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ROCKWELL KENT & GREENLAND PHILATELY

Will Ross

Two friends sit drinking brandy in a hut on Greenland's northwest coast. One of them is a famous American artist, on his second of three trips to Greenland. The other is one of the few remaining German aces of World War I, there to assist the crew of one of the first movies to be filmed in Greenland. While in their cups, to use the old term, they come up with an idea to help the natives in the small settlement, Igdlorssuit, where the artist lives. The child of this rather inauspicious beginning is, in fact, one of the gems of Greenland stamp collecting--Rockwell Kent's "Greenland Air Mail Stamp."

While today he is the subject of "Jeopardy" questions and crossword puzzles, in the 1920s and 30s Rockwell Kent was one of the best known artists in America. Sometimes confused with Norman Rockwell, even to this day, Kent's art was very different, as was his life. He was one of the last of the "gentlemen adventurers." These were men who travelled what was--wrongly--called the "unknown" world for the fun of it, rather than for science or glory. And, like Richard Halliburton, Peter Freuchen and Vilhjalmur Steffansson, he wrote about his adventures. The difference was that Kent was a world-class artist who also illustrated his own work. After traveling to Newfoundland, Alaska and Tierra del Fuego, his taste for adventure first brought him to Greenland in 1929.

THE BACKGROUND

Kent was 47 at the time he sailed to the west coast of Greenland in the summer of 1929 along with two younger companions. Unfortunately, their ship was wrecked on the Greenland rocks. Kent and his companions were saved and, while the two younger men left at the first opportunity, Kent stayed for several months painting and exploring. He also met, and was befriended by, two men who would, incidentally, have much to do with the creation of the Air Mail Stamp. They were Knud Rasmussen and Peter Freuchen. Freuchen, a hero of the Danish resistance, was to marry his second wife at Kent's upstate New York farm. He talks about Kent in his book, *It's All Adventure*. From Greenland Kent travelled to Copenhagen, where he met his wife, and stayed at the Rasmussen home. There he completed the drawings for his *magnum opus*, the three volume illustrated *Moby-Dick*. For those further interested in Kent's first

Greenland expedition, and his relationship with these two men, the book to look for at the library or in used book stores is entitled *N by E*.

Our story begins in July 1931, when Kent arrives at the small settlement of Igdlorssuit, on Ubekent (Unknown) Island in the Umanak District. The place had been suggested by Rasmussen and Freuchen, but they had been unable to accompany Kent on this voyage. He was alone. Once there Kent threw himself into the struggle of making a home, beginning to paint, and being understood by both the Danish administrator and the Greenland natives. Through the winter and into the following spring Kent worked on his paintings, drawings and lithographs—items that are now some of the most expensive and well-known of his works.

In the summer of 1932 a movie crew arrived in Igdlorssuit to make a film entitled *SOS--Iceberg*. The leader of the crew was a Dr. Fanck, and it was called the "Universal-Dr. Fanck / Greenland-Expedition." While headquartered in Igdlorssuit, much of the filming took place in the even smaller settlement of Nugatsiak, some 120 miles north. All supplies, including mail, had to be flown both ways. The flying chores for the film crew were handled by the former World War I flying ace Ernst Udet. Kent, who spoke fluent German, was drawn to the flyer, himself an artist, and they spent considerable time together.

We are now to the creation of the stamp itself and, for that history, we turn to Kent's own words as found in a letter to the noted air mail collector Erik Hildes-Heim and published in Sanabria's *Airpost News* of June 1950 and May 1951:

"Udet, who was stationed on my island because of the good landing beach for his plane, used to take occasional trips to neighboring settlements, including Umanak, fifty miles away. One night, at my house, with Udet as usual pretty high with brandy, we conceived the idea of getting out a postage stamp to stick on the occasional letters that would be consigned to him when he flew to Umanak.

"The proceeds of the stamps were to go toward the building of a community house which I was financing and building for the people of the settlement of Igdlorssuit. I may have printed about seventy-five of these stamps, and some of them were undoubtedly used by some of the Germans to stick on their letters. Besides the few Kroner raised from the stamps which was, of course, a tiny drop in the bucket toward the goal and 100 Kr. contributed by the Fanck expedition the house was paid for and erected by me and people of Igdlorssuit. All money for the stamps was paid directly to me and went into the funds for the building of the community house.

"The block for the Greenland stamp was made with the engraving tools which I had with me in Greenland, and it is properly termed a wood engraving. Strictly speaking, there is a distinction between wood cuts and wood engravings. Wood cuts on the side of grain are made with a knife or with ordinary wood engraving tools. Those made on the end grain are more properly called wood engravings and the tools used are identical with those used in engraving metal.

"The Greenland impressions were made by smearing oil paint on the block and printing it with a hammer. As a matter of fact, I am not absolutely sure how I succeeded in making the impression! The block for the stamps never passed out of my hands. I brought it home with me and had two hundred good impressions made of it in New York by the Pynson Printers. (Editor's Note: In at least several of these, the autograph of the artist appears in pencil in the lower right frame.)

