

## Norman Mingo/ 1896-1980

### Commemorative Essay by Sarah Clayton, Sleepy Hollow

Norman Mingo was the illustrator responsible for the definitive portrait of Alfred E. Neuman, who has graced almost every *Mad* magazine cover since 1956. Following an advertising career, he illustrated 97 *Mad* covers. He lived in Tarrytown. He should be remembered for his artistic career and creation of an icon.

#### Norman Mingo: The Man Behind the *Mad* Cover

Consider the most recognizable icons of late-20th century American popular culture. A few enduring images may come to mind, but it's more than likely that one of them is Alfred E. Neuman, the cheeky, cherubic, and seemingly immortal youngster featured on almost every cover of *Mad* magazine since 1956. Despite changes in culture, Alfred has remained a steady source of satirical wisecracks and gleefully juvenile parodies for over sixty years. Armed with his signature catchphrase, "What, Me Worry?", Alfred has traveled the world, encountered every president from Kennedy to Trump, and found a way to mock virtually every one of the institutions that adult Americans hold near and dear. But who was responsible for creating this ubiquitous character? He was a professional illustrator; he lived in Tarrytown and the Westchester area for much of his adult life; he created the definitive portrait of Alfred in 1956; and his name was Norman Mingo.

Norman Mingo was born in Chicago on January 25th, 1896. At a young age, he developed an interest in art, which became a serious passion as he grew older. Mingo used his gift wisely: as a teenager, he made money creating fashion sketches for Hart Schaffner Marx, and he even dropped out of high school to pursue art. Art was both a creative outlet and a dependable source of income for Mingo from his teenage years onward. This balance of passion and profitability was a hallmark of his life.

Mingo's burgeoning career was interrupted by World War I. He served in the Navy for three years, but art still found a way into his life. Mingo earned commissions on the side for his drawings of various moving parts of machinery that the Navy used in the war. After returning to dry land, he attended art schools in three cities.

During the Roaring Twenties, Mingo worked in the competitive Chicago advertising industry. From 1923 to 1931, he founded and was the president of a successful art studio that boasted several high-profile clients. In an interview, Mingo remembered this as a time of prosperity: "I'll never forget that our first month's gross billing was \$35,000 for artwork

produced” (Crouch). After the Great Depression struck, he left for New York City without a clear agenda, but knew he could rely on his art skills to survive. He freelanced successfully for several years, which provided him with enough income to buy a Westchester home. By 1939, Mingo was 43 years old, married to his wife Margaret, and had two sons. He continued freelancing until 1953.

After a failed 1953 venture into silk screening, he responded to two newspaper ads looking for illustrators. The first was for an ad agency. The second was from the creators of *Mad* magazine, who were looking for an artist to illustrate their covers and bring their early sketch of Alfred E. Neuman to life. He got the job at the ad agency, and met with Bill Gaines of *Mad* before landing that job, too. Mingo created the iconic image of Alfred E. Neuman in 1956, and the rest was history. He imbued Alfred with a certain emotional complexity and just the right amount of surrealism. Satisfied with Mingo’s rendition of their character, *Mad* had finally found its protagonist.

Mingo then left the magazine to focus on advertising, but returned in 1963. For each cover, Mingo started with rough pastel sketches based on *Mad* writers’ ideas, then created a large-scale finished product. He used acrylics and watercolors, paying special attention to color and spatial relationships. Mingo’s 1956 model of Alfred E. Neuman became the standard upon which all subsequent Alfreds were based. He illustrated 97 *Mad* covers between 1963 and 1979, with subject matter ranging from the lighthearted to the deeply political. One of his final covers featured a dramatized Alfred in front of a nuclear plant in meltdown. In a subversion of Alfred’s traditional catchphrase, the caption read, “Yes...Me Worry!” (Crouch).

Mingo retired to Tarrytown, New York, where he was a member of the Second Reformed Church. He died on May 8th, 1980 at St. Agnes Hospital in White Plains, survived by his sons and many grandchildren (New York Times). Norman Mingo should be remembered for his artistic ability, his life of applying his natural skill to a sustainable career, and his crucial contributions to American satire and popular culture. As a fan of good satire myself, I’m honored to live in the same town where such an important, if underappreciated, figure in the history of comedy once resided.

#### Works Cited

Crouch, Bill, Jr. "Alfred E. Neuman's Portrait Painter." n.d.: 16-21. Print. (Local source.)  
“Norman Mingo, 84, Illustrator Behind 'Alfred E. Neuman' Face.” *The New York Times*, 9 May 1980, p. 103.