

• DISTINGUISHED • ILLUSTRATOR • SERIES •

R.O. BLECHMAN: THE INQUIRING LINE



NORMAN ROCKWELL MUSEUM



In R.O. Blechman's engaging visual world, an exasperated stomach looks deeply into its owner's eyes, begging for less irritating food choices, or Alka-Seltzer™; a mother strikes a Whistler-inspired pose, delighted to receive the Mother's Day gifts bestowed by her children; a jack-o-lantern shares its unique perspective on the Halloween experience; and a pen reveals that it is definitely mightier than the sword, Don Quixote-style. Filled with humanity and humor, Blechman's whimsical, intelligent drawings, created in an instantly-recognizable hand, have been revealing us to ourselves for six decades. Deceptively uncomplicated, they offer meaningful metaphors for life, delivered with a wink and a nod and a twinkle in the artist's eye.

Norman Rockwell Museum is honored to present *R.O. Blechman: The Inquiring Line*, celebrating the exceptional career of an outstanding illustration master. The **Distinguished Illustrator Exhibition Series** highlighting the unique contributions of contemporary visual communicators is presented by the **Rockwell Center for American Visual Studies**, the nation's first research institute devoted to the art of illustration. The Distinguished Illustrator Series reflects the impact and evolution of published art, and of Norman Rockwell's beloved profession, which remains vibrant and ever-changing.

Norman Rockwell Museum holds the largest and most significant collection of art and archival materials relating to the life and work of Norman Rockwell. The Museum also preserves, interprets, and exhibits a growing collection of original illustration art by noted American illustrators, from historical to contemporary. The Norman Rockwell Museum Art Collection and Norman Rockwell Archive inspire a vibrant year-round exhibition program, national traveling exhibitions, and arts and humanities programs that engage diverse audiences. The Museum's collections, which are made accessible worldwide, are a comprehensive resource relating to Norman Rockwell and the art of illustration, the role of published imagery in society, and the American 20th century.

Stephanie Haboush Plunkett

Deputy Director/Chief Curator
Norman Rockwell Museum

Exhibition curator **Joyce K. Schiller, Ph. D.** is Curator of the Rockwell Center for American Visual Studies at Norman Rockwell Museum. She has organized many exhibitions relating to the art of illustration, and her writings on the subject can be found on the Rockwell Center's website at rockwell-center.org.

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Front cover: Illustration for *Franklin the Fly* by R.O. Blechman (Mankato, MN: Creative Editions, 2007).

Back cover: *New York at Night*, cover illustration for *The New Yorker*, October 1, 1979. **This page:** *Age of Terrorism*, Op-ed illustration for *The New York Times*, September 13, 2001. **Facing page:** *9/11 Memorial Lights*, 2006, illustration for The Municipal Art Society of New York.

