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Happy Holidays

Rockwell Kent's Christmas Seal

Acclaim & Controversy

by Douglas K. Lehmann



In the world of baseball, Ted Williams was beginning his career while Lou Gehrig's was coming to an end, and the Yanks swept the World Series. *Superman* and *Batman* comic strips debuted. The Spanish Civil War ended and World War II began. Nylon stockings, television, and the first air-conditioned car (Packard) were introduced. The movie *The Wizard of Oz* and the song *Beer Barrel Polka* were hits. Celebrities of the day included John Wayne, Kate Smith, and Frank Sinatra. In politics, Franklin D. Roosevelt was in his second term as our

stamp-collecting President. First class postage was holding at 3 cents, and a dollar was equal in purchasing power to \$18 today.

Being a 1939 baby myself, I have always been drawn to collecting memorabilia of that year, including copies of the *Life Magazine* and *The NY Herald Tribune* issues published on my birthday. In the late 1960s, while I was on Army duty, I made sure I saw *Gone with the Wind* in Paris, France (in English with French subtitles), where it had been running continuously since its premier on December 15, 1939. This fascination with 1939 memorabilia culminates in my collecting and specializing in the 1939 Christmas seal.

The National Tuberculosis Association (NTA) commissioned Rockwell Kent to design the 1939 Christmas seal. Kent was then at the pinnacle of his artistic career, excelling as a printmaker, illustrator, painter, and author. His style has been described as "American Social Realist" and "Art Deco." Viewed under either description, his images are very symbolic.





BUY
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PROTECT YOUR HOME
FROM TUBERCULOSIS

The commission was extended to Kent on July 27, 1937, giving him a two-year lead time. His fee would be \$1,000, which was to cover the creation of three designs — the actual seal plus two publicity posters. (Kent also was supposed to submit several different seal designs for the selection committee, but he didn't believe in creating alternate designs and so never complied with this stipulation.) A five-person Seal Sale Advisory Committee formally approved his design — an angel with the date "1939" — at a meeting in Los Angeles on June 7, 1938.



New South Wales semi-postal stamps.

A Brief History

The origin of Christmas seals traces back to the first semi-postal stamps issued by New South Wales (Scott B1-B2, June 1897), released in honor of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. Although the revenue raised by these stamps went primarily to postage fees, the remainder went to fund a Consumptives Home for people suffering from tuberculosis, a deadly disease for which there was no known cure. Denmark issued the

world's first separate Christmas seal in 1904, followed by issues from Sweden and Iceland. All profits from these latter non-postal releases went directly to charity.

The first U.S. Christmas seal is synonymous with Miss Emily P. Bissell, who was the force behind its creation in 1907. She has been commemorated on a 1946 Christmas seal and a 1980 postage stamp (Scott 1823). In 1908 the U.S. seals went national, thanks to a partnership between the American National Red Cross and the National Association for the

Study and Prevention of Tuberculosis (NASPT), who agreed to issue the seals jointly and split the profits 50/50.

In 1920 the renamed

National Tuberculosis Association (NTA) took over the program, and its double-barred cross logo has appeared on each seal since. Kent himself suggested that the NTA should "Publicize your double-barred cross, it has beauty and symbolic meaning."

By 1956, thanks to modern techniques for its prevention and treatment, tuberculosis was finally considered under control, and the NTA Board voted to extend its concerns to include other respiratory diseases. After two further name changes (in 1968 and 1973) the organization came to be called the American Lung Association, the name by which it is known today. It has turned its focus on another deadly disease — lung cancer.

Creating the Design

These annual issues are approaching the century mark of their existence, but Kent's 1939 seal design remains unique. No other angel has ever been the featured design; in addition, all other seals carry a slogan such as "Merry Christmas" or "Greetings." Because the 1939 design did not include a slogan, the Committee voted to add four seals to the center of the pane — three with health slogans and one with a Christmas greeting. Kent had no part in the design of these slogan seals. They were the creation of C.L. Newcomb, Director of Seal Sales in the NTA's New York office, who also added a thin red rectangle to Kent's original design.

Normally there is a contest for choosing the annual design. In 1939, however, it was a Kent coronation not a contest. Other artists did submit unsolicited designs, but they were never considered. Kent's 1938 essay, as submitted to the committee, was in two colors — red and black. (He had been told to keep the seal colors to four or less.) During the pre-production process, the printer added a third color, a light red (pink), to better represent the angel's face. The black background in the original essay was only intended to be representative and it was changed by the artist to dark blue. Kent sub-contracted the "1939" lettering to its final form and had it partially hidden behind the top crossbar. Newcomb added a fourth color, light blue, to the slogan seals. One hundred imperforate sheets, all numbered on the back, were autographed by Kent and sent to 100 affiliates for benefit auction or sale. Newcomb estimated each one would generate \$3-\$10 (about \$150 today).

Kent's commission also required him to create designs for two posters. These were not limited to four colors. One poster was for outdoor billboards. I have not seen it, but it included candles in the design. The other poster was small and contained the complete body of an angel whose head, shoulder, and arm duplicate the pose in the seal. However, Kent gave this angel a new hairstyle and changed its color to a reddish-blond.



