

The Case of the Missing Lecturer

Will Ross

The Kent Collector Summer 1991

# THE ★ KENT COLLECTOR



# THE CASE OF THE MISSING LECTURER

BY  
WILL ROSS

*"Life's Darkest Moments:  
That Was One of Them."*

In a life filled with many dark incidents, recounted in his autobiography *It's Me O Lord*, Rockwell Kent chose one in particular for this description. It was when he missed a lecture in Salt Lake City, Utah. In three short paragraphs he sets out the facts of the case: why he mis-sed it, what he proposed to do about it, and how he soothed ruffled feathers. The problem was, he set them out all too briefly. What did he say? How did the newspapers respond? What was the painting he gave the city in apology? I sighed and resigned myself to never knowing the answers when, serendipitously, my job required me to travel to Salt Lake City. Now that I had the opportunity, could I do the job? And in one day? I resolved to try.

Readers who are experienced researchers will realize, I am sure, the enormity of the task I set myself. While I do not



propose to bore you with an in depth discussion of my research methods, the search for information itself is interesting. Kent discusses this incident in Chapter XV, "What! Lecturing Again?" , Part Four, page 500, of *It's Me O Lord*. The chapter discusses his second lecture tour sometime in 1937. That gave me a starting date. Gladys Spector, who knows everything, told me that he did not lecture after 1940. I knew it was the first of December, because Rockwell says, "Thirty days hath September, April, June and November." If I had only had the wit to say that over to myself as I sat about in Los Angeles waiting to start for my next lecture in Salt Lake City, I wouldn't, thinking that November had thirty-one days, have arrived there just exactly twenty-four hours late." So, with my beginning and ending dates, I flew to Salt Lake City.

I had previously found out that the best place to do newspaper research was the Utah Historical Society, with its microfilm copies of the Salt Lake City daily newspapers. Located in the old Denver & Rio Grande Railroad terminal, the Society's library is extensive, and the staff extremely helpful. Seated before a microfilm reader, I went to work and discovered....nothing. I read both daily newspapers for the first week of December from 1937 to 1940 without finding a single word about Kent. I had just resolved to call it a day when serendipity again raised her beautiful head. The Mormon church, for some reason, has kept a Daily Journal of "important" events

since the 1800's. Basically a clipping service, it has been indexed and serves as the closest thing to a newspaper index. The librarian suggested I try it, and it showed one Kent entry, on a date different than the ones I was working with. Thinking it must be a review of his first lecture in Salt Lake City, glad that my trip would not be in vain, I put the roll in the machine.

"Noted Lecturer 'Missing'; Audience Waits In Vain", the headline of the *Salt Lake Tribune* said. I had found it. The trouble was it had not appeared in the December 1, 1937 issue; but December 5, 1933. Almost gladly with joy, I read on. But enough of me. Without further ado (except for editorial comments), "The Case of the Missing Lecturer."

"The whereabouts of Rockwell Kent, noted author and illustrator, was veiled in mystery Monday night," the *Salt Lake Tribune* continued. 1700 people had shown up to hear Kent speak on the topic "In Defense of True Art." Needless to say, they were upset when the lecturer did not

---

*"And now ... I want  
a hotel room, a bottle  
of good whiskey and a  
press conference"*

---

appear, nor communicate with the University of Utah, which was holding the lecture. The quotation marks around 'Missing' in the headline may subtly indicate that the reporter, and the audience, thought Kent's absence was intentional.

In the small town of Milford, Utah, Rockwell Kent began the task of restoring his good name. "Have this minute learned that today is the fifth not the fourth," Kent wired to Salt Lake City. "What can I do to atone for apparently gratuitous affront to



THE CONDUCTOR  
Puck



my friends - your people? Will lecture continuously free for two days if you or anyone will let me. Please publish arriving five thirty."

The Evening Deseret News of December 5 reported the receipt of this telegram. The article also stated that Kent would arrive that evening and he would give his lecture later in the week.

In the December 6 Salt Lake Telegram, Kent discusses his arrival. "When I got off the train in Salt Lake I didn't recognize anyone to meet me...Naturally, I thought, well, this is what I deserve, so I walked over to the ticket office, ready to buy a ticket for the next stop."

