

Ways of Seeing

Norman Rockwell cared about the history of art and often put paintings by old and new masters in his paintings. He particularly enjoyed depicting humorous interactions he imagined transpiring between museum visitors and paintings on the walls. Take *Art Critic* (page 61), a painting about the intense looking that goes on in museums. A young art student in baggy pants and torn sneakers is absorbed in the act of looking. With the aid of a magnifying glass, he studies a piece of jewelry adorning the chest of a woman in an imaginary Rubens portrait. That he is a copyist soon to begin his work Rockwell tells us through the young man's tools. Off a shoulder strap hangs his paint box, a portable easel, and a palette loaded with juicy globs of color rendered so literally that they invite touching to determine whether they are mere illusions or actual peaks of paint. (In Rockwell's oil painting for the illustration, they are in high relief.) Art magazines are tucked under the young man's left arm. Most importantly, in the hand held behind his back, he has a book illustrating the painting in front of him. Therein begins the joke, for in the reproduction, the woman looks straight out at the viewer as she would in an actual portrait. In the Rubens *à la* Rockwell, the woman gazes down upon the young copyist, conveying considerable interest in her young admirer. The respectable burghers in the seventeenth-century Dutch painting on the other wall also react with their eyes. They look disapprovingly upon what is transpiring between painter and painting. As our own eyes flit from detail to detail, joining all the other eyes at work, we quickly grasp that Rockwell's humor is about who is looking at whom. While this is easy humor to grasp, it rests upon a fundamental understanding of the nature of the art museum experience. Rockwell understood that museums are about seeing, about viewers using their eyes exclusively to interrogate the works of art in front of them. The humor comes when the figures in the paintings unexpectedly react to and return the viewer's gaze.

But where is the humor in another "looking-at-art" painting by Rockwell, the one called *The Connoisseur* (page 86)?¹ One's first impression is that little is going on. Rockwell set his stage with a cast of

The Connoisseur (detail), 1962

only two: the Painting and the Beholder. The Painting we see head-on; the Beholder, we see squarely from behind. We watch him beholding but are not privy to his reactions, for we cannot see his face. In addition there is one small but important walk-on role in this drama played by the Floor, whose diamonds direct our eyes into the painting and whose ordered forms create a base for the equally ordered Beholder. Given Rockwell's fondness for detail and for faces, the "defaced" viewer and the minimalist composition are the work's most startling features. Let's look carefully at these components as they appear in the original painting, where there is considerable texture and vivid illusionism, qualities diluted in the mass-produced and smaller printed version on the cover of *The Saturday Evening Post* (page 85).

When Rockwell rendered old-master paintings such as the Rubens portrait and the Frans Hals-like group in *Art Critic*, he imitated the loose brushwork and impasto on a much-reduced scale. Like those who make exquisite small-scale furniture for dollhouses, Rockwell had the ability to miniaturize the style of other painters. His deftness at imitation is particularly impressive in *The Connoisseur*, where he replicated Jackson Pollock's famous drip painting, a non-representational style completely at odds with Rockwell's own meticulous realism. From photographs and a couple of abstractions that the artist gave to friends, we know that Rockwell practiced his mock-Pollock style well in advance of the final painting.² He even had some studio fun, having himself photographed as he performed Pollock's characteristic gestures, imitating the famous and much-circulated photographs that Hans Namuth had made of "Jack the

Dripper," as *Time* magazine described him (page 83).³ Instead of the cigarette that hung from Pollock's mouth in many of Namuth's photographs, Rockwell clenched his pipe between his teeth.