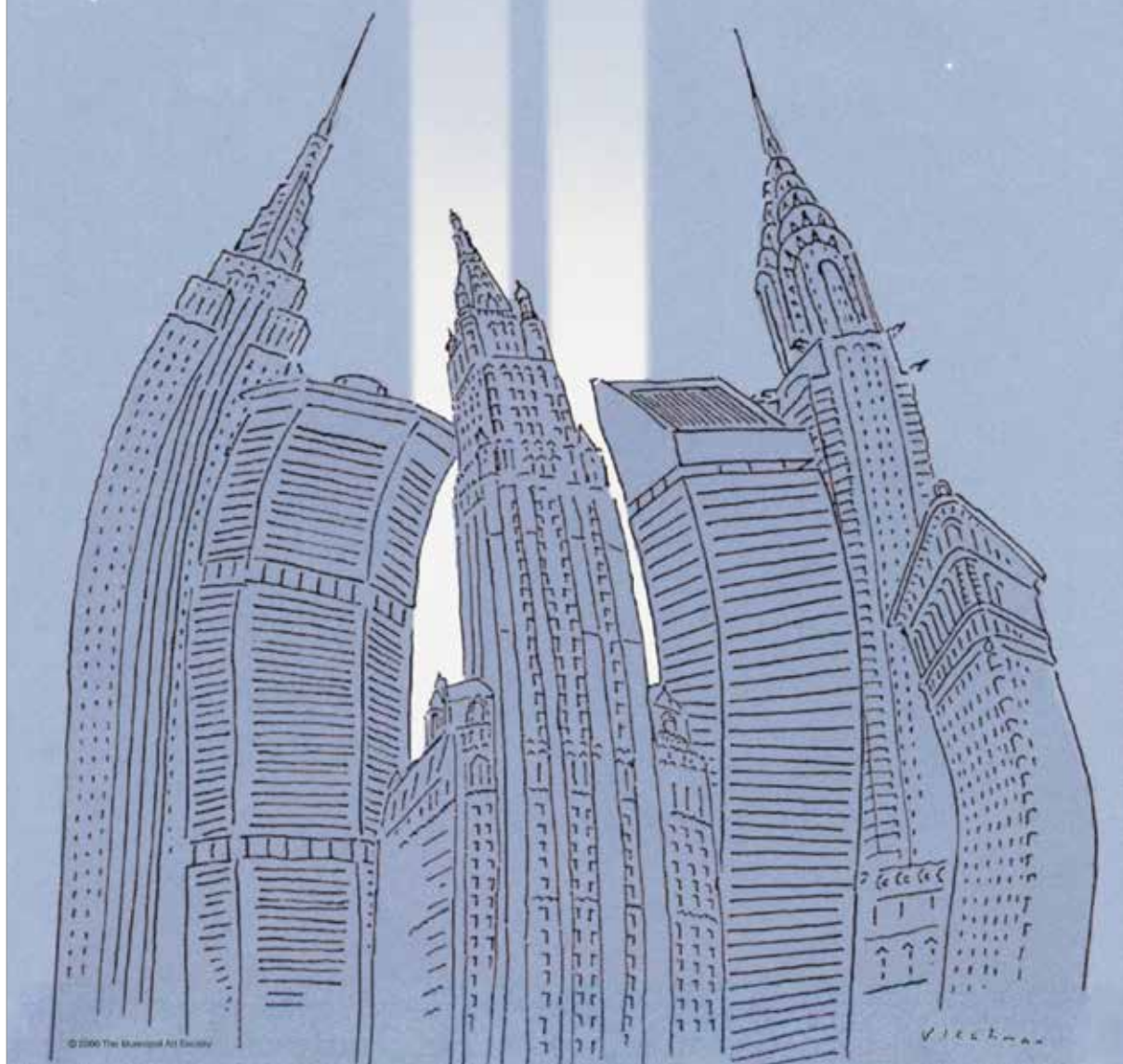
Designed by Rita Marshall

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R.O. BLECHMAN: THE INQUIRING LINE

