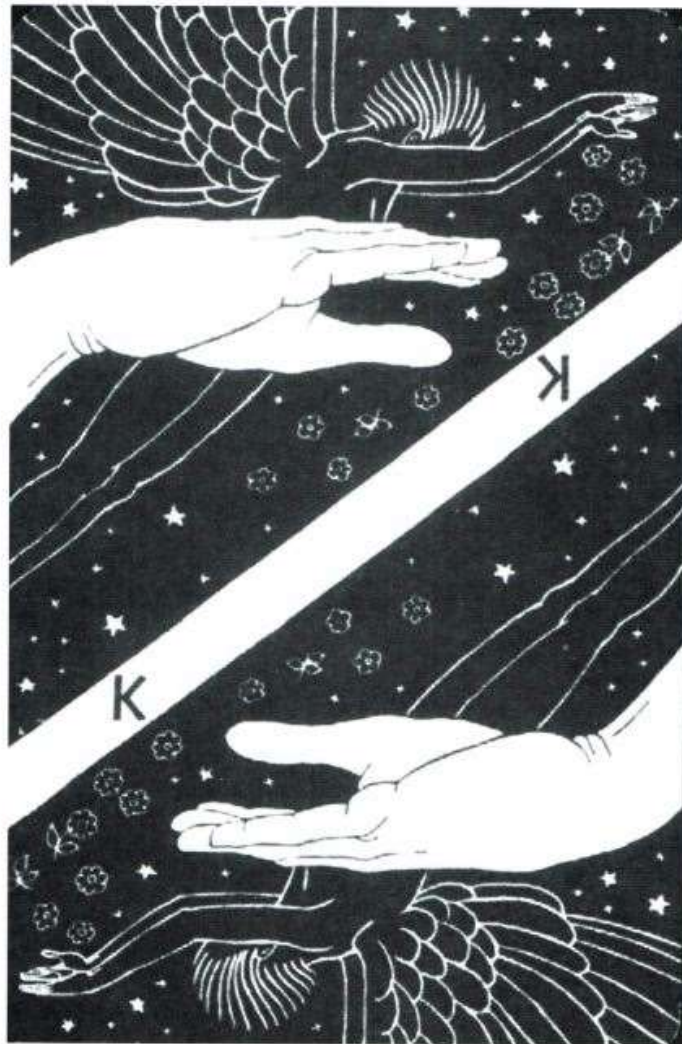


THE KENT COLLECTOR

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Rockwell Kent, as we all know, was a very versatile man. Over his long life, he put his hand to many different artistic activities. Painter, engraver, lithographer, book illustrator and bookplate designer are a few of the ones we are most familiar with. In addition, he designed china, dabbled in interior decorating, was a better than average architect and helped design a card game. It is the last one which will be discussed here.

In 1991, I was going through an art index looking up entries for Rockwell Kent. This particular index was put out by the Getty Center here in Los Angeles. Before the heyday of the Internet, I would do this occasionally, looking for Kent items. Suddenly, my eye happened on an entry for a card game called "*Privilege: The Modern Game With Social Significance.*" The designers were Robert Morey, Peggy Bacon, Esther Vance, William Gropper, George Schreiber and Rockwell Kent. For further information, the reader was directed to the four volume *A Catalogue of the Cary Collection of Greeting Cards at Yale University Library.*

Luckily, UCLA (where I do most of my research) happens to have these volumes. It took a week to get them out of storage, but I eventually was presented with four huge volumes of photos and descriptions of thousands of packs of playing cards at Yale University. I hurriedly looked up the entry for *Privilege*. Unfortunately, it only gave me a little more information and reproduced three of the cards, none of them by RK.

The game was described this way: *Privilege* combines the excitement of finance-monopoly with the diplomacy of contract, and is, in addition, an entirely new deal ... in which the struggle for power takes

place between dynamic social forces."

"The cards are people (or symbols) such as "banker," "idealist," etc., which you manipulate to plan your own society, realistically. With luck and bluff and strategy,



you will win privileges and security. Or if you lose – someone else wins double!"