"The stamps were printed singly. The block was in no way altered or reworked. The cut has been 'destroyed'—i.e. line has been scratched across it. Practically all the original blocks of my wood engravings are in various museums. After 'destroying' them, I made this disposal to prevent any suspicion that I might be reprinting. It is very important that the block of the stamps should be immunized."

For those, like me, who wonder at the possibility of printing great works of art with a hammer, Kent offered another option. This is making prints with a spoon. Kent said in another letter to Erik Hildes-Heim, "When a spoon is used, the paper is laid on the inked plate and then rubbed on the back with the back of a spoon. With proper ink very good impressions can be made in this way."

Kent left in the fall of 1932, returning for the third and last time in 1934-35 to the same place with one of his sons. During this last trip he wrote his famous book about the second trip, *Salamina*. While Kent never returned to Greenland, he felt very close to the country and its people for the rest of his life.

THE STAMP

A black and white reproduction simply cannot do justice to the beauty of this item. The original is reported to be a brown red color. The reprint is done in a lovely orange/red called sanguine. The lines of the iceberg and the water are crisp and clean. Unlike a drawing, which one can throw away if not perfect, if every line of an engraving is not exact, it is destroyed. In a room full of pieces of art much larger than the Air Mail Stamp, people are drawn to it by its simple beauty. It is acknowledged by art experts to be one of the highlights of the wood engravers' art.



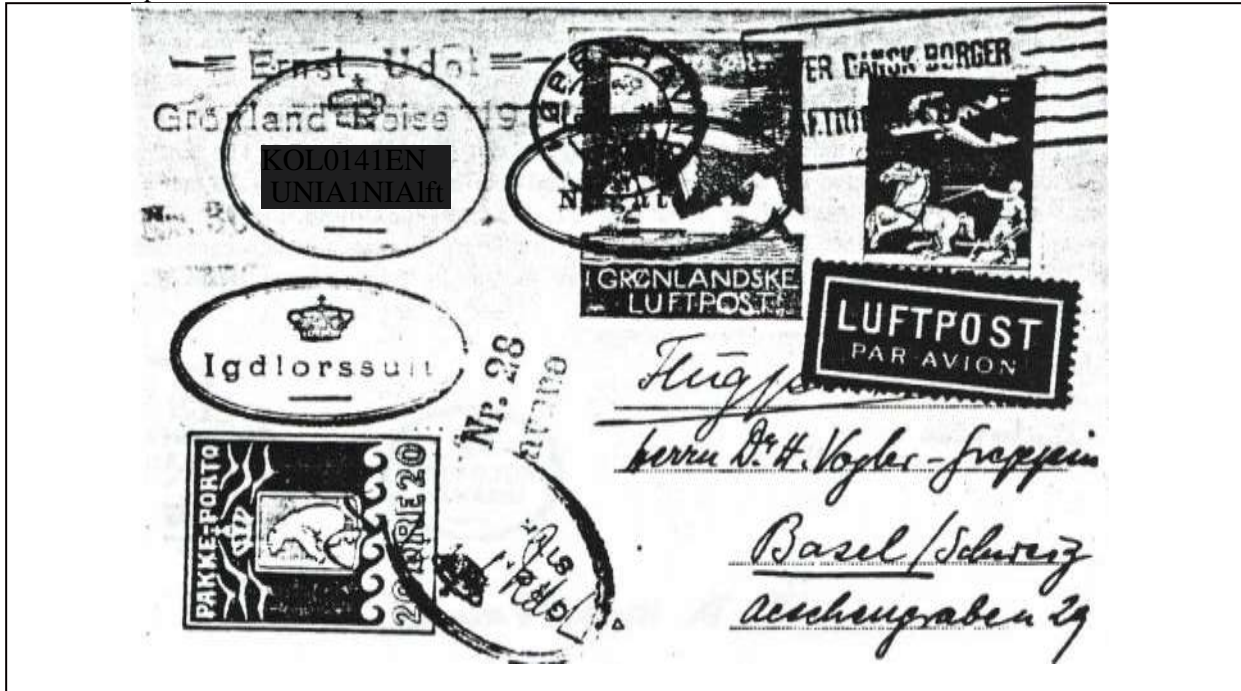
There was never any question about the status of this item. "The Greenland Air Mail stamp is a thoroughly unofficial stamp." So said Rockwell Kent in a November 6, 1944, letter to early Scandinavian Collectors Club member B.I. Christensen, published in the January 1946 (Vol. 3, #1) issue of **The Posthorn**. It should more properly be called a charitable or fund-raising seal, since it was purchased to provide funds for the community. It is, of course, the only Greenland item containing the term *Luftpost*, which has made it of interest to air mail collectors. That is why the original and reprint are listed in the **Sanabria Air Mail Catalog** as #S1 and #S2 respectively. Given how the mail was delivered, it is possible that the use of the term was an inside joke between Kent and Udet, since it was assumed that only in Udet's plane would the letters be in "air mail."