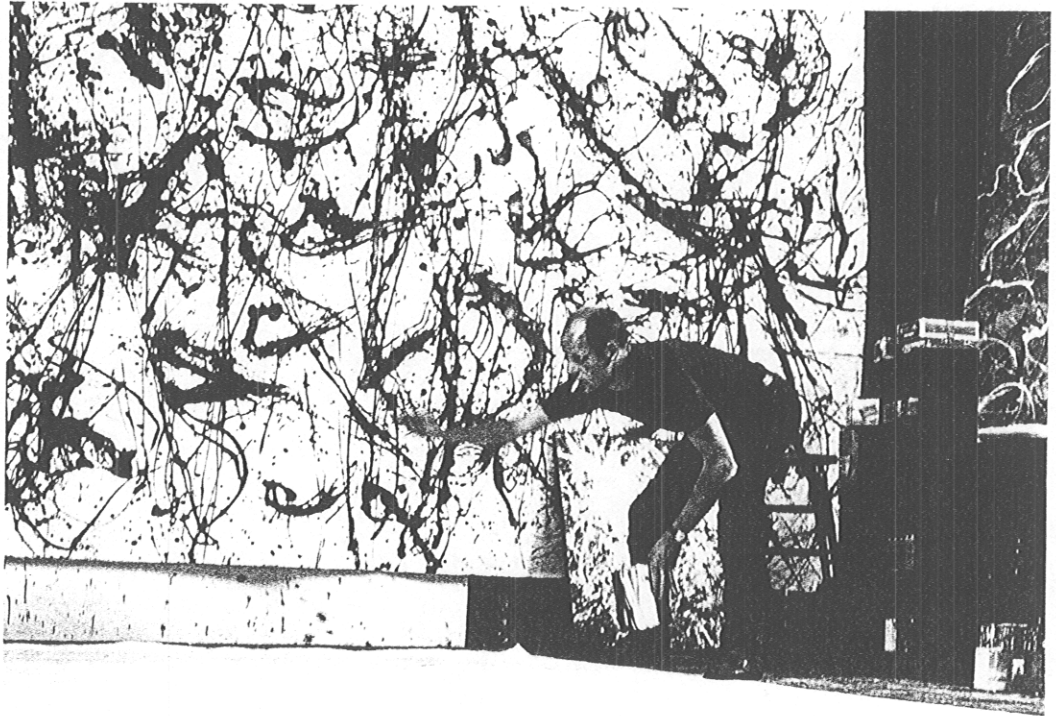
In the final composition, Rockwell created a drip painting that appears to be approximately six feet square, reduced in the painting to one-third this size. It is just a little taller and wider than the height of the Beholder. Recalling Pollock's classic drip paintings of 1947–50 (page 84), Rockwell's Painting is a tour-de-force of illusionism. One can only marvel at how well he pulled it off. When Pollock created his large canvases, he laid them flat on the ground and walked around them, using the full swing of his arm to create arcs and drips of paint. The size and character of his forms, in other words, bore a direct relationship to the scale of his own body. To replicate such effects in miniature, Rockwell had to give the *illusion* of full arm swings of paint but in fact work up close with smaller instruments. He had to make the reduction without losing the proper relationship of the skeins of paint to the whole.

Even though the surface is not as airy and lacy as an original Pollock, Rockwell got something of the texture and energy right. His drips are appropriately thin, created by something more like a toothbrush than the trowel, knives, paint cans, and sticks that Pollock used, and the larger constellations of paint are proportionately in scale. Magically, the drips lie upon the surface of the canvas and retain their substance as paint. Some of the heavily painted areas have dried and shriveled, just as in Pollock's paintings.

While the painting easily satisfies viewers who know something of Pollock's style but have not been



Norman Rockwell painting *The Connoisseur*, 1961



Jackson Pollock painting *Autumn Rhythm*, 1950



Jackson Pollock, *Number 3 1949: Tiger*, 1949

trained in its intricacies, Pollock connoisseurs who have had intimate encounters with the real thing might blanch. For them, the forms would appear too mechanical and cold, the colors too bright, and the surface too densely worked over with the artist's characteristic forms.⁴ Furthermore, Pollock's preferred format was not square, but vertical and tall or horizontal and long. "Apocalyptic wallpaper," Pollock critics might well call Rockwell's imitation, using Harold Rosenberg's pungent description of "decorative" action paintings whose forms and surfaces failed to have any existential urgency. Such works "lack the dialectical tension of a genuine act, associated with risk and will," Rosenberg wrote. The artist's "gesture completes itself without arousing either an opposing movement within itself nor his own desire to make the act more fully his own. . . . The result is an apocalyptic wallpaper."⁵

But if we characterize Rockwell as a mimic rather than as a poor abstract painter or Pollock wannabe, then we cannot help but be impressed by the way he used his realist skills to approximate (or illustrate) Pollock's drip style. He even buried a conceit of his

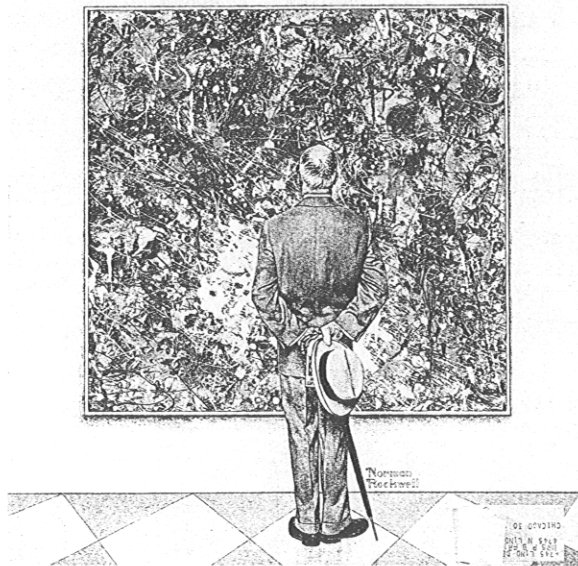
own within the Pollockesque swirls. To the right of the man's head, there is an unmistakable P for Pollock in bright red paint; with a little imagination one can also find a much larger (and bloodier) J to the left of the P. The stem of the J is crossed by a horizontal stroke, making not only a second, smaller J but also the shape of the cross. It was well known that Pollock had died in a car crash in 1956, five years before Rockwell conceived this work. On the wall below the Painting, in the same vertical register as the agitated JP, Rockwell signed his own name in sturdy, clean-cut block letters.