"The Salt Lake station, on my arrival, seemed singularly deserted; almost as though the city had declared a boycott of its visitor," Kent states in his autobiography. "So it was almost with relief that, after waiting about for five minutes, I walked to the information window to enquire for the next east-bound train. Right then a man accosted me: 'You Mr. Kent?' he said. And as I looked at him and answered 'Yes' he gave no smile of happy welcome; no hearty slap upon my back; no 'Well, well, old fellow, here you are at last! And how are things?' No, none of that. He just looked surly, glum. 'Come over here, sit down,' he growled and led the way.

"'And now,' I said, after he'd heard my proposition and accepted it, 'I want a hotel room, a bottle of good whiskey, and a press conference.' And so it came about that no more than half an hour later I was seated with three or four good fellows — and the press, in my experience, is always good — enlisting their support in the rehabilitation of a thoroughly discredited itinerant lecturer toward giving him a packed house two nights hence. Yes, I could stay that long. I had already phoned and changed one date; and I could make up the time by flying. I'd give the lecture free of charge. And I would present a large oil painting to the city museum."

It is easy to imagine the scene in Kent's hotel room. Three or four men in fedoras, cigarette or cigar smoke filling the air, the whiskey bottle level dropping quickly,

Rockwell being his charming best.

The Salt Lake Tribune and Deseret News for December 6 show that the press conference had not been a waste. It is here that Kent reveals that he had forgotten how many days November had in it, and the



Tribune reporter started his article with the little ditty on calendars that Kent uses in It's Me O Lord. Kent apologized in words that must have been difficult for a proud man to say, "I want the people of Salt Lake to know that my non-appearance on the lecture platform Monday night was inexcusable, and that I shall do my best to make amends." "I'll eat dirt, I'll do anything to make amends. I'll even paint a picture for your city. It's a good thing you don't lynch people here."

His use of the analogy to a lynching was topical, not just descriptive. In San Jose, California, shortly before Kent's arrival in Utah, a man had been lynched. The incident received the tacit approval of the Governor of California, and nation-wide interest. When asked his opinion of the lynching, Kent said, "Many Californians believe that the courts have been too lenient and have delayed justice and that the action will awaken judges. As for myself, I'd rather not be quoted." This refusal to comment is one indication of the importance he gave to not upsetting the Salt Lake City audience more. Certainly Kent had an opinion; he must have felt there were very compelling circumstances not to give it.

Before discussing his art, Rockwell commented briefly on Hollywood, where he had spent a lot of time with Charlie Chaplin. "I didn't see Mae West, and I didn't care to. There were so many platinum blondes in Hollywood that I doubt that they will all be able to get into the

pictures."

The Deseret News writer asked Rockwell to comment on the fact that he states there is not "symbolism" in his art, no matter how much other people say otherwise. "I draw a man looking at the stars, and immediately all sorts of philosophic speculations are drawn as to the significance of the thought. As a matter of fact, all I have drawn is a picture of a man looking at the stars—just the simple physical fact, but men are very fond of looking for symbols and hidden meanings in art."

As will be seen, this determination to debunk some of the most cherished shibboleths of art criticism occupied Kent throughout his time in Utah.

After discussing how he had adjusted his schedule to be able to give the postponed speech, Rockwell closed the interview with a discussion of one of his fondest dreams, "And if I can make enough money, I'll go back to Greenland again for a few years", he smiled, "Where I can play football on the moonlit beach with my friends the Eskimos."

That Rockwell was forgiven was evident in the editorial in the December 7, 1933 Deseret News entitled "Mr. Rockwell Kent, Artist":

"The fame of Mr. Rockwell Kent, artist and traveler, preceded him, and last Monday evening Kingsbury Hall was filled with people eager to hear him speak "In Defense of True Art." Incidentally, some of the older persons who looked at his etchings and woodcuts in the Union building remarked that they thought his art needed defense. Others, however, felt it deeply and were moved by its vitality and stirred by something they themselves could not explain."

"It might be adduced as evidence, if any question arises as to Mr. Kent's being a true artist, that he missed the Monday night lecture because he had lost track of the days of the week and was serenely pursuing his way with a worshipful spirit, thinking it was Sunday when the practical world about him was doing its Monday washing and other work appropriate to the second day of the week."

