

# Rockwell Kent

and

# Edward Hopper



By Jake Milgram Wien

Consider Rockwell Kent's paintings of land and sea as modern American mindscapes—poetic distillations of remote places that probe the mysteries of life. Kent hoped viewers would lose themselves in contemplation before his haunting visions.<sup>1</sup> “Essentials only ought to go into painting,” he insisted. “I want the elemental, infinite thing; I want to paint the rhythm of eternity.”<sup>2</sup> He perceived the earth and heavens as psychological force fields imposing their nature upon man to make him what he is.<sup>3</sup> Critics recognized a “stark strength” and “mystic imagination” pulsing through his paintings of Monhegan Island, Newfoundland, the Alaska Territory, and Tierra del Fuego.<sup>4</sup>

Edward Hopper also painted scenes of hushed silence where the real and imagined meld into enigmatic realms of the mind. The poet Mark Strand regarded the “emotional weight” of Hopper's work as the force that lifted his paintings “into the suggestive, quasi-mystical realm of meditation.”<sup>5</sup>

## Looking out, looking within



Fig. 1. *Open Window* by Edward Hopper (1882–1967), c. 1918–1919. Signed “Edward Hopper” at lower right. Etching on wove paper, 9 ¼ by 10 ½ inches. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, museum purchase with funds from Brooke Garber Neidich, Beth Rudin DeWoody, Laurie Tisch and Joanne Leonhardt Cassullo. Unless otherwise noted, all Hopper works © Heirs of Josephine N. Hopper/Whitney Museum of American Art.

Fig. 2. *Bow Lookout* by Rockwell Kent (1882–1971), 1945. Signed “Rockwell Kent” at lower right. Ink on paper, 8 ⅝ by 11 inches. Private collection. Unless otherwise noted, for Kent images, all rights reserved, Plattsburgh State Art Museum, State University of New York, Rockwell Kent Collection, bequest of Sally Kent Gorton.

Fig. 3. *A Young Sailor* by Kent, c. 1914–1917. Oil on canvas, 36 by 30 inches. Private collection.



Fig. 4. *Soir Bleu* by Hopper, 1914. Oil on canvas, 36 1/8 by 71 3/4 inches. Signed "E. Hopper" at lower left. Whitney Museum of American Art, Josephine N. Hopper Bequest.

"I'm after me."<sup>10</sup> Henri's directive harkened back to Goethe, whom Hopper quoted: "the beginning and end of all literary activity is the reproduction of the world that surrounds me by means of the world that is in me."<sup>11</sup> Kent, who modeled his late-in-life autobiography after *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, also revered Goethe and sang his poetry.

That inner exploration is essential to artistic creation was also central to the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Kent's serial painting expeditions were Emersonian journeys to the infinity of the self. In writing about Kent, the art critic Henry McBride remarked, "Wherever he goes, like Emerson, he finds himself."<sup>12</sup> Hopper, too, internalized Emersonian precepts in his search for interior truths.<sup>13</sup>

The emotive force that became the hallmark of both artists' creative introspection is forecast in two pivotal, contemporaneous paintings: Kent's *A Young Sailor* (Fig. 3) and Hopper's *Soir Bleu* (Fig. 4). (So comfortless were these works that neither sold in the artists' lifetime.) These disquieting dramas informed by the aesthetics of symbolism express a shared unease over the human condition. When studying with Henri, Kent and Hopper were exposed to currents of fin-de-siècle symbolism—particu-

larly the dark poetry of Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Verlaine, and Charles Baudelaire.<sup>14</sup> The international movement's French strain beguiled Hopper, its German variety allured Kent. Through a haunted masthead specter Kent conveys the anguish he and his Newfoundland neighbors felt when hundreds of sealers perished in concurrent maritime disasters off the coast of Newfoundland.<sup>15</sup>