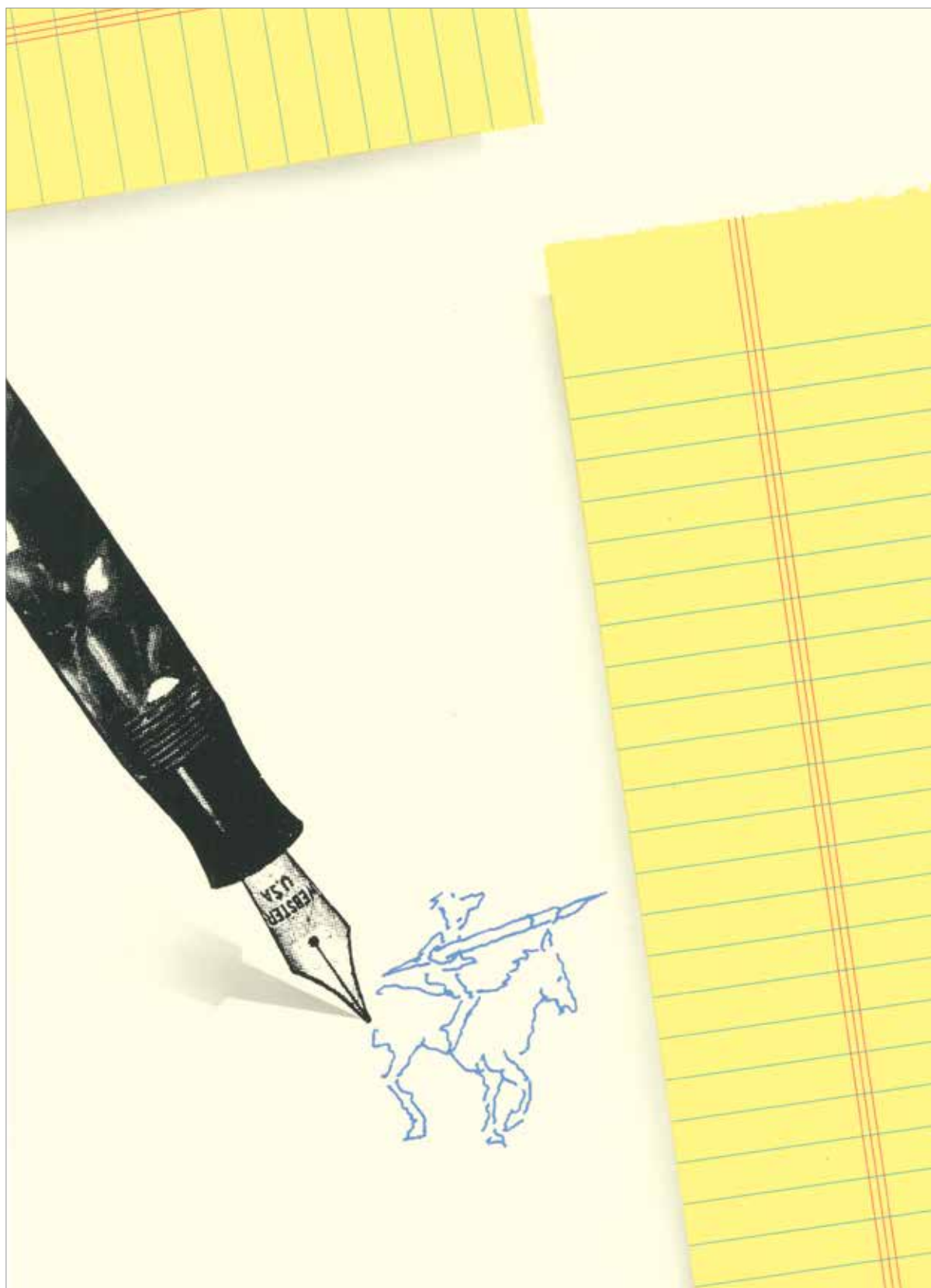
May 11 through June 30, 2013



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ROCKWELL CENTER FOR AMERICAN VISUAL STUDIES

NORMAN ROCKWELL MUSEUM

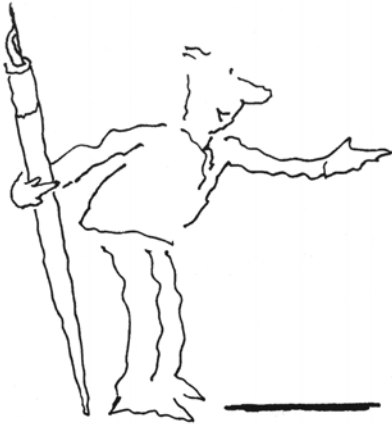


The Power of the Pen, cover illustration for *Story*, Autumn 1998.



R.O. BLECHMAN: THE INQUIRING LINE

JOYCE K. SCHILLER



R.O. Blechman is a celebrated illustrator, animator, children's book author, graphic novelist, and editorial cartoonist. His seminal animated commercial created for Alka-Selt-

zer™ and his witty illustrations for *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Huffington Post* have established Blechman's work as an important touchstone in modern illustration art. This has brought a flurry of honors: in 1983 Blechman was awarded the title of Illustrator of the Year by *Adweek*; in 1984 he received an Emmy as director of *The Soldier's Tale*, a animated PBS special; he was named a member of the New York Art Directors Club prestigious Hall of Fame in 1999; he received a Lifetime Achievement Award from The National Cartoonists Society in 2010; and in 2012, Blechman was inducted into the Illustrators Hall of Fame by the Society of Illustrators. In 2003, retrospective exhibition of his animated films was mounted at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Over the breadth of his career, Blechman has focused on and even revisited a variety of visual themes. Some originated within the stories he has written and illustrated since the 1950s. Some evolve from the appropriation of art made in other times and places. His art also reflects his experiences or the places he has been. The world may be his oyster, but it becomes our treat.

Blechman's illustrations sometimes focus on popular

sayings or commonly held customs offered up in various guises. One theme in his work addresses the age-old query, "is the pen mightier than the sword?" Blechman conveys this adage as an image of a sword or a scythe in the role of the active aggressor, with a pen in the role of the object aggressed upon. The pen, or the words it writes, are sometimes represented by a drawn ink pen, as in a 2010 illustration for *The New York Times Book Review* featuring a scythe chasing after an ink pen that writes "I'm not finished" as it runs away. After the laugh, Blechman's image prods us to question whether it is the continual laying down of words that makes the pen mighty or what the words say?

Another powerful pen image was created for the cover of the Autumn 1998 issue of *Story* magazine. On this cover, an oversized fountain pen draws a man riding a horse who also carries an ink pen held as though it were a lance. Blechman's drawn figures gallop toward a sheet of lined yellow legal paper. Here the pen is both prime mover and weapon, but also anachronistic. The pen shown is not a modern ball point pen or marker pen, it is a fountain pen. By their design, ink pen nibs are dangerous things. Made of metal, nibs have sharp points through which ink is delivered, so the fountain pen that draws the man on horse also appears to prod its creation into action.

The cover illustration is also an image of Don Quixote tilting at windmills. Sheets of yellow legal paper float above the drawn



Standing Bob, story illustration for *Print* v. 67 no.1, February 2013.

I'm not finished, illustration for "Working on the Ending" by Gail Godwin, in *The New York Times Sunday Book Review*, December 10, 2010.

surface serving as the paddles of the wind mill. Notice how the paper and fountain pen appear to cast shadows while the drawn horseman does not. Each permutation of the pen and sword provides amusement, but also fosters continued contemplation of an essential juxtaposition. Indeed, each time Blechman tackles the relationship, the pen inevitably becomes mightier.

Line and Style

Blechman's quality of line is notable and distinctive with its quivering character, laid down with obvious stops and starts; yet that is not the essential facet of his images. Though he describes it as his "tremulous line,"¹ it is the characters his lines create that hold the power in each work.

Many of Blechman's characters appear to be nebbishes (a Yiddish term meaning an unfortunate, timid geek), but they are really the artist's depiction of every man whose perseverance is his essential trait. In his 1988 *Story* magazine cover, Blechman makes it clear that the nebbish (the figure riding the horse) views the blank sheet of lined paper with trepidation.

In Blechman's first and still remarkable publication, *The Juggler of Our Lady*, the protagonist Cantalbert finds he has no exceptional gift he can use to create something



to present to the Madonna in honor of the anniversary of the birth of the Christ child. Instead, in the dark of the night, Cantalbert offers the Virgin Mary the activity that he loves most, juggling. It is Cantalbert's humble offering of the best of himself, made when

everyone else was asleep, that pleases the Lady beyond all the others. So although we may all be nebbishes, the core value Blechman communicates to us is to be yourself—to offer up to your community, the real you.