"In any case, Mr. Kent is a charming person and will doubtless find a great audience possessed of



something more than usual curiosity at Kingsbury Hall tonight to listen to his 'defense.'"

The day after his lecture, when Kent was already flying to Iowa, the December 8 *Salt Lake Tribune* wrote a glowing account of the lecture, which was extremely well attended. Rockwell evidently relished the opportunity of talking about art to an audience that was interested in the artist's point of view. After apologizing again for the "fiasco" of Monday, he lit into his favorite target. "While the critics go on blasting and damning art, the artist himself is seldom allowed to speak about art."

As for the topic that had been selected for him, "In Defense of True Art", he said, "One need not speak of 'true' art. Either it is art, or it isn't art. If it is art, it is its own justification, and needs no defense. Art has been made too heavy; we have been made art-conscious, trying to understand all the technical terms the critics use."

The rest of the lecture set out his ideas of the purpose of art:

"Art is closely related to human life and should be accepted as life is accepted. It is just one of the ways human beings have of expressing themselves, perhaps the simplest way, in that it is international, universal....."

"As the world has become more complex, we have discovered new

values, and art has changed and found new paths, new languages for expression, for the fundamental principle in art is to give expression to the values of life. The artist's business is not merely to paint what the eye sees, but to see and to know and to give what

---

*"I am not interested in philosophic speculations... I have merely painted what I saw, not just with my eyes, but with my whole being."*

---

his whole being sees. His painting is a medium you can understand, with which he tries to say what he has learned."

On Saturday December 9, the *Deseret News* carried a major column about Kent by Sid Olsen. In it Rockwell touches on many topics. The reporter's description of Kent is informative, "Rockwell has warm, brown eyes, and he talks like an enthusiastic little boy who is a little afraid you're going to scold him any minute. This atti-

tude is, quite inexplicably, a very charming one, and you are at once at home with the man."

Kent on his methods, "I take a large canvas out to the spot I have decided to paint, lean it against a tree, or prop it up with rocks, and squat down in front of it. No, I am not of the school which takes sketch notes in the field, and then re-composes the picture on an indoor easel, I'm afraid I can't paint that way on nature's pictures."

The search for symbolism? "When the sun rises, people immediately exclaim, 'Ah! The dawn!' and rush about pointing out that the sunrise is a symbol of hope, and so forth. All that has actually happened is that the sun has risen as usual.... Man reads meanings into the ordinary phenomena of our disordered lives that are not there. As far as I can see, art is the only thing in life worth a hoot, because it's the only thing done for the sheer pleasure of achievement."

And his favorite people:

"An art critic is one who comes unnecessarily between the artist and the public. There is no need for them. Art not only can't be satisfactorily explained, it must not be explained, for the good of the art. I paint a picture. I am not interested in philosophic speculations made as to its meaning. Indeed, there is no meaning in the picture. I have merely painted what I saw, not just with my eyes, but with my whole being. That's all. Even titles are unnecessary. When I do a picture, there is nothing in that picture but the simple physical fact that there is a painting before you. If you like to look at it, do so: if you don't like it, ignore it, but for heaven's sake, don't criticize it."

"There is no such thing as bad art. It's all art, even the worst of daubs. Some pictures are more pleasing to look at than others. You don't have to look at the unpleasing ones."

After discussing the importance he placed in his paintings—as opposed to his lithographs and wood engravings—Kent said that he had always been interested in Utah because of its art possibilities and that he believed that polygamy is the proper marital situation for man! He then discussed the necessity of desire in



*Denis*, 1926, oil on canvas. 34"x 44". Utah Museum of Fine Arts, State Arts Collection

painting, "There is no point in doing anything unless you are excited about it. If you can't work yourself into what they call a lather over your work, drop it. Too many pictures are painted now anyway."

"(Kent) ended the interview with a scathing denunciation of the numerous artists who take up painting before they have spent an arduous apprenticeship in learning to draw, and remarked as we waved him goodbye that, in his opinion, art schools are almost entirely valueless except for the barest fundamentals, which can be acquired in few months.