Both artists believed that to render subjective intensity in art meant avoiding certain genres and modes of painting: still life and flower paintings, for instance, but also society portraiture, decorative landscapes, fashionable color theories, and pure abstraction. They each sometimes waited for months to find worthy subject matter. Paradoxically, stints as professional illustrators honed their abilities to convey subjectivity. Hopper trained and worked in the field for many years, while Kent developed a natural aptitude for illustrating American and world classics that won him critical and popular acclaim. Their figurative compositions reveal a kindred interest in body language, as in Kent's *Man at Mast* (see Fig. 6) and Hopper's *South Carolina Morning* (Fig. 5), where contrasting states of reverie and guardedness are distinguished by the gestural rise of a head.

Fig. 5. *South Carolina Morning* by Hopper, 1955. Signed "Edward Hopper" at lower left. Oil on canvas, 30 3/8 by 40 1/4 inches. Whitney Museum of American Art, given in memory of Otto L. Spaeth by his family.

Fig. 6. Sketch for *Man at Mast* by Kent, 1929. Inscribed "Rockwell Kent (Sketch for woodblock 'Man at Mast')" at lower left. Graphite on paper, 8 1/8 by 5 1/2 inches. Private collection.

## Kent and Hopper shared a predilection—rarely mentioned and never examined—for scenes of isolation intended to move rather than console

Kent and Hopper shared a predilection—rarely mentioned and never examined—for scenes of isolation intended to move rather than console.<sup>6</sup> When the two artists appear on the same art-historical page, the topic of discussion is invariably their kindred origins: born a month apart and within miles of each other, they grew up in white, Christian, upper middle-class families, studied painting under William Merritt Chase, Kenneth Hayes Miller, and Robert Henri, and often shared classes and exhibited early works in the same group shows in New York. Occasional mention is made of their overlapping worlds, including Maine and Vermont (where both painted) and New York (where Kent lived next to Hopper for a short time and engaged the same dealer, Frank K. M. Rehn, to

handle his paintings). Rarer still are comparisons of the laconic styles and techniques that produced pictures with few moving parts.<sup>7</sup>

Yet lifelong visual correspondences can be seen when their signature works are selectively paired. Consonances spring from a likeminded understanding of artistic purpose: Kent and Hopper bared their souls on canvas. Their generation's dynamic painting instructor Robert Henri emboldened his students to summon up "intense feeling" and "profound contemplation" and imbue their work with their "exact state of being."<sup>8</sup> Kent considered Henri "an inspirational influence in American art... possibly the most important figure of our cultural history."<sup>9</sup> Hopper also took the gist of Henri's message to heart. When asked to explain his elusive, pared-down compositions, Hopper responded,





**Kent and Hopper** *orchestrated the dramatic effects of light to convey personal visions. Memory and imagination lurk in the shadow*

In remarkably similar ways the two artists framed the outer world to give shape to the inner world. For example, in Hopper's modestly scaled study for his painting *Morning Sun* (Fig. 7) and Kent's ink drawing *Shooting the Sun* (Fig. 8), solitary figures are flanked by a quadrilateral patch of white-hot sunlight. Each takes measure of the vast beyond and is separated from what is observed by a central vertical divide. The many antipodal components convey distinctively different moods: Hopper's reclusive woman sits passively confined to her urban space while Kent's upright man actively navigates the windswept sea. As expressions of the modern experience, the narrative fictions these images convey typify what is Hopperesque and Kentian.

