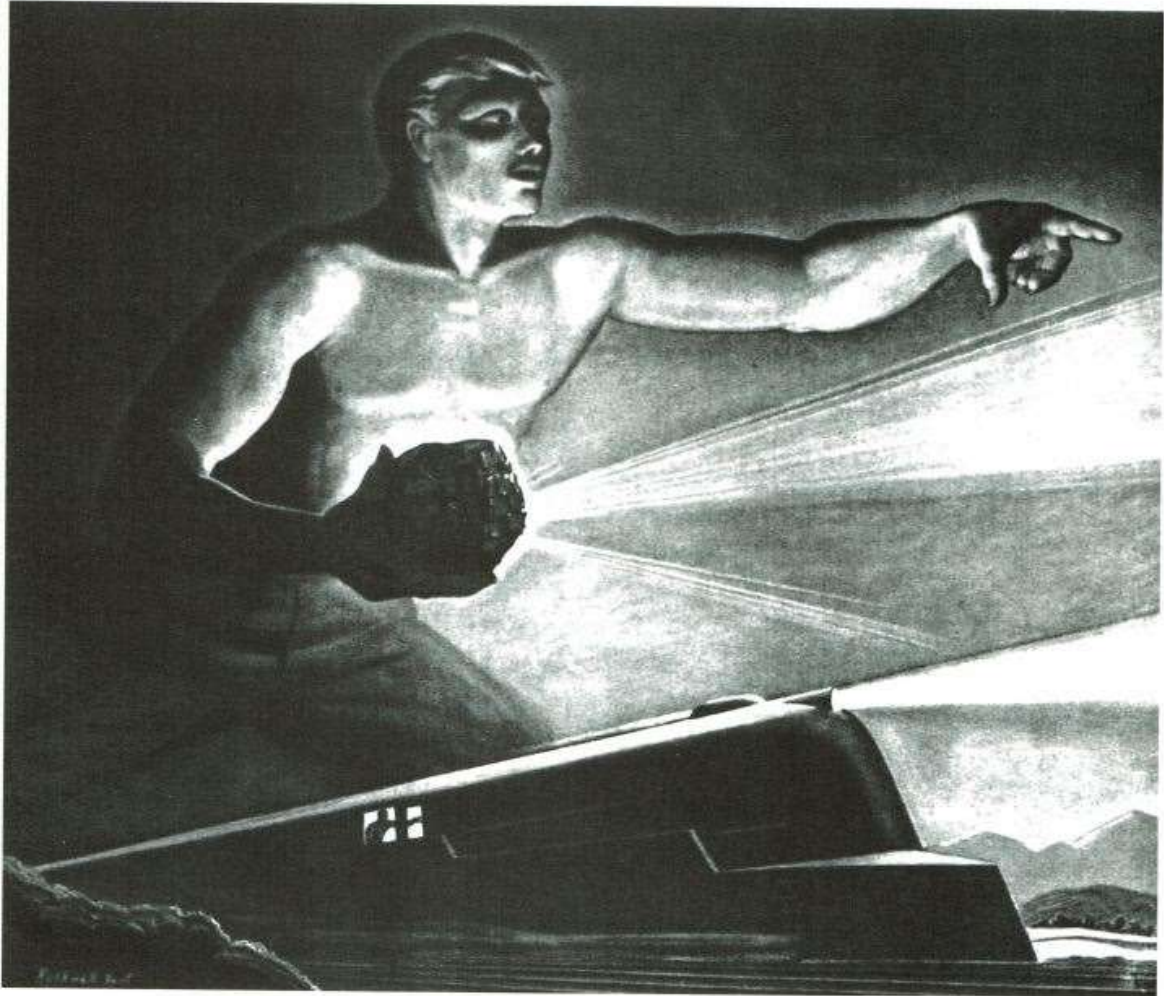


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THE GREAT DEBATE

With an Introduction and Explanatory Notes
by Will Ross



Photo of Rockwell Kent, Plattsburgh State Art Museum.

Rockwell Kent had a continuing problem with the advertising world, as can be seen in the article "The Eternal Struggle." This conflict may have reached a head with the publication of his article/letter "There Is No Such Thing As Commercial Art" in the June, 1936, issue of the *Professional Art Quarterly*, Volume II, Number 4. Unlike his other commentary, which was in his books, there are published responses to this assertion. The responders were Charles Perry Weimer, a noted illustrator of the day; and Willis Shook, Director of the Art Institute of Pittsburgh. Because of the philosophies expressed, and their contemporaneous nature, all three are worth reproducing in full, with just explanatory notes. It is worth noting that the editorial board of the *Professional Art Quarterly* included Dan Burne Jones.

