When the time comes in your family, there is one man you should see and rely upon, the man in your community allowed to sell the most respected name in monuments, the world over... Sealmark® Rock of Ages.

© 1965, Rock of Ages
Norman Rockwell and 
Corporate Sentimentality

I have a whole stack of old magazine covers in a cardboard box. Among them are an awful lot of *Saturday Evening Post* covers. All those schmaltzy fantasy images of an American small-town world that never actually existed. I looked at these covers and winced. This Norman Rockwell stuff always sends a shiver down my spine. Then I realized that, of the dozens of covers in that stack, not a single one of them was a Norman Rockwell illustration. In fact, there were about a half-dozen different names and they all looked identical to Rockwell. That’s a lot of copycats.

Perhaps not really “copycats.” Norman Rockwell (1874–1978) didn’t invent American realism, not by a long shot. American illustrative ideas about pictorial realism date back to the earliest days of this country’s attempt at defining an art style of its own. How that realism is actually technically portrayed has changed with time, but it’s always been there, plugging away. Rockwell may be one of those really famous celebrity names associated with the style, but he’s not the originator, nor the only, nor even the best of the lot (the Wyeths can probably take the “best of” crown).

The one thing that Rockwell DID seem to bring to the table was a cynicism that ran so deep that he commercialized the style into a racket—and got rich doing it. That may sound harsh, but it’s the way I see him. His heavy-handed mythic style of nostalgic sentimentalism is so smarmy that it even tugs at MY heartstrings—and THAT’S hard to do. He was really good at playing his audience in the most insidiously direct fashion. The worst part is that Norman Rockwell was a great salesman. He took a common and uninspired “craft” and turned it into a hype-driven commercial machine that gave his name a brand cachet. You wanted “Norman Rockwell” just because he was “Norman Rockwell.” The fact that his pictures were pretty and tugged a tear from your eye and a smile from your lips was pure gravy. He MADE you want to have one. This hustle made him a superstar.
Rockwell didn't limit his efforts to just *Saturday Evening Post* cover illustrations. He sold his originals for top dollar even during his lifetime—as if he was a real “fine art” gallery artist, even though he played no real role AT ALL in the 20th-century dialog of fine art. He faked it. He also continued to take on big-money clientele and do advertising work for them throughout his entire life. Even as late as 1964 he was selling his services to chemical companies, the nuclear industry, insurance companies and anybody who would give him enough cash. In return he'd give “the people” what they wanted (a.k.a., what the client wanted to sell to the rubes).
You also have to remember that Norman Rockwell knew exactly what he was doing. He used to TEACH it to his students. Yup, he trained a lot of American illustrators during the middle part of the last century. That’s because he was part of the founding faculty of the infamous Famous Artists School. Keep in mind that for the bulk of the existence of this visual language we now refer to as “graphic design,” it was a low craft that was taught through the back pages of magazines through correspondence courses. The idea of teaching this stuff in institutions of higher education didn’t really occur until the late 1960s, when the phrase “graphic design” gained general acceptance along with academic classroom structure. In the old days all the old masters were self-taught through mail order. Norman Rockwell taught the most famous of them all. The Famous Artists School even advertised on the back of comic books (Rockwell himself was depicted at his easel) calling for you to join up and send him money.

This schmaltzy advert selling the bereaved a tombstone for their loved one utilizes a sad little schoolgirl placing flowers on a grave. Is she praying? Is that a Bible with her schoolbooks? It is so cynical and insulting and contrived and downright SNEAKY that it’s sort of stunning to look at. Rock of Ages is a huge tombstone company and you can see their deeply inscribed logo in many headstones—an inscription twice as deep as the name of the deceased on the stone! Guaranteed to outlive the erosion of the client’s identity by twice as long! Just what I want—a corporate logo on my gravestone.

Norman Rockwell goes onto my list of cynical money-grubbing hacks who did their best to swindle us out of our money in exchange for sappy emotional fulfillment. What makes his work a tad worse is that he not only did it for himself and his own pocketbook, like LeRoy Neiman, Walter and Margaret Keane, Patrick Nagel, Dale Chihuly, and Peter Max, or—and I cringe to even mention—“The Painter of Light,” Thomas Kinkade. No, Rockwell knowingly did it to benefit the corporate monetary exploitation of all of us—he not only helped, he APPROVED.