If one could press the modern American spirit into a coin, Hopper and Kent would be its opposing sides. Frail and often suffering from chronic fatigue, Hopper recoiled from physical challenges. By contrast, Kent apprenticed with fresh air fanatic Abbott Handerson Thayer and relished the wilderness. He broke free from urban life and considered his voyages symptomatic of the "contemporary American character." Feelings of unrest and love of adventure are American and "very human," Kent contended.<sup>16</sup>

McBride agreed and granted America's most widely traveled living painter the indulgence allowed to "meteoric and dazzling visitors to these shores."<sup>17</sup>

Kent and Hopper's contrasting mental and physical temperaments are reflected in *Greenland Gothic* (Fig. 10) and *House by the Railroad* (Fig. 9). Kent traversed Arctic wilderness and found mythic strength in primordial rock formations. His figure conveys the serenity of isolation rather than loneliness; its subtext corresponds with the sentiment shared by Kent's circle of outdoorsmen and explorers: "I am least alone when I am all alone."<sup>18</sup> Hopper's austere Victorian mansion is emblematic of his fascination with vernacular, often outmoded architectural forms laden, for him, with symbolic meaning. The spatial treatments in these works are related: vertical forms loom over tracks stretching horizontally—organic (Kent) as opposed to man-made (Hopper)—and they align thematically by alluding to the intersection of the past with the present. Perceived by one art historian as a dour grande dame, Hopper's house brings to mind the title subject of Kent's Vermont painting *Puritan Church* (Fig. 11).<sup>19</sup> By renaming it *Mother and Chicks*, Kent drew attention to the religious structure's maternal and facial resemblance.

As these paintings demonstrate, Kent and Hopper orchestrated the dramatic effects of light to convey personal visions. Memory and imagination lurk in shadow: the resonance of shadows and strong contrasts of light and dark heightened their perception of a universe unresponsive, if not indifferent, to the fate of all living things.



Fig. 9. *House by the Railroad* by Hopper, 1925. Signed "Edward Hopper" at lower right. Oil on canvas, 24 by 29 inches. *Museum of Modern Art, New York; licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY.*



Fig. 10. *Greenland Gothic* by Kent, 1935-1937. Signed and dated "Rockwell Kent 1935-7" at lower left. Oil on canvas, 34 by 44 1/2 inches. *Private collection.*

Fig. 7. Study for *Morning Sun* by Hopper, 1952. Fabricated chalk on paper, 12 by 19 inches. *Whitney Museum of American Art, Josephine N. Hopper Bequest.*

Fig. 8. *Shooting the Sun* by Kent, 1945. Signed "Rockwell Kent" at lower right. Ink with opaque white on paper, 8 3/8 by 11 inches. *Private collection.*



Hopper is famously known as a composer of shadows, and Kent made shadow-play the title subject of such early paintings as *Winter, Monhegan Island* (Fig. 12), a touchstone of early American modernism. The painting was originally titled *The Shadows of Evening*, in reference to the fluid, slanting purple and blue forms brushed across the snowy foreground.<sup>20</sup> The title was soon transferred to Kent's Vermont painting *Shadows of Evening* (1921–1923, Whitney Museum of American Art), which explored the mystery and menace of the gloaming.

While each artist was in his stride in the late 1920s and early 1930s, their subjects almost make it seem as if each was reading the other's mind. Kent's *Abandoned House, Greenland* (Fig. 13) and Hopper's contemporaneous *House with Dead Trees* (Fig. 14) are conceived with expert draftsmanship. Kent honed his abilities as an architect at Columbia University and landed construction jobs in the 1910s with a printed calling card touting his expertise in archi-

tectural design and rendering. And yet architecture enthralled Hopper more than Kent, who traveled great distances in search of the elemental landscapes that would allow him to convey his sense of cosmic timelessness and human insignificance.<sup>21</sup>

Kent and Hopper also composed pastorals of similar design. *Summer, Greenland* (Fig. 16), which Kent conceived on an overland journey, portrays a schoolhouse bathed in the clarity of Arctic sunlight. Its slanting rooftop shadows and mysterious reflection animate a stark setting of undulating hills and spare vegetation. Abbreviated dashes of lime green, pink, ocher, purple, and blue applied with bravura brushwork bring to mind the late landscape paintings and pastels of William Merritt Chase. Hopper's *Cobb's Barns and Distant*



*Houses* (Fig. 15)—with its angled roofs, panoramic sweep, high horizon line, and dramatic, crosscutting shadows of the title subjects—aligns with the pictorial strategies of Kent's hushed bucolic setting.