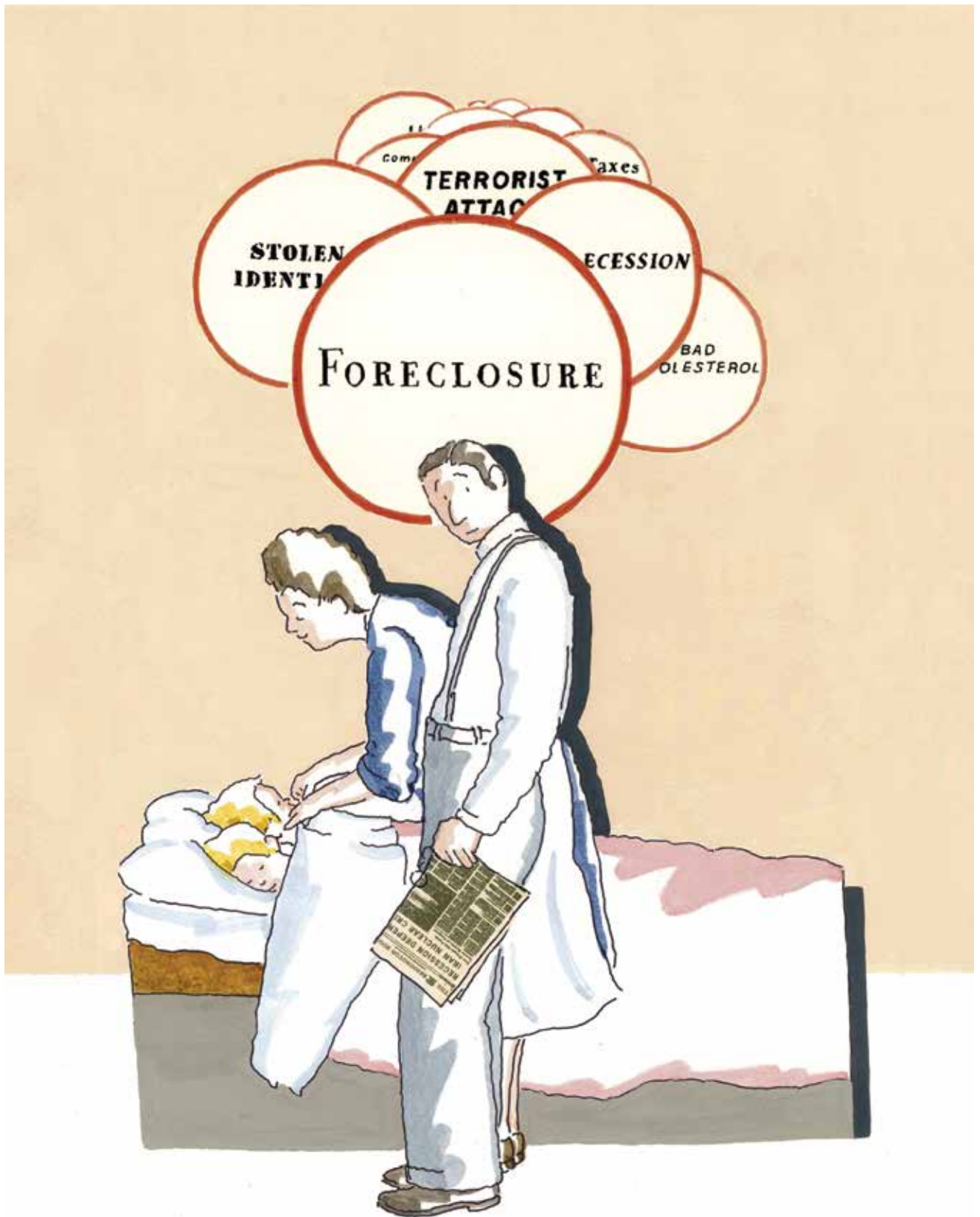
In his 2008 *Parody of Freedom from Fear* by Norman Rockwell, created for *Thoughts on Democracy*, an exhibition inspired by Norman Rockwell's *Four Freedoms* at Wolfsonian FIU², Blechman's reworking of this Rockwell image acknowledges some of the challenges that assail the contemporary everyman: foreclosure, stolen identity, recession, bad cholesterol, terrorist attacks, and taxes, as opposed to those detailed on the newspaper in Rockwell's World War II era painting: bombings, kill, horror, hit. To communicate the immensity of these issues, Blechman's father figure looks out of the picture frame at those of us viewing it, while Rockwell's father figure gazes down at his children. Rockwell couched his *Four Freedoms* illustrations in personal and private terms. Blechman's decision to pose the father figure looking back at the audience broadens the realm of personal fear into every man's fear.

Some of Blechman's characters seek to succeed in life, but despite their best intentions, things are sometimes beyond their control. His juxtaposition of Johnny Appleseed racing to plant seeds that will grow into apple trees and a gigantic Paul Bunyan following close behind, chopping down those same trees as they move through the arc of life, is a perfect reflection of Blechman's world view.

Despite personal excellence and transcendent devotion, an everyman like Johnny Appleseed stumbles through life trying to make a difference as he makes his daily contribution. This image could easily reference the quip Thomas á Kempis wrote in *Of the Imitation of Christ*, 'Man

¹ R. O. Blechman, *Dear James: Letters to a Young Illustrator* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009): 1.

² The Wolfsonian FIU challenged 60 artists and designers to create contemporary responses to Norman Rockwell's 1943 *Four Freedoms* paintings.