"Tell the kids not to spend more than a year, at the most, in art schools, but to get in and work hard, yet intelligently. Have a reason for painting, have something to say when you paint, and say it as best you can."

And what of the painting that Rockwell promised to send? He was as good as his word. The Utah Chronicle of March 29, 1934 reported the receipt of the painting "Denis", dated 1926. It is reproduced here for the first time, to my knowledge. Part of the Utah State Arts Collection, it is on loan to the Utah Museum of Fine Arts at the University of Utah. One of Rockwell's Ireland paintings, it is almost certainly a portrait of Annie McGinley's brothers, given the name is the same as her father's and it is of a young man. The acquisition of this "much-prized and valuable canvas by the world-celebrated artist, writer, and lecturer Rockwell Kent," was heralded as the centerpiece of the activities of the Utah Art Institute in a letter to Utah Governor Henry H. Blood on February 13, 1935. As you can see, they had reason to be pleased.

And what was Rockwell doing with Charlie Chaplin that made him forget how many days were in November? Looks like I'll have to look up old issues of Variety. Next article, "Rockwell in Hollywood?"

#### Sources

The Deseret News, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1933. December 2, 5, 6, 7, and 9.

Kent, Rockwell. It's Me O Lord: The Autobiography of Rockwell Kent. Dodd, Mead & Company, New York, 1955.

Salt Lake Telegram, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1933. December 6.

The Salt Lake Tribune, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1933. December 5, 6, and 8.

Utah Art Institute. Letter, President of Institute to Governor Henry H. Blood, February 13, 1935. State of Utah, Department of Administrative Services, Division of Archives & Records Service, Governor Blood Papers. Salt Lake City, Utah.

Utah Chronicle, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Utah. November 29, December 7, 1933 and March 29, 1934.

#### Acknowledgements

This article would not have been possible without the help and cooperation of many people and organizations in Salt Lake City, Utah. I cannot thank them enough, but I would like to

recognize them in the order in which I contacted them, not of importance.

Val Wilson, Utah State Archives Research Center, Salt Lake City, Utah.

Sherrill Sandberg, Visual Arts Coordinator, Utah Arts Council, Salt Lake City, Utah.

Linda Thatcher, Librarian, Utah State Historical Society, Salt Lake City, Charles R. Loving, Assistant Director, Utah Museum of Fine Arts, The University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Utah.

Kirk Baddley, Archivist, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Utah.

As always, my wife Kathy acted as audience, proofreader, and editor.

Copyright © 1990 by Wilford H. Ross. All rights reserved. ♦

New York, November 21st, 1933

Mr. J.M. Adamson  
University of Utah  
Salt Lake City, Utah

E. WEYHE  
Prints and Books on the Fine Arts  
794 Lexington Avenue  
Bet. 61st and 62nd Streets

For Exhibiton Memo

ROCKWELL KENT, LITHOGRPAHS:		WOOD ENGRAVINGS:	
Mala	\$10	Flame	\$100
Young Woman	\$10	Bather	\$50
Dirty Debora	\$10	Homeport	\$50
Greenland Hunter	\$10	Bowsprit	\$50
Climbing the Bars	\$75	Precipice	\$75
Resting	\$100	Big Baby	\$10
Sophia	\$10	Night Watch	\$75
Portrait of Cleland	\$25	Diver	\$10
Revisitation	\$100	Starlight	\$50
The Tree	\$75	Prometheus	\$5
Meditation	\$50	Drifter	\$10
Boatman	\$100	Fair Wind	\$30
Colophn	\$15	Deep Water	\$10
Beowulf and Grenda's Mother	\$30	The End	\$75
Hand and Sword	\$30	Masthead	\$150
Genealogical Tree	\$30	Oarsman	\$10
Funreral Pyre	\$30	God Speed	\$30
Beowulf	\$30		
Beowulf and the Dragon	\$30		
Farewell	\$20		
Susanna	\$35		

*This is an inventory for an exhibiton of Kent's prints held in conjunction with his lecture in Salt Lake City. By way of price comparison the Summer 1990 Kent Collector had dealers offering Bather for \$1200 and Night Watch for \$1950. At a June 1990 auction Home Port was sold for \$750.*