20th century. Wyeth produced more than 3,000 paintings and illustrated 112 books, twenty-five of them for the **Scribner Classics** series, for which he earned national fame. His first book for Scribner's, *Treasure Island*, was so successful that the proceeds from it allowed him to pay for his house and studio. A painting he created as the cover for another Scribner's book, *The Boy's King Arthur*, has two battling knights intertwined into one essential volume. Wyeth rejected Pyle's emphasis on accurate details and chose to convey his narratives in bold, powerful forms. His art stresses the passionate and dynamic, sometimes veering into the melodramatic.

Another early illustrator who set the standards for his profession was J.C. Leyendecker. Born in Germany, Leyendecker moved to Chicago as a boy, but had the opportunity to return to Europe to gain a year-long formal atelier art education at the **Académie Julian** in Paris, where he studied the work of **Toulouse-Lautrec (1864–1901)** and famed Art Nouveau poster artist **Alphonse Mucha (1860–1939)**. When he returned to America, he shifted his focus from fine art to illustration and quickly came to dominate the field. Leyendecker is credited with creating the *Arrow Collar Man*, a fictional figure based on his younger life partner, **Charles Beach**, that set the standards for masculine virility and formed the basis of the first modern life-style advertising campaign. In addition, Leyendecker produced more than 400 magazine covers and set the standard for modern magazine design. His name became synonymous with *The Saturday Evening Post*, the nation's most popular magazine at the time, and he eventually produced 322 covers for this venerable publication, one more than Norman Rockwell, his younger colleague.

Howard Pyle (1853–1911)
Dead Men Tell No Tales, 1899
Oil on canvas   20 1/4″ × 30 1/4″
The Kelly Collection of American Illustration

Dean Cornwell (1892-1960)
Mary Washing Jesus' Feet, 1928
Oil on canvas   34″ × 48″
The Kelly Collection of American Illustration

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Leyendecker's unsurpassed achievement as an illustrator lay in his exceptional ability to design powerful two-dimensional shapes. He instinctively treated all forms as silhouettes, rendering every object as an intriguing outline that would capture the viewer's attention. He then developed these flat graphic shapes into convincing and captivating three-dimensional volumes by exploring the rhythmical relationships of internal lines by using the *hachure* method, a form of cross-hatching and shading. Leyendecker gave truth to the old art school adage that drawing is simply designing shapes. His impressive command of his pictorial language elevated him into the stratosphere of illustrators, making him a household name and a figure beloved by the American people. In fact, Leyendecker's illustrations were so admired in the 1920s that in a single month he received 17,000 letters from fans—exceeding the number of fan mail received by screen idol **Rudolf Valentino**.

Leyendecker's art was so popular that he inspired a subsequent generation of artists. Norman Rockwell, twenty years his junior, looked up to the older artist as a role model and referred to him as "the great J.C. Leyendecker." He admitted that "Leyendecker was my god" and confessed that he used to "follow him down the streets of New Rochelle, just to be close to him." Rockwell adopted his idol's brilliant use of vignettes, but downplayed the stylized rhythmic lines, preferring to focus instead on the material quality of people and things. This attention to the texture of everyday objects is seen in his painting for a *Saturday Evening Post* cover titled *Dreaming of Adventure.* He captured the poignant isolation of a middle-aged clerk sitting alone at his work table. Although confined to a drab office life, he nevertheless dreams of heroic exploits, represented by the grand sailing ship above his head. Rockwell went on to become the best-known American illustrator of the mid-twentieth century. His fame rests largely with the 321 covers he created for *The Saturday Evening Post*, one less than Leyendecker, whom out of respect he did not want to surpass.