Parody of Norman Rockwell's *Freedom from Fear*, *Thoughts on Democracy: Reinterpreting Norman Rockwell's Four Freedoms*, The Wolfsonian FIU, 2008.



proposes, God disposes.’ Blechman acknowledges that his images are often a response to a written idea or concept :

“I always felt that my skills, such as they are, are as much literary as visual maybe even more literary than visual, because I always enjoyed language a lot. As for my drawing skills, if I work hard I can do very well.”³

Beyond references to Don Quixote and Thomas á Kempis, Blechman’s drawn lines breathe along with the characters they create. Thus, his drawn line style may express nervous energy, or when emboldened with watercolor wash, reveal and convey three-dimensional form that appears to come to life on the page.

Artistic Homage : Contextual Reuse

For his 1990 holiday cover for *The New Yorker*, Blechman borrowed from the figures of the ancient marble group of *Laocoön and His Sons*. That sculpture depicts a Trojan priest and his sons being punished by the gods for warning his countrymen about the Greek Trojan horse that would invade the city. Probably carved in the 1st century B.C. and perhaps based on an earlier Greek bronze figure, the *Laocoön* was rediscovered in Rome in the early 16th century. The

sculpture’s influence is immense, in part because it had been praised in the 1st century by the writer Pliny the Younger. It was so highly regarded that not long after its rediscovery, the Pope brought the sculptural group into the Vatican collections. The discovery of the *Laocoön* figures inspired sculptors of the early 17th century, like Gianlorenzo Bernini (1598–1680), to attempt to convey dramatic emotion in addition to physical beauty, as he did in his sculpture of *David*, 1623.

The *Laocoön* has also been appropriated and reinterpreted by many other artists including William Blake and Charles Dickens. Blechman’s twist (literal and figural) was to posit a modern version of the image with father and sons balancing on wrapped packages, bound together by holiday ribbons and Christmas lights. While many Renaissance and Baroque period Italians knew about this figural group, in the 20th century it is predominantly familiar to those who study art history. Blechman’s choice of this image source supposes that the rest of us who view his *New Yorker* cover illustration will get the joke. Our big conundrum, he suggests, is getting ready for the holidays without being overwhelmed.

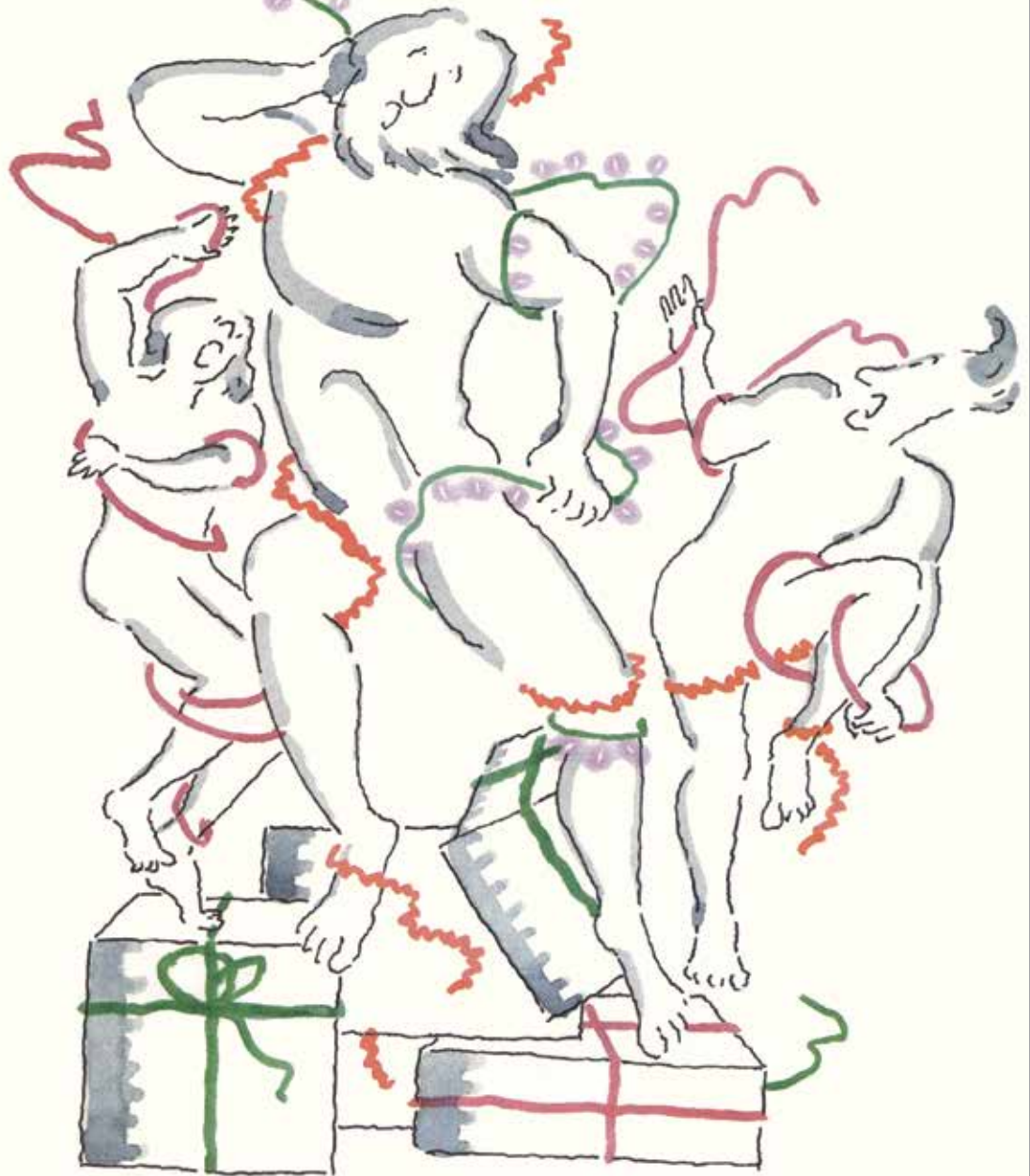
In Blechman’s 1996 book, the *Life of Saint Nicholas*, he again referenced the Greek *Laocoön*, this time along with other classical sculptures that were transformed, according to his story, into politically correct Christian-themed images by Nicholas’s father Pompus Pluvius in order to maintain his thriving business.