This deliberate juxtaposition of Pollock's non-representational artiness with Rockwell's own down-home illustrative skills happens again in the illusionistic body of the Beholder, which so bullishly interrupts the abstract Painting. In meticulous detail and clean realism, the Beholder is classic Rockwell; his body shape, clothes, and the things held in his hands identify his character type. He is conservatively attired, immaculately outfitted in a gray suit that is so perfectly fitted that nary a wrinkle appears across his broad shoulders. His costume not only speaks of his urbanity

THE LITTLE-KNOWN WORLD OF
**OUR NEGRO
ARISTOCRACY**

BACKSTAGE WITH
ACADEMY AWARD WINNER
Shirley Jones

POST
The Saturday Evening
Jan. 13, 1962 20c



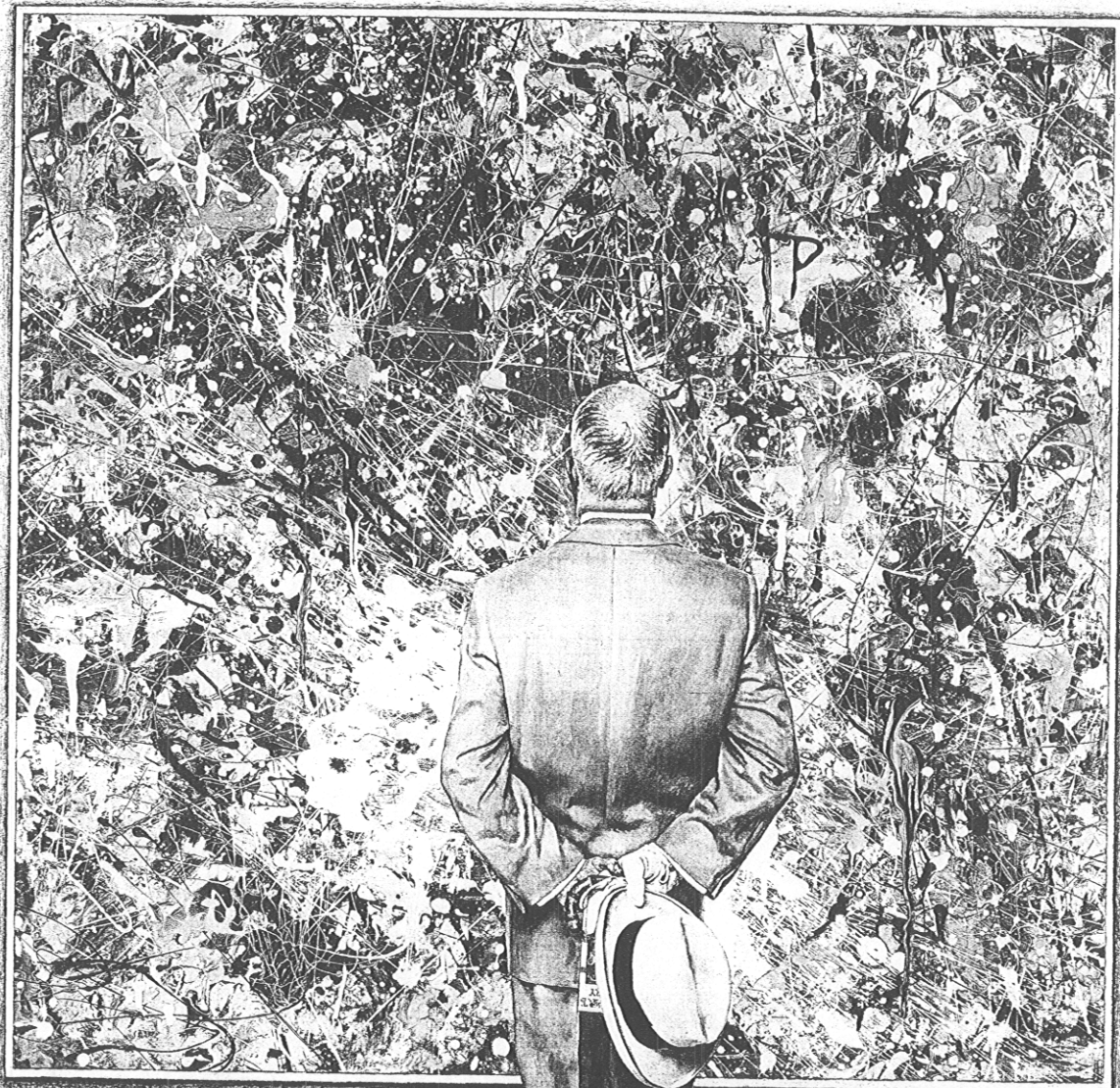
The Connoisseur, 1962

but also alludes to the male dandy whose aesthetic dress customarily included elegant gloves, an exquisite hat, and a walking stick, represented here by a surrogate umbrella. The soft gray gloves, in particular, give Rockwell's Beholder an air of preciousness and affectation, especially as one is worn while the other is not, a combination that has a long tradition in visual and literary representations of dandies. That our Beholder is a perfectionist in dress is also exemplified by his highly polished black shoes and his starched white shirt peeping above his suit collar and so tightly fitted that his neck bulges slightly out over it. This bit of fleshiness and the thinning gray hair suggest that the Beholder is in the prime of life. His dress evokes professional success (banking or law, perhaps), expensive tastes, and a touch of the esthete. He holds an Art Gallery Guide in his hands, signaling that he frequents galleries.

Exactly where is the Rockwellian humor in this confrontation between city man and abstract painting? *The Connoisseur*, unlike most *Post* covers by Rockwell, is exceedingly deadpan, giving us few directions as to

how to react. Indeed, it is so open-ended that viewers read it from a variety of angles.⁶ The three letters to the editor of *The Saturday Evening Post* that appeared in the February 17, 1962, issue are a case in point. M. R. Daugherty of Anaheim, California, wondered indignantly why Rockwell wasted his effort on "such junk! The word 'art' has been discounted as much as Uncle Sam's dollar in applying the word to such stuff." Joe F. Akins of Ruston, Louisiana, made his own joke of the cover by reading the Beholder as bewildered and suggesting that it was easy to understand why: for the painting "is obviously hanging upside down." A third writer, Robert J. Handy of Seattle, Washington, complimented Rockwell's modern abstraction—not bad for "just an illustrator"—and praised his sense of humor, a "quality sorely needed in modern art."⁷

The first two of these writers perceived the Painting as the kind of art they did not like or appreciate. The third found it funny, but did not say exactly where he found the humor. All of them implicitly acknowledged the primacy of abstract art in post-World War II American culture. By 1961, when Rockwell created