The clarity of sunlight sharpens the unbroken silence of Hopper's urban *pièce de résistance*, *Early Sunday Morning* (Fig. 17). An interlocking series of rectangular forms—storefronts beneath curtained habitations—stretch laterally behind a hydrant and barber pole, character actors grounded in concrete. (Hopper painted *out* a figure in one of the windows.)<sup>22</sup> Trees and stumps grounded in the earth are the seven dramatis personae of Kent's *Alaska Winter* (Fig. 18). (Kent painted *in* the distant specter of a tiny figure in silhouette.) The backwoods counterpoint to Hopper's

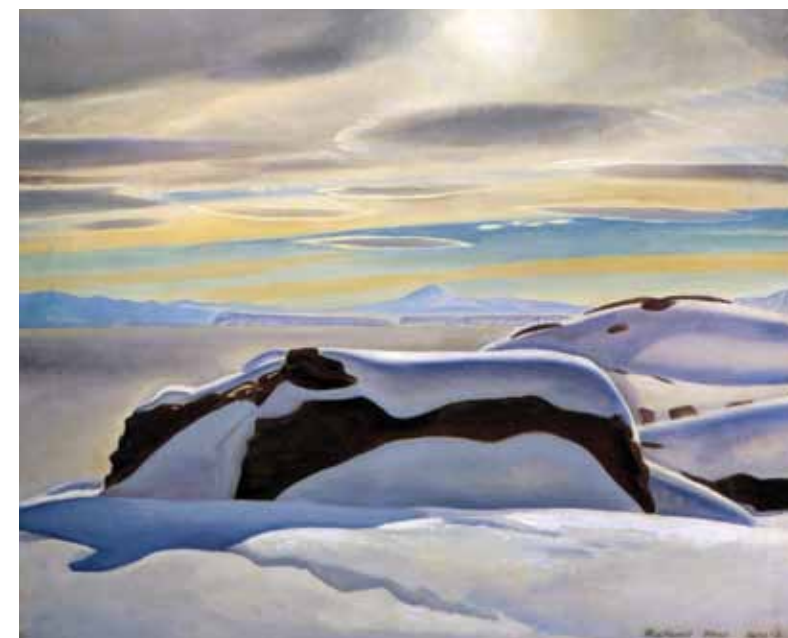


Fig. 11. *Puritan Church* by Kent, c. 1923. Signed "Rockwell Kent" at lower right. Oil on canvas, 22 by 24 inches. *Lost Vermont Images Collection of Lyman Orton at the Vermont Country Store.*

Fig. 12. *Winter, Monhegan Island* by Kent, 1907. Signed and dated "Rockwell Kent 1907" at lower left. Oil on canvas, 33 7/8 by 44 inches. *Metropolitan Museum of Art, George A. Hearn Fund. © Metropolitan Museum of Art/ Art Resource, NY.*

Fig. 13. *Abandoned House, Greenland* by Kent, 1932–1933. Signed and dated "Rockwell Kent 1932–3" at lower right. Oil on canvas mounted on panel, 28 by 34 inches. *Private collection.*

Fig. 14. *House with Dead Trees* by Hopper, 1932. Signed "Edward Hopper" at lower right. Watercolor on paper, 20 by 28 inches. *Private collection.*

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geometric design is a range of pyramidal mountain peaks that form a naturalistic backdrop, a theatrical mainstay Hopper's picture also calls to mind.<sup>23</sup> In an upper corner of each painting, forms punctuate the cloudless skies and break the recession into deep space. Hopper adds a dark square evocative of a skyscraper's profile, and Kent silhouettes the lower boughs of a soaring tree against the expanse of the sky.