"There Is No Such Thing As Commercial Art" A Letter from Rockwell Kent, *PROFESSIONAL ART QUARTERLY*; Volume II, Number 4, June 1936, pgs. 6-7.

It is so long ago that I promised you some sort of article for the *PROFESSIONAL ART QUARTERLY*, and you have announced the article in vain so many times that, not to defer the matter any longer, I'll undertake to dictate what shall follow, begging you not to omit any por-

tions of it, and to forgive me for its informality. I have been slow in fulfilling my promise because, on looking into those numbers of the *PROFESSIONAL ART QUARTERLY* which you sent me, I realized, for the first time, the periodical's thoroughly "professional" nature, and at once felt myself out of sympathy with it.

It is a magazine devoted to commercial art and to the interests of the commercial artist. Strictly speaking, there can be no such thing as commercial art. If it is the one, it cannot be the other. A man is either an artist or he isn't one, and the professional in that field of commercial activity had much better leave the word "art" out of the title of his profession, and coin for his trade some other distinguished name as "realtor" or "mortician."

I have been compelled, from time to time, to turn out what is called commercial art, but I am so far from being an adept at it that it is always a struggle, and frequently ends in a complete disagreement between the client and me. The artist insists upon doing things in his own way. The advertiser or his agent or the art director of the agency all think of the artist as a mere instrument for carrying out *their* ideas. And the two are incompatible. When a coarse, pot-bellied, garter-snapping vice-president of some gangster corporation begins to find fault with a face that I have drawn, no argument is possible. If I consult my own commercial interests, I just say to him

promptly, "All right, old boy, just give me a photograph of the tart you're keeping on Riverside Drive, and I'll copy it." And if there is any artist in me I'll add, "But I won't sign my name to the thing." Then is when the trouble starts.

As a matter of fact, the brand of commercial art of which I am speaking, that is, the brand that even *pretends* to draw its inspiration from life or from a photograph, is too exalted to be of any concern to the average commercial artist. From what I see of commercial art in those few advertisements that are not photographs, in book illustrations and book jackets, the first requirement of the successful commercial artist is a pantograph.¹ This machine and a good reference library and, of course, pens, inks, brushes, and water-colors are almost the only essentials for the successful practice of commercial art.

There is, of course, the business of selling. That is so important a side of the commercial artist's career that at least one successful art editor has devoted a whole book to it. This book, which I had the privilege of reviewing a few years ago, (the review was not published)² goes into the minutest detail about the dress—I mean

¹ A pantograph is an instrument for copying a figure on any predetermined scale.

² Kent is probably referring here to his essay "A Solicited Introduction to a Book on Advertising (1928)," published in *Rockwellkentiana*. The essay is reproduced in the article, "The Eternal Struggle."

shoes, socks, clothes, neckties and breast-pocket handkerchief – that the artist should affect upon approaching the sacred precincts of the client. It describes what the artist's bearing should be – a coy mingling of obsequiousness and dignity. It warns him carefully against prolonging his stay one instant longer than would charm the client.

I must confess to you frankly that, while I realize the importance of all these things to the commercial artist, the importance of the pantograph, the equipment, the clothes, the selling manner and all of that, I am not much good at it myself, and would only be deluding your readers if I wrote about it with authority.

In the winter number of the PROFESSIONAL ART QUARTERLY it is announced that I will tell, in your pages, how I make woodcuts. No verbal description of how I do it would be the equivalent of a pantograph. How I do it, please understand, seems to me to be of as little concern, to any real artist, as how anybody else has done it has been a concern of mine. Every artist knows this. He knows that to all such questions as, "How do you write a book?" "How do you paint a picture?" "How do you make a woodcut?" – the only answer is to sit down with pen and ink and write; buy brushes, paints and canvas, and paint; buy blocks of wood and tools, and get to work.

As a matter of fact, I have already written a book in which I carefully explain that I do not make woodcuts. And never have made one; that woodcuts are one kind of thing; and wood engravings are another; and that I make wood engravings. The publishers of this book entitled it, "How I Make A Woodcut."³ This book can be bought, I believe, for ten cents.

There is a fine book by a fine woodcutter, J.J. Lankes. Lankes tells all that need be told about making woodcuts, and yet Lankes would say, as I do, there is only one way to become a woodcutter: that is, to get the blocks and cut them.