Two of the 1939 rejected Christmas seal designs submitted by other artists.



This design is mostly red and blue.

The Delaware Anti-Tuberculosis Society hosted Kent at its annual meeting on April 5, 1939. The program notes gave a brief, affectionate description of the artist:

"To know Rockwell Kent is to love him" writes one of his friends, "...unless he is driving.... Dear God, you pray, if he would only slow down at the curves. But he has never slowed down at the curves and probably never will."

It is this gusto for every phase of living expressed with all the ardor of passionate convictions, that keeps Mr. Kent so constantly in the news...[after schooling] his roving, adventurous spirit took full charge. He worked on the coast of Maine as lobsterman and carpenter.... He has lived in Newfoundland, in Greenland and in Alaska, and made a trip to Tierra del Fuego at the tip of South American in a lifeboat. His home at Ausable Forks, New York, he has made into a paying farm where he raises pure bred Jersey cattle and Great Dane dogs.

Mr. Kent's output of work, his energy and resourcefulness are all prodigious. To finance his Alaska trip in 1917, he incorporated himself and sold shares to his friends, paying off all outstanding obligations with proceeds from *Wilderness*, the book he wrote and illustrated there. His paintings hang in all the principal galleries of the country. His drawings are numbered literally in the thousands, ranging from advertising to illustrations for Walt Whitman and Shakespeare. His writings merit a bibliography to themselves, for he is distinguished an author in his own right as he is an artist.

...Born in Tarrytown Heights, New York; June 21, 1882...He has been married twice and has six children...

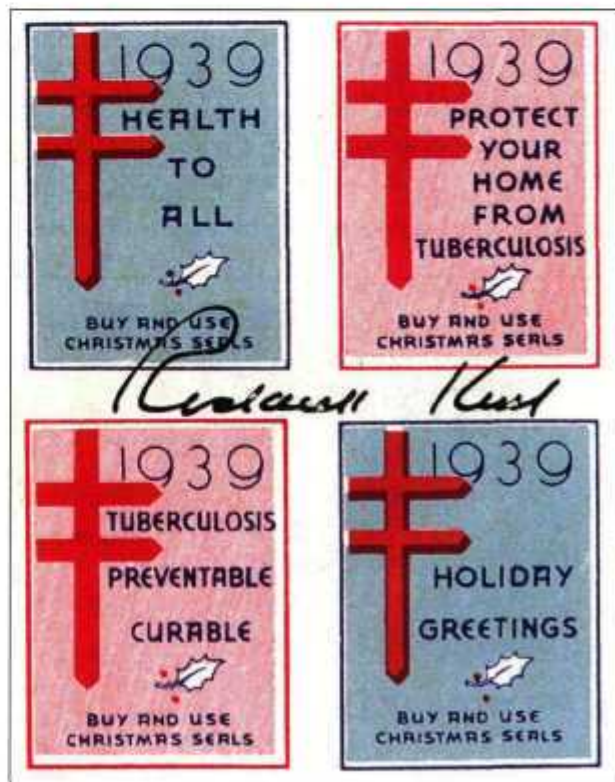
I own the Lakeside Press (Chicago) first edition of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1930) and illustrated with 280 of Kent's drawings. One of these is pictured on Scott 3502q, issued February 1, 2001 as part of the American Illustrators set. This edition was an instant and huge commercial and artistic success for Kent. It took him four years to draw the illustrations, and one of the 1,000 books still in existence today will cost you more than \$125. However, if you want an original period Kent print, the 1939 Christmas seal can be yours for only 10 cents!

After Kent's April 5th talk, Mr. G. Taggart Evans, Executive Secretary of the Delaware Anti-Tuberculosis Society, remarked to Newcomb that he was "inclined to agree with the ladies that he has everything." So, the NTA made Kent available as a speaker to various NTA affiliates the rest of 1939. Kent requested only



Cover postmarked Santa Claus, Indiana, on December 1, 1939, the seal's nationwide debut, signed by Rockwell Kent. The cachet is a line-drawing of Kent's seal design.

Normally there is a contest for choosing the annual design. In 1939, however, it was a Kent coronation not a contest.



Four center slogan seals from an imperforate sheet autographed by Rockwell Kent. On reverse it is numbered 52 (of 100 sheets signed by Kent).

for travel expenses, and asked that no admission be charged. He was in great demand by the society matrons of that day for whom his personality and charm were irresistible. In all Kent gave eight talks from April–November 1939.

Kent was a pragmatic individual. He stated that if the NTA revenues for 1939 exceeded those for 1938, then his design was a success; if not, it was a failure. In fact, the receipts of \$5,593,399 were an increase of 7 percent over the previous year. However, in 1940 receipts jumped by 13 percent when a traditional design with slogan returned as the central seal theme.