This is where matters stood until 2000. I would occasionally look in game catalogues for *Privilege*, check out antique malls for card games in the hope I would find it, and wonder what the game would look like. One day last year a good friend of mine visited me while I was recovering from surgery. We were playing around on ebay when the

conversation turned to *Privilege*. He said, somewhat jokingly, "Type it in and we'll see what happens." What happened was the game showed up! Not only that, the seller did not put in the description the names of any of the designers. In other words, the possibility existed that I had a sleeper on my hands since RK's name had not been mentioned in the description. The opening bid price: \$15. Needless to say, I bid substantially above that level. The upshot was that I won the lot at an amazingly low price. Once again, knowledge and a little bit of luck had come through. I quickly sent my money in and waited to see what arrived.

Several weeks later a little box arrived at my door. Inside was the fascinating card game *Privilege*. A few words about the game itself. "There are 52 cards. Two are wisdom cards and are called Honesty and Kindness. (These are the ones Kent designed.) The other 50 cards are divided into 5 groups of 10 cards each. Each group has its own color and is called by the name of its leading card: Scientist, Idealist, Judge, Banker, Advertiser.

"Each group has a different strength. Each card in a group has a name or design, and a number showing its strength within its own group. The 5 groups are divided into 2 co-operating sets. One co-operating set consists of the groups – Scientist, Idealist, Judge; the other consists of the groups – Banker, Advertiser. These groups co-operate to win PRIVILEGES, which is the point of the game. A privilege is any round over 5 bid and won by the bidder. Players who try to win Privileges, and are UPSET, suffer UNDERPRIVILEGES.

I will not give you all the rules. Suffice it to say that *Privilege* is to be played by four people in two teams. As I read on, it became clear that this game is akin to

A Matter of "Privilege"

By Will Ross

bridge or other team bidding games. "As in other games of strategy, the purpose of bidding is to confuse your opponents, while letting your partner know what you have."

The origins of the game are lost in history. The copyright was held by Robert Morey, who was also one of the designers. Of the five other designers, only correspondence with William Gropper is described in *A Finding Aid to the Rockwell Kent Papers*, meaning it is at the Archives of American Art. Unfortunately, the letters start in 1942, four years after the publication of *Privilege*. One wonders whether the six designers were at some party and decided to design a game on a whim.

What does become clear, as one looks further into the rules is that *Privilege* is a political game. For example, the strongest group is that led by the Scientist, who has with him the Engineer and the Artist. The Idealist comes next; his color is appropriately red. The Producer and Educator help him. On it goes through the Judge and Banker to the lowest group, that led by the Advertiser. His assistants are the Newspaper Owner and Bishop. Their tools are Deceive, Self-Deception and Ignorance.

As players win hands, points are totaled or subtracted. As one team gets 500 points, they win a BASIC PRIVILEGE. When one team wins three BASIC PRIVILEGES, they have achieved SECURITY. "After winning security 5 times, further privileges won are called SUPERFICIAL PRIVILEGES. Winning security six successive times brings the player to UTOPIA." And achieving Utopia, of course, means that one side has won the game.

Bacon, Vance, Gropper and Schreiber each designed one card for each of the five groups. Kent designed the two wild cards - Honesty and Kindness. In my opinion, the Kent cards are the best designed of the pack. The others are all rather heavy-handed illustrations of a type. As can be seen, the Kent designs are in reverse, with blue being the major color and the figures being in outline form. The same illustration form can be seen in Kent's endpapers for *World-Famous Paintings*, published in 1939. It can also be seen in the advertising card he did for the National Association to Prevent

Blindness, produced about the same time. In fact, all three of these illustrations contain various illustrations of hands. At one point, I wondered whether the design of the hands on the playing cards were the letters H and K in American Sign Language. They



are not, at least today. Possibly the letters have changed over the years. The two playing cards are also interesting because they add to the canon of Kent angels. Angels were a recurring theme in Kent's art throughout his career.

Privilege is today a relic of a time when bridge parties and card games were a regular feature of life. The pack I own shows signs of being well-used. As Kentiana goes the cards are a minor, but welcomed, addition. As with much of Kent's art that was done for commercial purposes, it is interesting to contemplate as to what might have happened to his originals. Unfortunately, they are probably lost in time. A fate that might have happened to *Privilege* as well, if not for a friend, UCLA, and ebay.



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