Norman
Rockwell

The Connoisseur, 1962

The Connoisseur, Abstract Expressionist art had been well covered in the popular press for nearly fifteen years; by the mid-1950s, it had successfully attracted collectors whose passion for this kind of difficult art was itself often newsworthy.⁸ All this attention had helped fuel jokes and clichés about abstract paintings: that they could be hung with any side up or be produced by children or monkeys. In such a climate, Rockwell surely intuited that an encounter between a city gentleman and an abstract painting could amuse those for whom modern art was not a regular or necessary part of their universe. But he left the confrontation open to interpretation. *The Saturday Evening Post* readers might easily have found it funny because the world that the contemporary connoisseur occupied was so far removed from the realities of their own lives, or because they believed Rockwell shared their rejection of abstract art. Or they might project onto the male viewer their own bewilderment and anxieties as beholders of paintings whose forms of address they did not understand or find engaging. They might also have found the finely dressed art appreciator a comic figure, he being a type far removed from the middle-brow suburbanites who ordinarily populated the covers of *The Saturday Evening Post*.

There is good slapstick humor, too, in the collision of the chaos and disorderliness of the mock Pollock painting with the tidiness and fastidiousness of the Beholder, whose ordered world extends into the diamond-patterned Floor beneath his feet. The Painting is aggressive and assaulting; the Beholder, rooted to an earthbound tile, is passive and receiving. They are not natural partners but aliens confronting one another. However one wishes to describe it—chaos ver-

sus order, color versus line, Baroque versus classical, youth versus age, imagination versus rationality, left brain versus right, female versus male, immateriality versus material—Rockwell vested his illustration of a gentleman's encounter with an abstract painting with some of the grandest and most elementary conflicts in the universe. This is what makes me smile. The Painting is so random and chaotic and the Beholder so balanced and symmetrical. The middle seam in his suit jacket divides his body exactly in half, as does the thin space between his legs. Both arms are pulled behind his back at the same angle and even the folds in his sleeves and pant legs seems to echo one another. Furthermore, his weight is evenly distributed, and his feet are planted like a tree in the middle of the central white diamond on the floor. But then, within all this rigor, there are subtle asymmetries that Rockwell used to animate his stolid composition: the two feet pointing away from the body at slightly different angles and the Beholder's body placed just right of center.