³ Quote from “R. O. Blechman.” in *Talking Lines : The Graphic Stories of R. O. Blechman* (Montreal, Quebec, Canada : Drawn & Quarterly, 2009) : 5.

Dec. 17, 1990

THE NEW YORKER

Price \$1.75



Christmas Wrapping (Modern Laocoön), cover illustration for The New Yorker, December 17, 1990.



The humor of this story demands that the reader recognize and understand the meanings and origins of these sculptural forms : *Aphrodite* versus the *Madonna* ; *Nike* versus the *Annunciation* ; the *Discobolus* versus *Jesus Casting Out the Money Changers* ; and the *Laocoön* versus *The Three Magi*.

In broad terms the appropriation of art implies a visual fluency with the art of the past that may not be common in our society. That said, examples of this phenomena seen on covers of *The New Yorker* or in the pages of *The New York Times*, by Blechman and many others, may be viewed by readers who are perhaps more likely to have a broad and deep visual education than in the population at large. Nevertheless, we must also acknowledge that in the 21st century, viewers of popular illustration may possess a broader knowledge of visual references because of the explosion of internet access than could have been imagined in the past.

When Blechman created an illustration referencing Shell Oil's™ passivity in the face of the deaths of Nigerian activists campaigning against the company's onshore drilling unit, he appropriated Botticelli's central figure from his 1486 painting *The Birth of Venus*. Because the deceased activists wanted the company to abandon oil production in Ogoniland, Blechman drew a new version of *Venus on the Half-shell*, as she is popularly known, to make visual sense of the story he was referencing. Scallops and other hinged shells have been used to symbolize the feminine principle, so it is understandable that images of Venus (or Aphrodite), the goddess of love and fertility, include a scallop shell to identify a woman. No doubt Shell Oil™ chose a scallop shell as the central feature of their logo, because over geologic time, shells and others detritus of the ancient world became compressed and transformed into oil. Blechman's image

references Botticelli's *Venus*, but the figure standing on the shell is skeletal, not the voluptuous beauty portrayed in the original painting. With this transformation, Blechman implied that the company's passivity yielded only a dead figure, not a fertile living one. In 2009, Manhattan's federal court declared that, in 1995, Shell™ was complicit in the deaths of the activists.

A few years ago, Blechman was working on creating a new logo for The Museum of the City of New York. In an attempt to encompass the many aspects of this great American city, from its historical roots to its place in the creative imagination, he proposed a logo that paired the figure of Peter Stuyvesant with Mondrian's famous abstract painting, *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, with the name of the museum worked into Mondrian's grid.

The image of Stuyvesant embodies all the attributes to easily identify the man who served as the last Dutch Director-General of the colony of New Netherland from 1627 until 1664 before it was ceded to the English and renamed New York. A few years before Stuyvesant was selected to manage the Dutch West India Company colony, he lost his right leg, the result of a cannon ball hit. The leg was amputated and replaced with a wooden peg and he used a wooden walking stick to help keep his balance. It is interesting to note that Blechman delineated the lost leg as the proper right. Look carefully at Howard Pyle's *Tailpiece* illustration