This is not a cynical article about commercial art. It is an honest one. The

more a man wants to be an artist, the more he will hamper himself in all his traffic with commercial art. The really successful commercial artist is the clever, facile, empty-headed, go-getting fellow whose mental and spiritual outlook is the equivalent of sales managers. These fellows can look out for themselves and need no advice. The artist doesn't want any advice. And the whole business of art and commerce can get along without, at least, more words from me.

Faithfully yours,
Rockwell Kent

"Rockwell Kent Answered" A Letter From Charles Perry Weimer
PROFESSIONAL ART QUARTERLY;
Volume III, Number 1, September 1936,
pages 5-6, 9.

Several people have recently called my attention to a letter that appeared in the "Professional Art Quarterly," and today I had an opportunity to read it. From it I gather that a man cannot sell the results of his training, the inspiration of his soul, the expression of his genius, and still be an artist. Frankly, this coming from one who has gained the respect of artist and layman the world over seems to indicate a good mind gone to seed.

The spirit and soul of the real artist shows through every effort of that artist, whether it be expressed in one medium or another. Many a man can produce inspired efforts to be hung in famous galleries, who will not necessarily have to take up an entirely different angle in his rendering to make his work profitable or usable. There are a great many men and women in the art field who don't realize the importance of education, background and spirit, but there are a great many who really have that something, and I am sure that these "artists" are not willing to concede such a statement without some answer.

Perhaps my contemporary by reason of his now high position in the art field feels he is forced to take the attitude he

has, just as most parents seem willing to forget, in the treatment of their offspring, that they were young themselves. Apparently he is inclined to forget that in his younger days he himself was one of these "commercial artists," although he undoubtedly would indignantly deny that he is just a mechanic today. I feel that he has done a great deal of harm to the ambition of today's young artists, as would an announcement by any one of our best known writers that all newspapermen are mechanics.

There are many of us who render for one organization of other that feel we are not producing our best, but I'll wager that there are few men of importance in the art field who sit down to their drawing boards with anything other than that spirit that is in the soul of all artists. There is, of course, a difference between the man who illustrates because he wants to illustrate and the man who renders from necessity. All artists are not fortunate enough to have financial independence in their earlier days, but the artist is there with each rendering whether it be commercial or fine art.

An artist that can distinguish his work by an unusual technique does not necessarily have to diverge from his inspirational illustrative style if his work is bought and used by intelligent art buyers. The real cause of this controversy is undoubtedly the agency, or rather the man known as the "art director." Many who hold art directing jobs don't by any stretch of the imagination know what and how to buy, forcing most artists to toe the line to the point of ridiculous, but when intelligence is used in buying the artist's work, it is unnecessary for him to render any differently than were he to hang the same thing in a gallery or to offer it for sale to a collector.

³ Rockwell Kent. *How I Make A Wood Cut*. (Pasadena, California: Esto Publishing Company, 1934.)

Another possible cause may be that some artists feel it beneath them to render a bottle, an automobile, or a steam shovel, particularly to render it intelligibly enough so that any one would pay for it. If this is the case, the cause of the fine artist is hopeless. A great many fine artists do work for commercial reproduction, and if they are not men enough and honest enough to turn out their best through some false feeling of superiority, I can't help feeling that the mechanic who is a good mechanic, and worth what he is paid, is certainly to be admired.

If all artists lived only to be hung in a gallery for the enlightenment of civilization today, I wonder how many would even be able to buy typewriters and papers to tell the world what noble men they were. It is sad to think that no matter what genius you may express, you are only a mechanic if you are paid for it. I am sure some of our greatest, actresses, singers, writers, etc., are glad to know that at last they have been classified, not as great artists in their profession, but as mechanics.

The future of art in this country depends on many things, and the sale of that art for commercial use gives not one, but millions, an opportunity to see and judge it. If this is so, and I believe it is, can commercialization be a stumbling block for the great men of the future? I can't make myself believe it.

Would it not be better for our best artists to stop tearing down the ambitions of younger men in the field, and to start a drive for more intelligent buying and use of the great mass of real art we have in this country today?

And . . . would it not also be well for some of these same "fine artists" to come down to earth, forget their superiority, and produce some real art for advertising, and stop cheating just because they feel they are doing something beneath them when they take money for the expression of their souls?

"No Such Thing As Commercial Art? - Phooey!" by Willis Shook

PROFESSIONAL ART QUARTERLY; Volume III, Number 1, September 1936, pages 7-9.

Rockwell Kent's recent tirade against commercial art, artists and students, art buyers, sales managers and business men is wholly uncalled for and altogether unwarranted.