There are also smaller amusements. A little twist of hair that has managed to escape from the Beholder's tidy pate curls into his bald spot like a Pollock swirl of paint; harder to see, there is also a little white tuft at the front center of the Beholder's head that simultaneously belongs both to the hair on the man's head and to the painting's surface. That the Beholder's body remains at attention in the middle of an explosion of white paint is another hilarious passage. How calm and contained he stands in the ejaculatory crossfire of luminous paint!

Given that the miniature Pollock painting is rendered so carefully, even respectfully, what can we



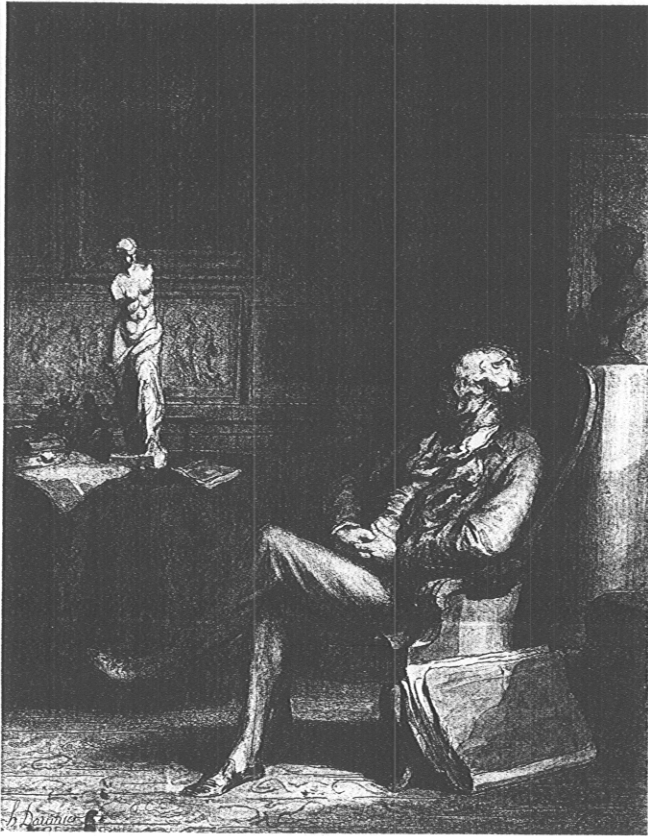
Unknown artist, *The Auction*, 1770

deduce, if anything, about Rockwell's personal appreciation of abstract art? If the Beholder is taken as Rockwell's surrogate, then it is all the more significant that the artist did not reveal the one body part we most want to see: the Beholder's face. This is a crucially missing element, since nothing about the Beholder, other than his containment and orderliness, registers any sure reaction to what he is seeing. Because faces are central vehicles for pictorial storytellers—certainly they were for Rockwell—the absence of the man's face warrants further consideration.

To assess the anomaly of Rockwell's faceless Beholder, let us compare him with other representations of connoisseurs looking at works of art. This is an old subject in the history of art, and traditionally the connoisseur's face is vital to the artist's narrative. When the subject first became popular in mid- to late-eighteenth-century England, connoisseurs were often the butt of visual jokes, and their faces carried the

comic message. By distending the eyes and noses and exaggerating the wigs of their subjects, satirists such as William Hogarth and James Gillray mocked the pretense and greed of English gentlemen and women who formed private collections not because of a passion for art but for status and prestige. In an anonymous print made in London at this time, a group of upper-class connoisseurs, both men and women, stare at a landscape painting being offered for sale, not one of them seeming to notice that the canvas is upside-down (above). They are grotesquely malformed creatures, analogous to animals who consume everything in sight. They have hooked or pointed noses, barnyard mouths, and intense eyes aimed like arrows at works of art, but seeing nothing. They are acquisitive possessors who do not see.

Alongside this tradition of the connoisseur as blind and foolish, another depicted him as thoughtful and cultured. For artists such as Johann Zoffany in



Honoré Daumier, *Le Connoisseur*, 1860–65

England and, later, Honoré Daumier in France, the act of looking that transpires between a collector and a work of art was a favorite subject. In *Le Connoisseur* (above), Daumier's relaxed collector is seated in the privacy of his home, surrounded by works in his collection. He looks intently upon a small statue of the Venus de Milo standing on a nearby table, his absorption so total that we feel that we are intruding upon his private space.⁹ The collector's face, turned to the object under scrutiny, registers appreciation and contentment. The pleasures of beholding, as well as possessing, are visualized further by the beam of light that Daumier uses to bring together the body of the connoisseur with the art he admires as well as the few prints at his side and on the table. Putting everything else in shadow, Daumier literally illuminates the satisfactions that concentrated looking can extract from works of art.