Kent's wilderness paintings anticipate the emotional underpinnings and spirituality of Mark Rothko's color field abstractions. Wayne Thiebaud has described the greenish glow of Kent's chromatically gradated sky in *Winter, Monhegan Island* as "Rothko-like."<sup>24</sup> The numinous qualities of Hopper's extraordinary paintings also share Rothko's impulse to project on canvas the subjective silence of what lies within.<sup>25</sup> All three artists—Kent, Hopper, and Rothko—convey the humanist's faith in the power of art to glimpse, if not reveal, the mystery of modern existence.

<sup>1</sup> Kent printed an excerpt from *The Confessions of St. Augustine* on the cover of his 1924 solo exhibition brochures: "And the people went there and admired the high mountains, the wide wastes of the sea and the mighty downward rushing streams, and the ocean and the course of the stars and forgot themselves."<sup>2</sup> Quoted in C. Lewis Hind, "Rockwell Kent in Alaska and Elsewhere," *International Studio*, vol. 67, no. 268 (June 1919), p. 112. <sup>3</sup> Rockwell Kent, *Voyaging: Southward from the Strait of Magellan* (G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1924), p. 101. <sup>4</sup> *Vanity Fair*, vol. 12, no. 4 (June 1921), p. 58. Helen A. Read, *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, April 20, 1924. <sup>5</sup> Mark Strand, "On Edward Hopper," *The New York Review of Books*, June 25, 2015, p. 41. <sup>6</sup> A fleeting reference to the "landscape of isolation" is found in Richard V. West, *An Enkindled Eye: The Paintings of Rockwell Kent* (Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Santa Barbara, Calif., 1985), p. 23. <sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Luther Cary noted a common "Americanism of their technique" in her review, "Many Types of Art Are Now on Exhibition," *New York Times*, February 28, 1926, sec. 8, p. 12. And Suzanne Muchnic ("Kent at Peak with Landscapes," *Los Angeles Times*, August 13, 1985) observed that "Kent's paintings communicate through American plainspeak. Indeed, his awe-struck roughness is shared by his more graceful contemporaries, such as Arthur Dove, Georgia O'Keeffe and Edward Hopper." <sup>8</sup> Robert Henri, *The Art Spirit* (J.B. Lippincott Company, New York, 1923; reprinted Westview Press, Boulder, Colo., 1984), pp. 16–17. <sup>9</sup> Rockwell Kent, *It's Me O Lord: The Autobiography of Rockwell Kent* (Dodd, Mead and Company, New York, 1955), p. 81. <sup>10</sup> Barbara Novak, "The Posthumous Revenge of Josephine Hopper," *Art in America*, June 1996, p. 31. <sup>11</sup> Quoted in Brian O'Doherty, "Portrait: Edward Hopper," *ibid.*, vol. 52, no. 6. (December 1964), p. 72. <sup>12</sup> Henry McBride, "Water Colors of Ireland by Rockwell Kent," *New York Sun*, March 12, 1927. Kent writes that as a voyager he "has explored the two infinities—the external universe—and himself" (*Voyaging*, p. 24). <sup>13</sup> See Gail Levin, *Edward Hopper: An Intimate Biography* (Rizzoli, New York, 2007), pp. 14–15. <sup>14</sup> Kent, *It's Me O Lord*, p.