MANY OF THESE ILLUSTRATORS chose to push the limits of their art to dramatic extremes. **Coles Phillips (1880–1927)** preferred to work in gouache, a dense, opaque watercolour, and employed this medium in 1909 to create his first "Fade-away Girl." By rendering parts of the figure's clothing the same colour as the background, he achieved the illusion of the figure disappearing into the surrounding space. By creating figures that are both present
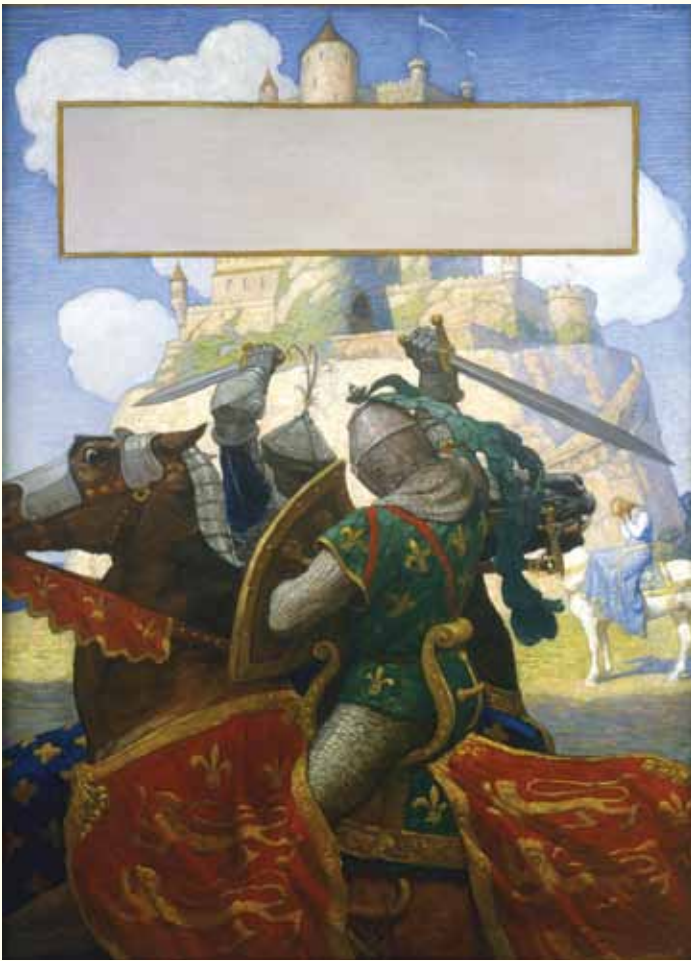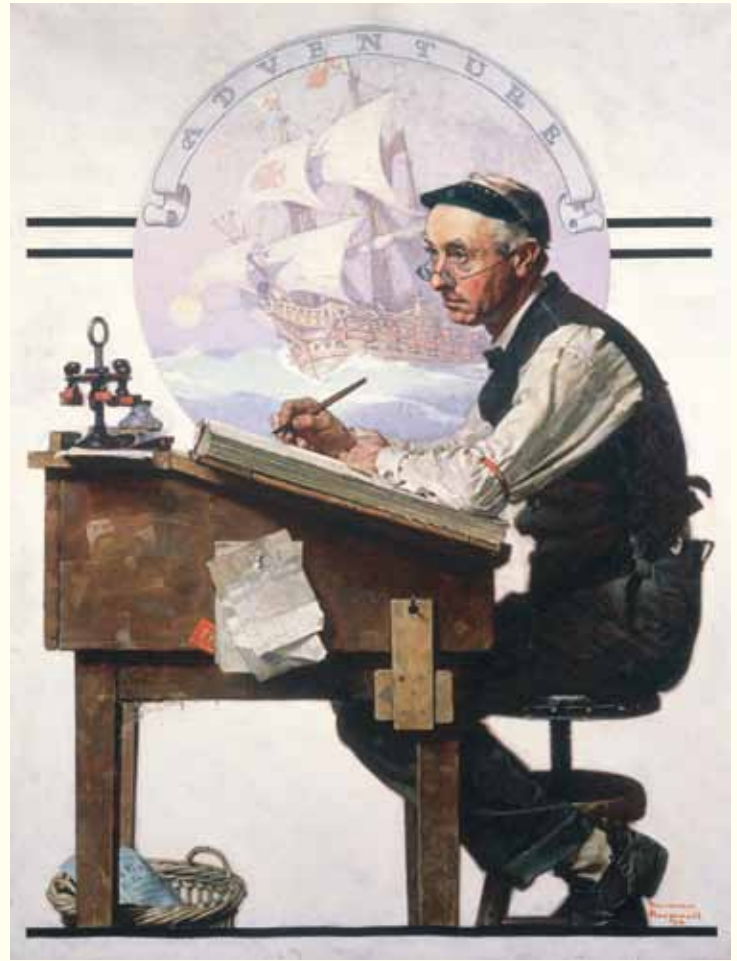
N. C. Wyeth (1882–1945)
The Boy's King Arthur, 1917
(Book Cover)
Oil on canvas   39″ × 28″
The Kelly Collection of American Illustration

Norman Rockwell (1894-1978)
Dreaming of Adventure, 1924
Oil on canvas   30″ × 23″
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The Kelly Collection of American Illustration

Coles Phillips (1880-1927)
The Magic Hour, 1924
Gouache on paper   20 1/2″ × 15 1/2″
The Kelly Collection of American Illustration

and absent, Phillips enticed viewers who have to mentally "fill-in" the image. The striking design quality of his novel technique became a popular fixture of *Life* magazine covers. These inventive explorations of positive and negative space paralleled **Henri Matisse's (1869–1954)** modernist experiments with figure and ground of the same time.

The artists of the Golden Age of American Illustration produced a body of work of lasting value because their art was both aesthetically refined and popular with the public. These artists were able to achieve this rare balance because they were commissioned to produce images for publication and always thought in terms of the perspective of a mass audience and sensitivities.

Notes:
The author, **Michael Zakian***, is Director of the* **Frederick R. Weisman Museum of Art** *and an adjunct professor of art history*

at **Pepperdine University** *in Malibu.*

Illustrating Modern Life: The Golden Age of American Illustration from the Kelly Collection *is on view at the* **Frederick R. Weisman Museum of Art at Pepperdine University** *through March 31. This illuminating exhibition, featuring 68 original works from the period, is drawn from the significant holdings of* **The Kelly Collection of American Illustration**, *regarded as one of the nation's finest private holdings of art from the Golden Age of Illustration. This collection was formed over the last thirty years by* **Richard and Mary Kelly** *of Virginia, individuals who have dedicated their lives to collecting the finest examples of this genre. This exhibition and accompanying catalogue mark the first time the Kelly Collection has been shown on the West Coast. For more information, please see the Exhibitions listings in this Newsletter or visit http://arts.pepperdine.edu/museum.htm and http://www.thekellycollection.org/ home.htm.*