In his connoisseurial portrait of Sidney Janis



George Segal, *Portrait of Sidney Janis with Mondrian Painting*, 1967

(above), George Segal renders the same kind of genial looker who expresses his ownership of art—in this case a 1933 Mondrian painting—by gently touching its frame. In the 1950s and 1960s, Janis was a well-known contemporary art dealer in New York; he handled the work of European modernists such as Picasso and Mondrian and also contemporary American artists such as the Abstract Expressionists and Pop artists. By then he had also formed an important collection of modern art that in 1968 went to New York's Museum of Modern Art.¹⁰ When he sat (or stood, in this case) for his portrait by Segal, he allowed one of the Mondrian paintings in his collection to be worked into the composition. Segal represents him looking kindly and reflectively at the abstract painting on the easel, as if it were a lover. Together the collector and painting form a couple on intimate terms.

In that Rockwell's *Beholder* is in a public space—most likely a commercial art gallery, given the guide



"I wish this bench was in front of something I understood."

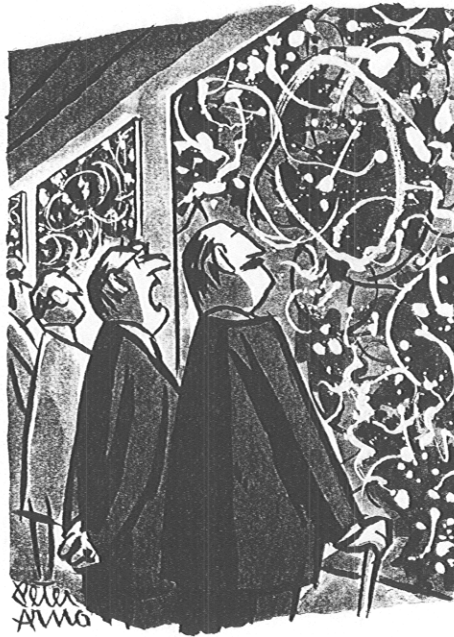
Barney Tobey, "I wish this bench was in front of something I understood." *The New Yorker*, December 31, 1955

and umbrella in his hand—we must consider yet one more set of representations: cartoons about people in museums and galleries struggling to fathom—and articulate—the meaning of works of modern art. *The New Yorker* magazine specialized in cartoons of this genre and ran them so often that they conditioned audiences to expect humor whenever city viewers were pictured confronting difficult art. These cartoons poked fun both at the befuddled New Yorkers trying to understand abstract art and at the art itself.¹¹ In one such cartoon, a woman in a gallery of abstract sculpture stands in front of a golf club bent into an abstract shape and calls over to her perplexed husband looking at another work: "Here's one you'll understand." In another cartoon, two well-dressed women sit on a bench in front of a row of abstract paintings, and one says to the other "I wish this bench was in front of something I understood" (above). In these examples, viewers confess their inability to find meaning in abstract works of art, despite their effort. In a Peter Arno example that *The New Yorker* ran in 1961, two city gentlemen of the same type as Rockwell's Be-

holder study a Pollock painting and render a discriminating if pretentious connoisseurial judgment. One says to the other, "His spatter is masterful, but his dribbles lack conviction" (page 91).

Cartoons such as these had long been in circulation when Rockwell painted *The Connoisseur*. And his image has all the elements of these cartoons, except that it lacks a punch line. Rockwell does not tell us in words whether his Beholder is bewildered or delighted by what he is seeing; we don't even know if his eyes are open.

So what may we finally conclude about the silent Beholder's encounter with an Abstract Expressionist painting? Did Rockwell's faceless viewer-surrogate express the artist's own indecisiveness about modern art? Was the artist poking fun at connoisseurs of modern art by insinuating that they were dandified and effete? Was Rockwell angered, even threatened, by the popularity of New York School abstraction, expressing it by a joke: a miniature painting executed so well that Rockwell's talents as an illustrator dwarf Pollock's as a fine artist? Or was Rockwell's imitation the



"His spatter is masterful, but his dribbles lack conviction."