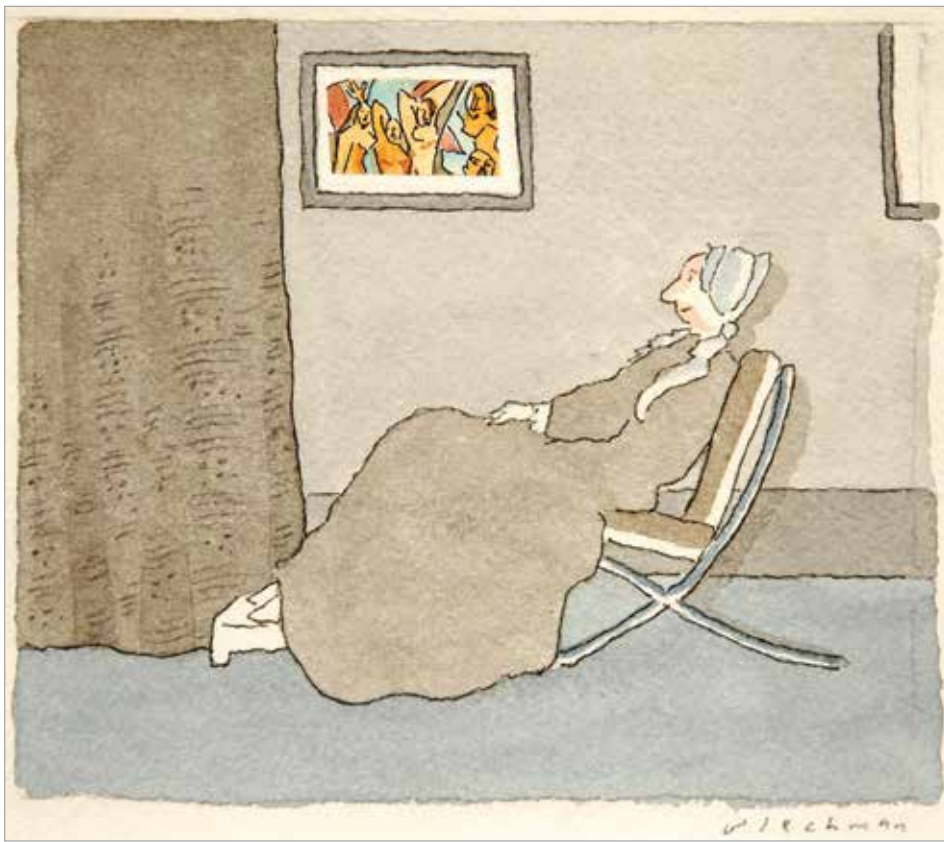


from 1893 as compared to Blechman's, and you can interpolate that Pyle got it right in the print copy, but in order to do so the original drawing shows

the figure flipped so that it would be correct when printed. Blechman's pairing of Stuyvesant and Mondrian's famous painting is inspired, since among many memorable things that Stuyvesant did, he ordered the digging of the canal that eventually became Broad Street and Broadway. In the 20th century Mondrian made Broadway boogie. As Blechman said in conversation, "it was coincidence that I chose to pair the Dutch 17th century leader of the original colony with a Dutch 20th century modernist painter who loved the city."

Blechman has appropriated some of the most popular and easily recognizable images of the modern world, such as Whistler's *Mother* (*Arrangement in Grey and Black: The Artist's Mother*, 1871) and Rodin's *The Thinker*, created as part of the sculptor's *Gates of Hell*, c. 1898. For his May 14, 1990 *New Yorker* cover, Blechman posed his iconic version of Anna MacNeil Whistler on her chair being offered tributes (flowers, candy, and theater tickets) from Lilliputian-sized children. This cover reflected our cultural response to Mother's Day, with husbands and children scurrying to offer tribute.

Blechman's later version of Whistler's mother is a real tickler. Posed facing left as she was in Whistler's original painting, in this version, the mother is seated on a Mies van der Rohe 1929 *Barcelona Chair*, and on the wall to her right



is an image of Picasso's ground-breaking 1907 painting, *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, instead of a black and white print. Picasso's painting and van Der Rohe's chair are touchstones of 20th century modernism. Each of these works was created in an attempt to produce painted art or furniture in pared down or re-invigorated forms. Blechman does much the same, but instead of an arrangement in grey and black, he paints his vision of the essential Whistler's *Mother* in shades of grey and taupe, with his *Demoiselles* providing a colorful accent.

In Blechman's various illustrations based on Auguste Rodin's sculpture of *The Thinker*, the focus is on the act of contemplation, both who is doing it and what they are thinking about. For his 1991 *New Yorker* cover illustration, 'the who' is a robot and 'the what' is presumably about life. Some years later, Blechman melds the familiar mouse head, a reference to Mickey Mouse™, with the body of *The Thinker*. The act of contemplation and self-reference is so central to

being a part of the world we live in, that in *Contemplative Chair*, Blechman has even considered a chair's inner desire.

Storytelling and the Hapless Everyman

Blechman is a storyteller in both drawings and words. His earliest published work, *The Juggler of Our Lady* (1952) recounts a juggler monk who, to the horror of his fellow monks, gives as his present to the Virgin, a juggling performance. Amazingly, after the monk collapses at the end of his performance, God rewards the humble juggler for his devotion. The drawings for this early work are simple, and so is the story. But with humor and by challenging conventional approaches, Blechman reminds us that all we can do is our best, whatever that may be.

Blechman's characters and situations observe and reflect upon their experiences. Each seeks to succeed in life, though they are sometimes surprised by what the world has to offer or deny. In his 2008 illustration for *House Beautiful* about the

