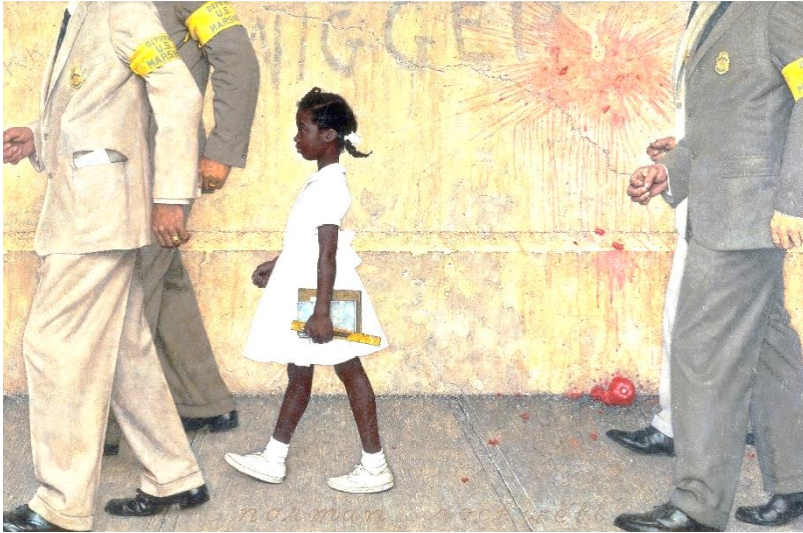


Norman Rockwell, *The Problem We All Live With*

Learn why a controversial painting became a symbol of the American civil rights movement



Norman Rockwell, *The Problem We All Live With*, 1963, oil on canvas, 36 x 58 inches. Illustration for *LOOK*, January 14, 1964. Norman Rockwell Museum Collections. ©NRELC, Niles, IL.

Imagine that you are six years old, and it's your first day in a new school. You are wearing a special outfit. You have your notebook, your pencils. You are excited, but a little nervous, too. Official-looking men in suits are there to escort you to the building. A wild, screaming crowd is gathered outside. Could it be a parade? Your teacher greets you warmly, but where are your classmates? Why are you the only student in the room? Why is there no

one to eat lunch with you or to play with you on the playground? You are little and confused, but your mom has told you to behave, so you are brave—you don't cry.

This is what actually happened to **Ruby Bridges** on her first day at William Franz Elementary School in New Orleans on November 14, 1960. Ruby was the first African American child to attend the school after a federal court ordered the New Orleans school system to integrate. The public outcry was so great, that white parents withdrew their children from school so they would not have to sit with a black girl. Ruby spent an entire year in a classroom by herself.

Artist and magazine illustrator **Norman Rockwell** is known for his idyllic images of American life in the twentieth century. But his work had a new sense of purpose in 1960s when he was hired by *LOOK* magazine. There, he produced his famous painting *The Problem We All Live With*, a visual commentary on segregation and the problem of racism in America. The painting depicts Ruby's courageous walk to school on that November day. She dutifully follows faceless men—the yellow armbands reveal them to be federal marshals—past a wall smeared with racist graffiti and the juice of a thrown tomato. The canvas is arranged so that the viewer is at Ruby's height, seeing the scene from her perspective.

Rockwell's painting, created a few years after Ruby made her fateful entrance at school, was produced at the height of the Civil Rights Movement. It is now considered a symbol of that struggle. Bridges never met Rockwell, but as an adult she came to admire his decision to tell her story: "Here was a man that had been doing lots of work, painting family images, and all of a sudden decided this is what I'm going to do...it's wrong, and I'm going to say that it's wrong...the mere fact that [Norman Rockwell] had enough courage to step up to the plate and say I'm going to make a statement, and he did it in a very powerful way...even though I had not had an opportunity to meet him, I commend him for that."

Who is Ruby Bridges?

The little girl led by federal marshals to school on November 14, 1960 was born in 1954, the same year the Supreme Court declared school segregation unconstitutional in the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. But by the time Ruby entered kindergarten, many schools had failed to comply with the Court's ruling. Ruby's parents responded to a call from local NAACP leaders to challenge school segregation in New Orleans—a decision for which they ultimately suffered: Her father lost his job and her grandparents, who were sharecroppers in Mississippi, were forced off their land.