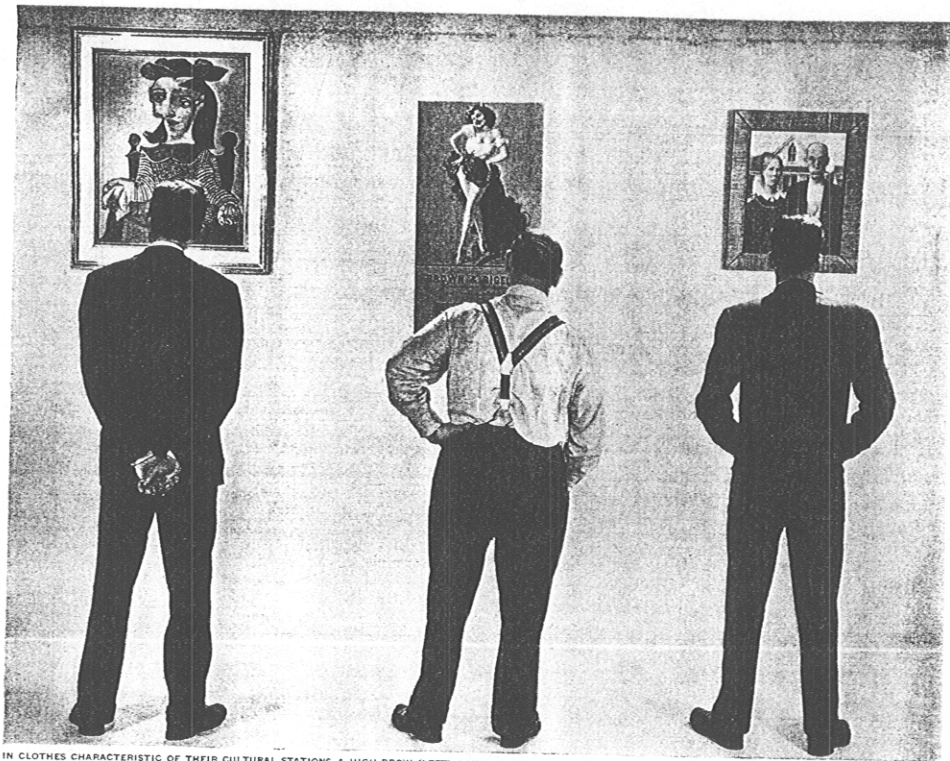
Peter Arno, "His spatter is masterful, but his dribbles lack conviction." *The New Yorker*, September 23, 1961

sincerest form of flattery, conveying admiration for the abstractionist?¹²

There is some truth, I suspect, to each of these lines of argument, especially if we recall that Rockwell was working in a climate where he and other figurative painters such as Andrew Wyeth were roundly criticized for their storytelling. He had cause to defend himself against his detractors and have a little fun with the pieties surrounding abstract art. In the 1950s, the art world feverishly debated the relative merits of abstract art, realist art, and art illustration, and Rockwell, because he was popular, was frequently caught in the crossfire. Clement Greenberg, one of the most vocal critics of the period and a champion of Pollock and other New York School artists, set the terms of the debate. He argued for the aesthetic complexities and challenges of abstract art while protesting the cheapened kitsch culture that he felt dominated America. In Greenberg's lexicon, Rockwell's illustrations were kitsch—that is, popular and commercial artworks that appealed to the masses. His realism was easy, sentimental, and undemanding. When such popular forms

become the dominant taste, Greenberg warned, the high arts find it hard to flourish or even survive, and enlightened culture collapses; this was a great danger, he felt, in a society as populist and commercial as the United States.¹³

In 1949, Russell Lynes, a writer about contemporary culture, observed how pervasive the debates about the value of modern art, especially abstraction, had become. Even a popular magazine like *Life* was reporting on abstract painters and had sponsored a serious conference on the nature of modern art.¹⁴ In a long and amusing essay, Lynes suggested that American culture was now divided along lines of taste rather than class. "It isn't wealth or family that makes prestige these days. It's high thinking," he suggested.¹⁵ The country was now broken into three taste groups: highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow. Lynes described highbrows as individuals who were challenged by the complexities and intellectuality of modern art, while lowbrows did not care about what was in or out of fashion in art; they just liked what they liked. Middlebrows, on the other hand, took high culture seriously



HIGH-BROW, LOW-BROW, MIDDLE-BROW

Herbert Gehr, *Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow*, *Life*, April 11, 1949

but did not make the fine distinctions of the high-brows. They put reproductions on their walls rather than works of art, and in many respects they had ordinary and eclectic tastes. When it came to modern art, middlebrows could be philistines, lashing out at what they could not easily understand.