"Is the talent of Ogden Nash, Berton Barley and Edgar Guest prostituted because it is written to sell soup, soap and cigars?"

He reveals himself as intolerant of those who possess less talent than his own; he sneers at sane, common-sense business methods; he hurls opprobrium at art buyers and mocks their looks; he betrays a naïve belief in his own infallibility - and he makes me tired.

What a man! Skippy, when he hands his commercial artist "father" a thousand plus a week, might well ask, "What's eatin' on Mr. Kent?"

When writing his scathing piece Kent specifically asked the editor to "omit no portion of it" as though he feared one golden word might be lost on posterity. Further on, he damns an executive for daring to make a suggestion that might improve a Kent drawing. He says, "an artist wants no advice." (What a sweet time Kent's instructors must have had!) Which is to be expected of the man, who, if memory serves me rightly, stood on the stage of Carnegie Galleries in Pittsburgh holding one of the paintings from the International Exhibition and told his audience, "I criticise this because I can do better." Kent, old boy, please - p-u-l-e-a-s-e, a little more modesty would be becoming.

Kent says there is no such thing as "commercial" art. What then, are musi-

cians who compose operettas for film? Sculptors who do figures for garden pottery, ash trays, and book ends? Writers who review books, art, and drama? Is the talent of Ogden Nash, Berton Barley, and Edgar Guest prostituted because it is written to sell soup, soap and cigars?

If Mr. Kent is so positive that things commercial are to be avoided as a plague, why does he illustrate Sherwin-Williams paint ads, or write and draw for Esquire?

And it's a pretty safe bet that he was given a rough to follow for the paint folk. What's the difference between acting on somebody's suggestion before making a drawing and after?

Michaelangelo frankly acknowledged that he took the pose of figure of God in "The Last Judgment" from the painting by another artist of a wounded general falling forward.

If the taint of the horrid word commercial irks his soul, why did he sell shares as a means of raising funds to go to Greenland to paint?⁴ If that wasn't commercial, what was it?

And am I to understand that he carries his hatred of the business world and its "gangster corporations" to the point of ignoring all advertised merchandise? When he built his house recently, I suppose he bought obscure brands of lumber and hardware. Doubtless he drives a car made by himself and listens to a crystal detector. But of course he hasn't got a radio because the programs are commercially sponsored!

Must it not wring Kent's heaven-winging soul to realize that every dollar that buys his stuff was made in the trade marts.

Last fall, the work of Rockwell Kent and Charles Weimer was selected to represent American art in the London Studio's

⁴ Kent actually sold shares to go to Alaska.

book. Weimer graduated from the two year commercial art course of the Art Institute of Pittsburgh. Weimer belongs to the Artists' Guild of New York, your own club, Rockwell, though you haven't met.

Why should Mr. Kent think that a young man or woman born with insuffi-

cient talent to do the big things in art should run an elevator or manicure nails? To deny a person the right to follow art even in such humble capacity as designing labels or doing fashion drawings for department stores is to indicate a smallness of spirit deserving of sharp criticism.

ter to solicit the art director with unwashed face and paint-daubed pants, fresh from the easel?

Should he live for Art's sake, like Gaugin, starved and diseased, to die in misery? Frankly, Mr. Kent, were it not better had Van Gogh turned whatever ability he had into commercial channels - like Cheret, for example - and so lived in comfort, at the same time benefitting more people than the picture dealers who have profited so tremendously since he shot himself?

What dreadful experiences in this sad world have so soured Mr. Kent that he must use such terms as "a coy mingling of obsequiousness and dignity"; "empty-headed commercial artists whose mental outlook is equivalent to that of sales managers"; "coarse, pot-bellied, garter-snapping vice-

president of some gangster corporation." (Mr. Deeds, incidentally, omitted garter-snapping from his symptoms of pixilation.)

Mr. Kybb, who looks after Sherwin-Williams' sales is now the proud possessor of a mental portrait of himself by Sir Kent. I wonder if he thinks it a good likeness or



Photo of Rockwell Kent, Plattsburgh State Art Museum.

whether he wouldn't want to make some suggestions to improve it? No use, Mr. Kybb; that's the way the artist saw you and b'God and b'Jesus, you'll have to stay that way.

Mr. Kent minces matters and splits hairs when he talks of wood cutting and wood engraving. Also, it would seem, when he discusses morals. And, anyway, why throw aspersions on all art buyers because of the amorous adventures of one?

No, Skippy, I can't answer your question; I don't know what's eatin' on the hard-bitten Mr. Kent. Maybe he stayed out too long in the six-month day of the Arctics and was touched with the sun.