May 14, 1990

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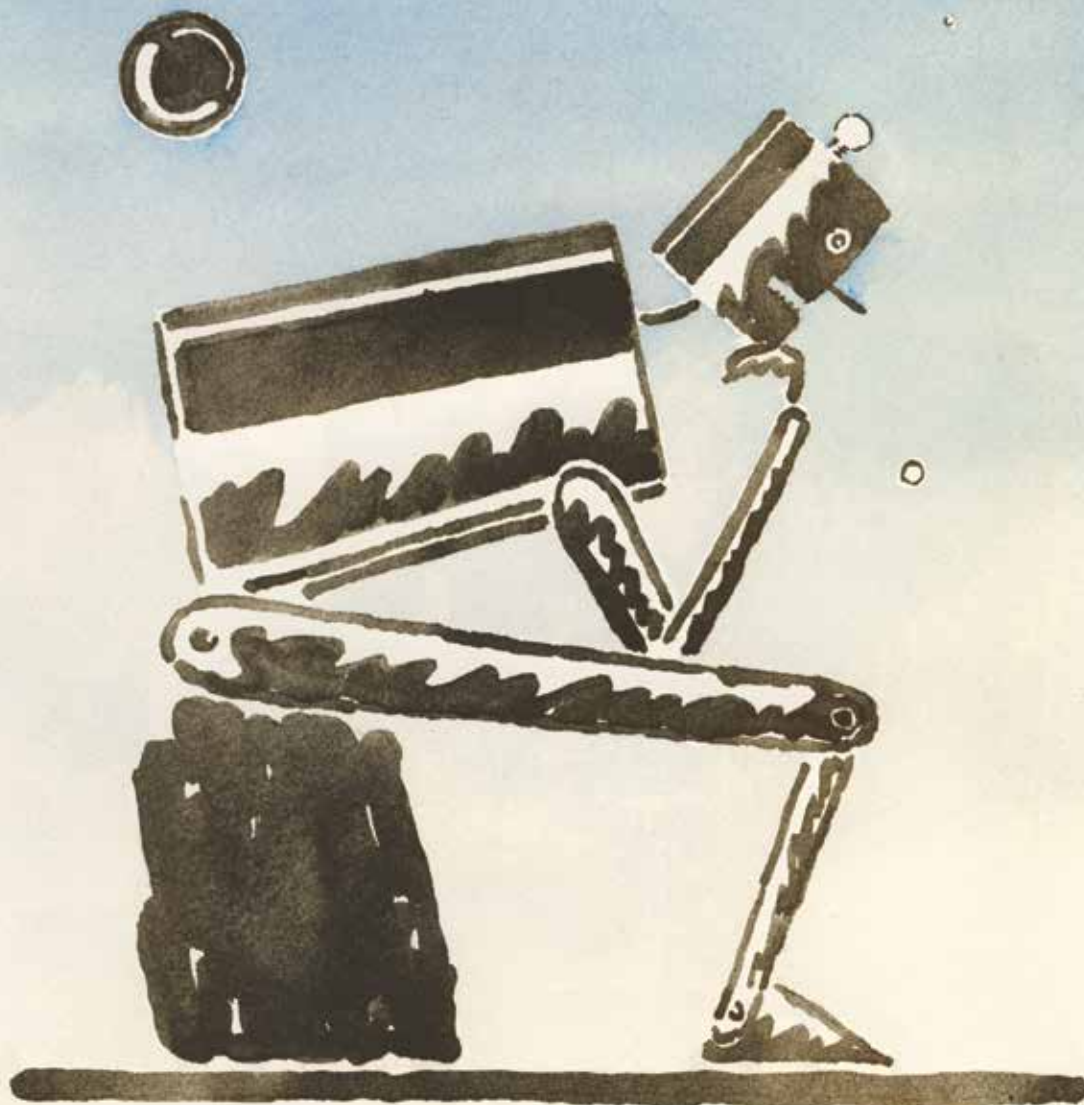


Gifts for Mother, cover illustration for The New Yorker, May 14, 1990.

Oct. 7, 1991

THE NEW YORKER

Price \$1.75



BLECH
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Robot (à la Rodin), cover illustration for The New Yorker, October 7, 1991.



challenges of dieting, Blechman named the drawing and the embattled character *The Dieter*. Armed with only her knife and fork, an over-weight everywoman single-handedly battles the ferocious snake-like menu representing restaurant dining.

In 2000, Blechman illustrated the moment when a group of industrious monks, who created and recreated manuscripts by hand, are confronted by Johannes Gutenberg and his mechanical press. Their livelihood has been taken from them and it is clear that they are unhappy with this new development. But Blechman's essential lesson is clear even here: each of us are cast in our own story—some are innovators, others only copyists.

The artist's storytelling skills are also revealed in his wordless illustrations. In 2006, Blechman created an image for The Municipal Art Society of New York, a stark visual reflection on 9/11, five years after the fact. It showed the still-standing skyscrapers of New York City, from the Flatiron (Fuller) Building on the right to the Empire State Building on the left, bowing to the lights shining up into the night sky that marked the location of the now destroyed buildings. Two days after the attacks on the World Trade Center, Blechman produced an illustration for *The New York Times* Op-Ed page called *Age of Terrorism*, in which the ghosts of the Twin Towers pierced the dark. At the bottom of the heart, where the arcs come together in a point, bits of the image crumble

away. Not only did Blechman illustrate America's broken heart, he also noted that our sense of stability and feelings of imperviousness had been shattered. So much conveyed by so little.

Norman Rockwell Museum is honored to include R. O. Blechman in our series of *Distinguished Illustrator* exhibitions. Blechman's art has been influencing and tickling us for nearly 60 years. In this exhibition, we are fortunate to have examples of his illustrations from the breadth of that time—from his wry humor to illustrations with clear political intent. While working with the artist on this exhibition, I was pleased to learn that a favorite quote from Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Intelligence Office" also held a special place in his heart:

"I want my place, my own place, my true place in the world, my proper sphere, my thing which Nature intended me to perform when she fashioned me thus awry, and which I have vainly sought all my life-time."⁴

R. O. Blechman has clearly found his place.



⁴ Nathaniel Hawthorne, "The Intelligence Office," *Mosses from an Old Manse* Vol. 2 (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1882): 365.

