**Description**

**Norman Rockwell (American, 1894-1978)**

*Ben Franklin's Sesquicentennial*, The Saturday Evening Post cover, May 29, 1926

Oil on canvas

36 x 27 inches (91.4 x 68.6 cm)

Signed lower right: Norman / Rockwell

PROPERTY FORMERLY FROM THE COLLECTION OF DEBBIE REYNOLDS

PROVENANCE:
The artist;
Bernard Danenberg, New York, acquired from the above;
Joseph H. Hennage Collection, acquired from the above;
(With) Bernard & S. Dean Levy, New York;
Debbie Reynolds Collection, California, acquired from the above;
Acquired by the present owner from the above.

EXHIBITED:
The Fort Lauderdale Museum of Arts, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and elsewhere, "Norman Rockwell: A Sixty Year Retrospective," February 11, 1972-March 5, 1972;
"The Bi-Centennial Freedom Train Tour," United States, April 1, 1975-December 31, 1976;
The Huntington Library Museum, San Marino, California, January 2012-2015;

LITERATURE:
S. Flythe, Jr. *Norman Rockwell and The Saturday Evening Post, The Early Years (1916- 1928)*, New York, 1976;
The Chicago Tribune Magazine, April 4, 1976;

Heritage Auctions is honored to be offering Norman Rockwell's *Ben Franklin's Sesquicentennial*, formerly in the collection of the actress Debbie Reynolds, which graced the cover of the May 29, 1926 *Saturday Evening Post*. Commissioned in celebration of the 150th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the painting is significant as Rockwell's only cover illustration out of over 500 featuring a Founding Father. The painting's popularity led to its reproduction on the cover of the July 4, 1976 *Chicago Tribune Magazine*, kicking off the country's Bicentennial year, and to its inclusion in twelve major exhibitions nationwide since the early 1970s.

On July 4, 1776, fifty-six delegates to the Second Continental Congress met at the Pennsylvania State House and signed the Declaration of Independence, officially declaring the thirteen American colonies a new nation. In this 1926 *Post* cover, Rockwell spotlights the noted statesman-writer-inventor-educator Benjamin Franklin alone among these Founding Fathers. Wearing traditional homespun breeches, waistcoat, and velvet outer coat, Franklin leans on a Federal desk and engages the viewer, his quill pen hovering over the weighty document. A book propped against the desk leg underscores Franklin's identity as an author and publisher; behind his head, the heraldic American seal, emblazoned with unfurling ribbons, flashing eagle wings, and bright stars, hints at two of his other instrumental roles, U.S. diplomat and experimenter with electricity.

*Ben Franklin's Sesquicentennial* merits comparison with other magazine covers from this period. Rockwell borrowed the composition directly from his June 7, 1924 *Post* cover, *Daydreaming Bookkeeper* (fig. 1). Here, an accountant similarly leans on a desk in profile, his hand holding a pen over a ledger. Objects defining each man appear in identical places: on the corner of the desk, the accountant's rubber stamp stand versus Franklin's ink pot with quills; at the foot of the desk, a basket with work papers versus a book; and behind the men, a tondo with a ship on the high seas versus one with the American eagle seal. Through the intentional placement of iconography, Rockwell shows that the men are far more than their day jobs as bookkeeper or book publisher; rather, they are imaginers of larger dreams, whether of swashbuckling sea adventure or American freedom.

At the same time, Rockwell deliberately contrasts *Ben Franklin's Sesquicentennial* with the 1767 David Martin painting of Franklin that *Literary Digest* published on its January 16, 1926 Sesquicentennial cover (fig. 2). Martin depicts Franklin as an introspective, upper-class philosopher-scholar rather
than as a relatable man of action. Seated at a desk covered with a rich satin cloth and anchored by a classical bust, Franklin, absorbed in thought, pores over his political treatises. Oppositely, Rockwell's Franklin embraces the look of an everyday citizen, shedding a formal powdered wig and opting for a simpler coat without gold embroidery. Even more important, Rockwell's Franklin directly gazes at the viewer, involving him in this momentous declaration he is about to sign:

*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*

Why did Rockwell choose Franklin among the Founding Fathers, instead of Thomas Jefferson or John Adams, for example, for his Sesquicentennial *Post cover?* The first reason was Philadelphia. Rockwell's May 29 *cover served as an advertisement for the eagerly anticipated Sesquicentennial International Exposition, a world's fair that opened in South Philadelphia on May 31 and ran through November. Franklin, of course, embodied Philadelphia: moving to Philadelphia as a youth, he founded the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, organized the Associated Regiment of Philadelphia of the Continental Army, represented Pennsylvania as a diplomat to England and France, served as the Philadelphia postmaster (later the Postmaster General), was named the first president of the Academy and College of Philadelphia (University of Pennsylvania), signed the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution as the delegate from Pennsylvania, and led the state as the president of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society and as the governor of Pennsylvania.

The city of Philadelphia had been planning the Sesquicentennial celebration since 1921, and as the *Post* launched Rockwell's cover, even more images of Franklin and his object counterpart, the Liberty Bell, began abounding. In order to help pay for the fair, the U.S. government issued a commemorative stamp depicting the Liberty Bell, as well as two coins: a silver half dollar with the heads of George Washington and Calvin Coolidge on the obverse and the Liberty Bell on the reverse, and a $2.5 gold quarter eagle with Liberty holding a torch on one side and Independence Hall on the other. (In 1948 the designer of these coins, John R. Sinnock, created a half-dollar coin with Franklin on the obverse and the Liberty Bell on the reverse.) Meanwhile, a local lithography company produced a sheet of eight stamps, including one with the silhouette of Franklin, lauding Philadelphia as a center for the arts, scientific research, and commerce. On opening day, fairgoers entered the grounds beneath a colossal, illuminated Liberty Bell and walked past the "Founders Pylons," columns representing the thirteen colonies and their respective signers of the Declaration of Independence (fig. 3). They could tour, among other attractions, a model post office and the "Tower of Light" - referencing Franklin's work as a postmaster and scientist. They could roam through international exhibitions in five "palaces," conceived by the young architect Louis Kahn, and purchase a variety of souvenirs with the iconic Liberty Bell: car ornaments, ladies' compacts, spoons, pins, flags, copper trays, shoe horns, postcards, and paperweights. And after July 1, they could access the city from the Delaware River Bridge, in 1955 renamed the Benjamin Franklin Bridge, whose grand opening was the event of the Sesquicentennial.

Franklin would have also appealed to Rockwell as a *Post cover subject* because Franklin was in fact the "spiritual father" of the *Post*, having served as the longtime editor of its parent publication, *The Pennsylvania Gazette*. The most influential newspaper in the colonies, the *Gazette* ran from 1728-1800 and offered citizens news about the Revolution, the new Republic, and foreign affairs; articles on cultural and social events; editorials and classified ads; essays and letters from readers; and fiction, non-fiction, and cartoons. As the editor and publisher, Franklin presented his own pieces, often under aliases, in genres ranging from scientific research to political treatises to satirical short stories. In 1821, several decades after Franklin's death, *The Saturday Evening Post* was founded as the offspring of *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, promoting the same variety of features intended to attract a large middle-class audience. All *Post* issues from 1821-1942 included a masthead with Franklin's portrait and the description, "An Illustrated Weekly Founded A.D. 1728 by Benj. Franklin." In addition, every January from 1943-1961, the *Post* highlighted a cover image of Franklin along with one of his famous quotes. Rockwell himself documented the moment when the *Post* folded in 1969, drawing for an *Atlantic Monthly* article a charcoal portrait entitled *Ben Franklin Weeping Over the Demise of the Post*.

No doubt Rockwell selected Franklin as the subject of the *Post's* Sesquicentennial cover because the artist saw himself in the great Founding Father. In particular, Franklin's identity as a representative of the American people would have resonated with Rockwell. Franklin served the colonists not merely as a statesman - signing all four key documents establishing the US as a country and furthering diplomacy in England and France - but also as a publisher and social activist. Through his widely popular *Poor Richard's Almanack*, which he released annually from 1733-1758 under the penname Richard Saunders, Franklin defined for the new nation a moral code based on self-governance, hard work, education, frugality, temperament, humility, justice, public service, and religious and political freedom. (Rockwell illustrated a compendium of *Poor Richard's Almanacks* in 1963.) Franklin's Puritan beliefs that all men are equal and that a man's worth stems from his moral behavior, not his class, led him eventually to free his slaves and condemn the institution of slavery. Likewise, through his illustrations, Rockwell considered himself a spokesman for the American people. His early work, especially for the *Post*, reinforced traditional, middle-class values of family, faith, community, and economic prosperity. And his later work, especially for *Look* magazine in the 1960s, tackled provocative social and political topics, which advocated for racial equality and world peace.