## If one could press the modern American spirit into a coin, Hopper and Kent would be its opposing sides

91. For an astute analysis that sheds light on how symbolist invention may have shaped Hopper's artistry, see Pamela N. Koob, "States of Being: Edward Hopper and Symbolist Aesthetics," *American Art*, vol. 18, no. 3 (Fall 2004), pp. 52–77. <sup>15</sup> Kent's modernist turn following the groundbreaking Armory Show in New York is explored in Jake Milgram Wien, *Vital Passage: The Newfoundland Epic of Rockwell Kent* (Rooms Corporation of Newfoundland and Labrador, St. John's, Newfoundland, 2014). <sup>16</sup> Rockwell Kent to Thomas Craven, March ? [sic] 1925, Rockwell Kent Papers, Archives of American Art, reel 5172, frame 1188. See Craven's review of Kent's *Voyaging: Southward from the Strait of Magellan*, *The Dial*, vol. 78, no. 4 (April 1925), pp. 324–325. Kent echoed the philosophy of Robert Henri, who encouraged his students to go to the most isolated corners of the earth in order to get away from it all. <sup>17</sup> Henry McBride, "Tierra del Fuego Landscapes," *New York Sun*, April 18, 1925. <sup>18</sup> Hans Hinrichs, one of Kent's seagoing patrons, voiced this sentiment in a letter to Kent, July 8, 1946, Rockwell Kent Papers, Archives of American Art, reel 5191, frame 126. <sup>19</sup> See Sarah Burns, "Better for Haunts: Victorian Houses and the Modern Imagination," *American Art*, vol. 26, no. 3 (Fall 2012), pp. 12–13. <sup>20</sup> The title of the painting evolved over time, from *The Shadows of Evening to Evening on the Coast of Maine to Winter Evening*, and finally to *Winter, Monhegan Island*. See Jake Milgram Wien, *Rockwell Kent: The Mythic and the Modern* (Hudson Hills Press, New York, in association with the Portland Museum of Art, Maine, 2005), p. 147 n.12. <sup>21</sup> Hopper's early enthusiasm

for architecture was often thwarted by the dictates of his magazine editors who contrived to situate "people waving their arms" in his illustrations. See Edward Hopper quoted in Archer Winsten, "Wake of the News. Washington Square North Boasts Strangers Worth Talking To," *New York Post*, November 26, 1935," cited in Levin, *Edward Hopper: An Intimate Biography*, pp. 139, 595 n.24. <sup>22</sup> Brian O'Doherty, "Portrait: Edward Hopper," *Art in America*, vol. 52 (December 1964), p. 78, cited in Levin, *Edward Hopper: An Intimate Biography*, p. 227. <sup>23</sup> The backdrop Jo Mielziner designed for the set of Elmer Rice's 1929 Broadway drama *Street Scene* evidently inspired *Early Sunday Morning*, originally titled "Seventh Avenue Shops"; see Levin, *Edward Hopper: An Intimate Biography*, pp. 227–228. Mielziner was also on Kent's radar in 1930: that year, following Kent's preliminary designs, Mielziner and his theater crew in New York painted, transported, and installed both the ceiling mural and a folding stage screen for the Cape Cinema in Dennis, Massachusetts. <sup>24</sup> See Michael Kimmelman, "A Little Weirdness Can Help An Artist," *New York Times*, August 23, <sup>25</sup> See David Anfam, "Rothko's Hopper: A Strange Wholeness," in *Edward Hopper*, ed. Sheena Wagstaff (Tate Publishing, London, 2004), pp. 34–49.

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Fig. 15. *Cobb's Barns and Distant Houses* by Hopper, 1930–1933. Oil on canvas, 28 1/2 by 42 3/4 inches. Whitney Museum of American Art, Josephine N. Hopper Bequest.

Fig. 16. *Summer, Greenland* by Kent, 1932–1933. Inscribed "Rockwell Kent To D [indecipherable]" at lower left. Oil on canvas adhered to panel, 28 by 44 inches. Terra Foundation for American Art, Daniel J. Terra Art Acquisition Endowment Fund.

Fig. 17. *Early Sunday Morning* by Hopper, 1930. Signed "Edward Hopper" at lower right. Oil on canvas, 35 1/4 by 60 1/4 inches. Whitney Museum of American Art, museum purchase with funds from Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney.

Fig. 18. *Alaska Winter* by Kent, 1919. Signed and dated "Rockwell Kent, Alaska. 1919" at lower left. Oil on canvas, 34 by 43 1/2 inches. Anchorage Museum, Alaska.