The editors of *Life* magazine liked Lynes's *Harper's Weekly* article so much that they digested it for their readers, creating two pictorial charts to categorize the new taste lines.¹⁶ In one of these, they depicted three men standing in front of three pictures (above). Just as in Rockwell's *The Connoisseur*, we see the men completely from behind and judge their types by their clothes and body postures. To the left, the highbrow man in a suit has his hands drawn comfortably behind his back, his body relaxed as he looks upon a Picasso portrait. In the center, the lowbrow wears a baggy shirt with suspenders; he is short, a bit overweight, and lounges onto one leg. Working class in type, he

stares at a pin-up on a calendar. The third man, the middlebrow, stands with tension running throughout his suited body. His hands are drawn in front of him, his shoulders are square, his body type athletic and alert. He looks with assurance at Grant Wood's painting *American Gothic*. He might just as well have been admiring one by Rockwell.

Such postwar arguments set the parameters by which Rockwell was judged by modernist art critics at the time and by art historians today. The latter still are likely to see in the illustrator's work a pandering to philistine audiences, whose antimodern tastes they assume Rockwell shared and nurtured. *The Connoisseur* offers a brilliant corrective to such knee-jerk presumptions. In it, Rockwell makes clear that he knows something about abstract art, and he details for his audience the differences between his very literal style and the abstract one of a modern artist. He found a way to illustrate for a popular audience the different demands

that Abstract Expressionist canvases and the covers of *The Saturday Evening Post* made on their viewers. He used *The Connoisseur* to illustrate the theory of looking advocated by the New York School of abstraction and to demonstrate how different it was from the mode of looking embodied within his own illustrations.

A Rockwell painting addresses its viewers directly, relying on many details that are relatively easy to synthesize into a story. The canvases of abstract artists, especially those of the New York School, asked beholders to take time to experience pure form and color. The ideal viewer for Abstract Expressionist work was meditative, someone who slowed down, relinquished external concerns, and put himself into that suspended state Michael Fried has called "absorbed beholding."¹⁷ As Pollock once told an interviewer, he thought viewers should look "passively" at his paintings "and try to receive what the painting has to offer and not bring a subject matter or preconceived idea of what they are looking for."¹⁸ Through such acts of intense looking, the viewer might so psychologically merge with the painting that he would lose consciousness of his physical self (replacing eye-sight with I-site, we might say). Such a theory of transcendence lay behind the New York School's production of very large canvases, so large that they become painted environments, engulfing viewers who engage them from a close vantage point. Customarily, these canvases were hung low and far apart so that viewers would experience each one completely on its own, standing so close that they would have no peripheral vision outside the canvas. They were meant to be completely immersed by large fields of color and painted line.¹⁹

This, I would submit, is the kind of beholder experience Rockwell illustrated, revealing himself to be far more learned and experienced in abstract art than one might generally suppose. *The Connoisseur* illustrates the relationship between Beholder and Painting that abstract artists imagined and desired. Following this line of argument, let's look one last time at *The Connoisseur*.

Like the Pollock abstractions it imitates, the Painting is very large and was the first thing Rockwell painted. (One can see the vestigial outline of drips under the figure and under the white of the wall at the

edges of the canvas.) He then painted the body of the Beholder over the painting so that two thirds of his body was embraced by the abstraction.²⁰ By tilting the diamond tiles of the Floor upward, Rockwell exaggerated what he had undoubtedly read about painters such as Pollock and Mark Rothko, whose ideal viewers engaged abstract paintings at close hand. He intensified that engagement by adding subtle shadows at all four edges of the canvas, making the Painting appear suspended in front of the gallery wall and pushing into the Beholder's space. Because the Painting is so colorful and dynamic, and so much more aggressive than the Beholder, it threatens to wrap the Beholder in its web. As if a counter force, the modeled body of the Beholder pushes back into the abstract canvas, creating a playful push-pull dynamic that cleverly mimics one of the formalist ideals of the Abstract Expressionist painters.

Locking his two protagonists into an intense pictorial relationship, Rockwell played upon the cliché that opposites attract. In its lock on the Beholder, the abstract Painting also signifies the attacks the New York School made on illustrators like Rockwell, whose gray-suited surrogate—so very realistic in style—stands his ground. But Rockwell's most subtle and sophisticated humor resides in the way he dramatized the nature of looking that Abstract Expressionist canvases invited and depended upon. This was not the kind of looking at details through a magnifying glass that Rockwell depicted in *Art Critic*, an old-master variant of seeing that he practiced as his own. It was rather a contemporary style of absorbed looking that promised transcendence and the experience of bodily loss. Rockwell's down-home emblem of that loss, and of this manner of beholding, is the missing face. The marvel is that Rockwell found a popular and accessible means to illustrate this difficult and innovative style of beholding while remaining true to his own audience's more traditional ways of seeing.²¹