That Rockwell deemed himself a "Founding Father of American Illustration" is evidenced in several of his key self-portraits. For the July 1976 edition of *American Artist*, commemorating the country's Bicentennial, Rockwell depicted himself wrapping a "happy birthday" ribbon around the Liberty Bell, a painter's mahlstick beneath his arm and an open case of paint supplies at his feet (fig. 4). Here, Rockwell is a literal substitute for Franklin, his artwork as instrumental as Franklin's writings in defining the American ethos. And in his famous 1960 *Triple Self-Portrait*, whose study Heritage sold for a record-breaking $1.3 million, Rockwell places himself within the Western canon - symbolized by the postcard self-portraits of Durer, Rembrandt, Picasso, and van Gogh tackled to the canvas - while simultaneously framing himself within a specifically American art tradition - symbolized by the Federal mirror topped by an eagle with American shield (fig. 5). Indeed, *Triple Self-Portrait* bears striking similarities with *Ben Franklin's Sesquicentennial*. Both paintings utilize a predominant palette of "American flag" red, white, and blue. In the one, Rockwell is seated at an easel and holds a paintbrush, about to complete his portrait; in the other, Franklin leans on a desk and holds an ink quill, about to sign the Declaration. While Rockwell positions his back to the picture plane, his mirror image gazes directly at the viewer, like Franklin, "speaking to the people." By Rockwell's foot, a bucket of discarded paper and paint tubes mimics the book by Franklin's foot; correspondingly, Rockwell's reflected head, like Franklin's, is offset by a mirror with his wnograph. These intentionally parallel compositional devices equate Rockwell with Franklin and impart a powerful message: just as Franklin

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**Condition Report**: Unlined canvas; scattered areas of minor craquelure, most notably on either side of eagle emblem; stretcher bar marks; under UV light, there appears to be careful touches of inpaint underneath desk between figure's legs. Framed Dimensions 40 X 31 Inches

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Hall of fame
Norman Rockwell was born in New York City at the turn of the 20th century. As a child, he excelled as a painter, culminating in a job as a cover artist for Boys' Life Magazine when he was just 18 years old. Four years later, Rockwell would land a life-changing position at The Saturday Evening Post, a popular bi-monthly magazine. Over the span of 47 years, Rockwell completed 322 covers for the magazine, with most exploring quaint themes like childhood, coupledom, and the American workforce. By the 1960s, Rockwell's work remained popular with the public. In 1963, however, he left his job at The Saturday Evening Post and accepted a role at Look Magazine. It is during his time with Look that Rockwell's interest in social justice emerged—and his old approach to art dissipated.

Norman Rockwell (American, 1894-1978). Ben Franklin Sesquicentennial of the Signing of the Declaration of Independence 1926 oil on canvas signed (lower right) Norman Rockwell 38 x 28in (96 x 71cm). Depicting a full length portrait of Benjamin Franklin, quill pen in hand prepared to sign the Declaration of Independence, with the seal of the United States behind him. The platform base inscribed; Sesqui*Centennial*Celebration of the*Signing*of*the*Declaration*of*Independence. Commissioned for the Saturday Evening Post cover, May 29, 1926. Footnotes. Provenance: Norman Rockwell to Bernard Daneberg Ben Franklin Sesquicentennial of the Signing of the Declaration of Independence 1926 oil on canvas signed (lower right) Norman Rockwell 38 x 28in (96 x 71cm) Depicting a full length portrait of Benjamin Franklin, quill pen in hand prepared to sign the Declaration of Independence, with the seal of the United States behind him. The platform base inscribed; Sesqui*Centennial*Celebration of the*Signing*of*the*Declaration*of*Independence. Commissioned for the Saturday Evening Post cover, May 29, 1926. Bookmark Go to lot Question about lot. Informations about the auction. Auction house: Bonhams Lond