Now married and the mother of four sons, Ms. Bridges Hall still lives in New Orleans, where she formed the Ruby Bridges Foundation to promote “the values, tolerance, respect, and appreciation of all differences.” On the 50th anniversary of her challenge to school segregation, she was honored at the White House by the nation's first African American president, who told her, “If it hadn't been for you...I might not be here....”

Ruby's walk to school was part of a larger history dating back to the Civil War. Despite Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation and the passage of an amendment to the U.S. Constitution that abolished slavery, African Americans were never truly free. By the late 1800s, “Jim Crow” laws in the Southern states prevented black people from sharing public accommodations, such as train cars, bathrooms, swimming pools, and schools.

This began to change in the 1950s when the National Association of Colored People (NAACP) challenged school segregation in the courts, and NAACP lawyer Thurgood Marshall argued the now-famous *Brown v. Board of Education* case before the Supreme Court. In 1954, the Court handed down its landmark decision: School segregation was unconstitutional because it violated the 14th Amendment, which guarantees all citizens—of all races—“equal protection under the law.”

But the South was slow to comply with the ruling, and it looked like blacks would have to force the issue. When nine students in Little Rock, Arkansas, decided to integrate Central High School in 1957, they were threatened by angry mobs, prompting President Dwight Eisenhower to call in U.S. paratroopers to escort the teenagers safely to school. By 1960, New Orleans was still fighting integration in its schools. They lost their case, allowing Ruby to break a long-standing barrier for herself as well as future generations.



Norman Rockwell



Norman Rockwell was born in New York City on February 3, 1894. From an early age he knew he wanted to be an artist. Instead of attending a regular high school, he studied at New York's Art Students League and immediately went to work contributing illustrations to books and magazines. At age 19, he became the art editor for *Boy's Life* magazine.

For many decades Rockwell's illustrations appeared on the covers of the leading magazines of his day, including *Saturday Evening Post*, *Leslie's Weekly*, *Life*, and *LOOK*. During World War II, he painted the Four Freedoms series, inspired by a speech made by President Franklin Roosevelt. He is best known for his sentimental images of American life, which evoke nostalgia for a time when life was slower, when families

spent evenings around the dinner table, sharing stories, and feeling safe and happy in their own homes.

Yet by the 1960s, the country had changed and so had the artist. Rockwell began to address more controversial themes such as poverty and racism. *The Problem We All Live With*, published in *LOOK* in 1964, took on the issue of school segregation. While some readers missed the Rockwell of happier times, others praised him for tackling serious issues.

Letters to the editor were a mix of praise and criticism. One Florida reader wrote, "Rockwell's picture is worth a thousand words...I am saving this issue for my children with the hope that by the time they become old enough to comprehend its meaning, the subject matter will have become history." Other readers objected to Rockwell's image. A man from Texas wrote "Just where does Norman Rockwell live? Just where does your editor live? Probably both of these men live in all-white, highly expensive, highly exclusive neighborhoods. Oh what hypocrites all of you are!" The most shocking letter came from a man in New Orleans who called Rockwell's work, "just some more vicious lying propaganda being used for the crime of racial integration by such black journals as Look, Life, etc." But irate opinions did not stop Rockwell from pursuing his course. In 1965, he illustrated the murder of civil rights workers in Philadelphia, Mississippi, and in 1967, he chose children, once again, to illustrate desegregation, this time in our suburbs.

In an interview later in his life, Rockwell recalled that he once had to paint out an African-American person in a group picture since *The Saturday Evening Post* policy dictated showing African-Americans in service industry jobs only. Freed from such restraints, Rockwell seemed to look for opportunities to correct the editorial prejudices reflected in his previous work.

Rockwell died on November 8, 1978 at age 84. He lived through two world wars, painted the portraits of several U.S. presidents, witnessed a man walk on the moon, and produced more than 4,000 works of art. Together, his early idyllic and later realistic views of American life represent the artist's personal portrait of our nation. He is an American icon. No wonder that in 2011 President Barack Obama borrowed *The Problem We All Live With* for a special White House exhibition to commemorate the walk Ruby Bridges took to William Franz Elementary School 50 years earlier.

*"Rockwell painted the American dream
—better than anyone."—Steven Spielberg*

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<http://www.nrm.org/thinglink/text/ProblemLiveWith.html>