Controversy

Despite the overall national increase in Christmas seal sales, the New York City revenues actually were *down* in 1939 from 1938. On January 7, 1938, the first sign of trouble arose when the design committee voiced reservations about "possible religious opposition" to Kent's angel motif. Newcomb responded to this criticism with the comment "...we can eliminate the objection of religious opposition because I have consulted some Jewish people and they see nothing objectionable about the motif of the design." Kent concurred, saying, "...I have encountered that [religious objection] before in another design. Christians are inclined to be so cocky about their religion that they forget that it was derived from Judaism, and that the angels of the Christian church are all descended from the Jewish prototype. The only objection to the use of an angel would come from



Scott 3502q shows the Kent drawing from Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*.

Communist doctrinal extremists."

Despite Kent's dismissal of possible objections to his angel, Newcomb received enough pressure from the New York City committee that he caved in and asked Kent to submit a new design on March 14, 1938. Kent was upset and refused to withdraw the original design, demanding that it be voted on in California. Newcomb relented, but, contrary to Kent's expectations, the final vote was not unanimous, although it passed 4 to 1.

During the seal sale that commenced December 1, 1939, isolated criticism continued to arise from different parts of the country. (I might liken this to the same type criticism the first Love stamps, designed by Robert Indiana, received in 1973.) Newcomb answered all of these letters and later gave Kent a representative sample of both the good and bad comments.

On December 5, 1939, the Associated Press asked Kent to comment on a letter printed that stated the seal's angel "did not look like" an angel. Kent replied by asking if the letter writer had ever seen an angel:

I may say that even if she has, there are — undoubtedly — angels and angels. A friend has written me that my angel looks as though she had used rouge and lipstick, and had plucked her eyebrows. That should have the endorsement of women, for what other reasons but to look like angels do our women do these things? Anyhow, my angel looks to me like the kind of angel that I could really like in a big way.

Kent clearly was amused by this problem of perception and referred to it again in a letter to a friend:

As to the angel: I realize that angels are only what people imagine them to be and that when women pluck and paint their eyebrows and paint their lips and cheeks, they are only making themselves into what they want to be. Maybe in the past we have had too many man-made angels. At any rate, there's some reason for my having copied the angels that flesh and blood women try to make themselves into.

Another set of objections were based on race. Some viewers thought that Kent's angel looked "too Syrian." Kent



Hand-painted cachet by Jordice Peterson using the only slogan seal with a Christmas theme. Right seal has a printer's mark: "D" for the Edward & Deutsche Lithographing Company.

actually revised his angel's face to make it more Anglo-Saxon, with particular attention to the girl's expression. America in 1939 was strongly influenced by WASP culture (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant). The civil rights movement was still twenty years away, and racial barriers and inequities remained largely unquestioned by the general population.

Kent was a member of the Socialist Party and championed many radical causes, as well as supporting many left-wing organizations. These activities came to affect his popularity as an artist in the 1940s and 1950s. Indications of his future problems could be seen during the 1939 seal sale. He was a member of the American League for Peace and Democracy, which some thought to be a Communist front. In early November 1939 he was called upon to testify before the Dies Committee on Un-American Affairs, accused of being a Communist. His ego was so bruised that in his talk to the Washington DC Chapter of the NTA, he did not talk about the seal design, as planned, but rather repeated his defense that he presented to the Dies Committee a few weeks earlier. In 1960 Kent donated eighty paintings and about 800 other works on paper to the Soviet Union, a decision that did not help his popularity. His increasing political activities erased hitherto strong marketing opportunities for his work and led to a boycotting of his business ventures. Former friends often shunned him. He died in 1971 at age 89, somewhat ostracized by his countrymen.

Today

Kent was unique, and his 1939 Christmas seal design remains a burst of fireworks in the night sky compared to the dying embers of a series of lesser seal designs of the most conventional stuff. Today, the situation has changed and his reputation has ridden out his turbulent political past. Appreciation of his brilliant works, both as artist and author, continues to escalate. Since 1974 the Plattsburgh State Art Museum (State University of New York) has published the *Kent Collector*, a tri-annual journal dedicated to the life and work of Rockwell Kent.

In 2001 the American Philatelic Society adopted a new Cinderella Division that recognizes Christmas seals for World Series of Philately exhibiting. Past APS-President John Hotchner's exhibit on the 1934 Christmas seal was the prototype exhibit and a prime impetus for the creation of this new category. The author's monograph on *The Postal*



Wood-block cachet of Kent's seal made by Glen Osborn. Osborn used two imprints, first stamping the blue, and then adding the red on top, making the double-barred cross darker. The date and halo were added in white India ink over the stamped colors.

History of Christmas Seals (1990, 39 pages) gives further credence to this area of collecting. However, although the collecting will go on, sadly Christmas seals themselves may not. The prime purpose of the seal is to stimulate donations, but marketing practices have changed. Sweden and Italy have ceased issuing seals, and the future of seals in the United States is uncertain.

The Author

Douglas Lehmann is a retired U.S. Army Corps of Engineers analyst. He has been part of the NAPEX organization since 1984. His exhibit, "Winged Charity — the 1939 Christmas Seal," has won Gold at WSP shows. He also owns a copy of the correspondence between the NTA and that includes the quotations in this article. The file covers three years and includes 150 letters.



Christmas Seal & Charity Stamp Society

APS Affiliate 101 was organized for collectors of local, national, and foreign tuberculosis seals, as well as other charity seals.

Interested collectors should contact:
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