Needless to say, used copies of the original item on cover are very rare. The following are illustrations of the three covers known to me. To my knowledge, this is the first time that they are seen in the same place. There are also two fore-runners, which will also be illustrated and discussed. Those who have knowledge of additional examples, on or off cover, are urged to let the editor know, and send copies for publication.

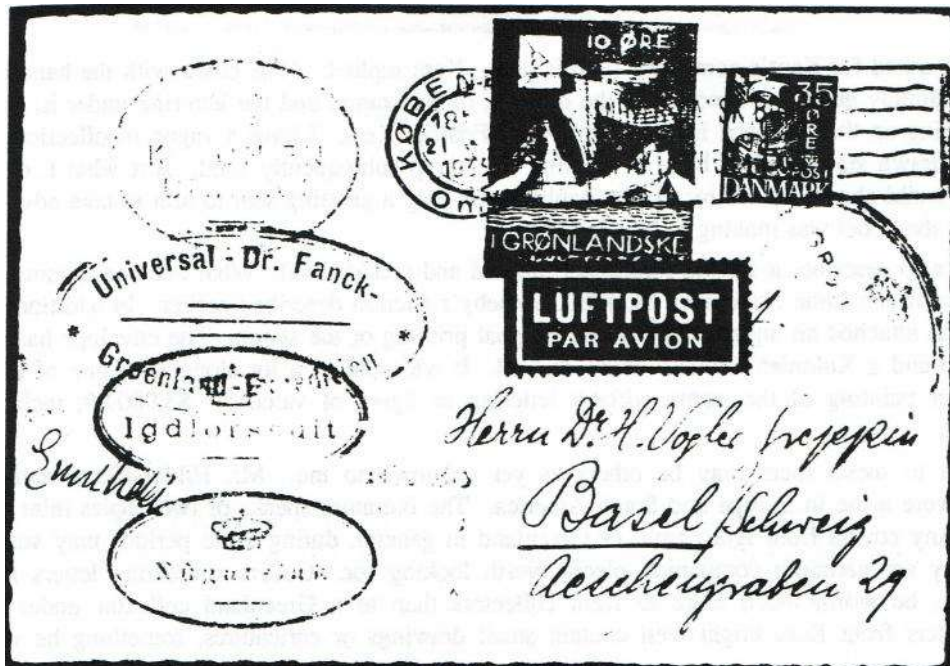


The first cover to be illustrated in the United States was in the May 1951 **Sanabria's Airpost News**. It was sent by the governor of Igdlorssuit, Mr. V.H. Jørgensen. Kent had his troubles with Mr. Jørgensen, who nonetheless was an intelligent person as he wrote on the back of this cover, "Save the envelope, it bears a Greenland airmail stamp." The Copenhagen postmark is dated July 31, 1932, and ties the air mail stamp and a 10 ore Danish stamp, as does the stamp of the film company.

In the **Aero Philatelist Annals** of January 1962 (Vol. 9 #3), we see the second known cover. It is a card sent to Switzerland and contains some very fascinating markings. In addition to Udet's own stamp and autograph it has the avane marks of Satut (Nr. 28) and Igdlorssuit (Nr. 30). It also has the "Kolonien Umanak," "Igdlorssuit" and "Nugatsiak" stamps applied in Greenland. A 20 ore Pakke-Porto (Facit P9) has a Gronlands Stryelse mark. Finally, it did receive air mail service, but the Luftpost sticker makes it impossible to tell the denomination.

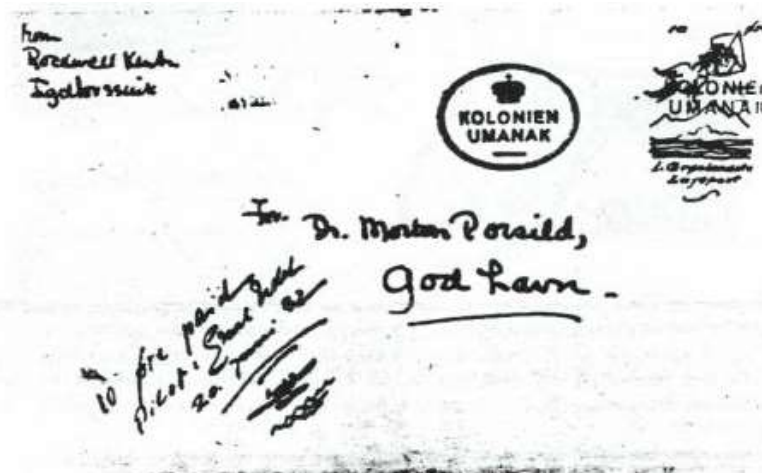


On November 19, 1980, Sotheby's sold the third cover of which I have knowledge. This is also the only sale known, so it gives us the only "market" we can speak of. Addressed to the same doctor in Basel as the second cover, it does not have Udet's mark, but does have that of the film expedition. What is particularly interesting is that it is postmarked in Copenhagen on May 21, 1933. This is well after the time that Kent and the film crew had left Greenland. The Danish stamp is Facit 225. This cover sold for \$4,675.00, including the buyer's charge of 10%.



The Posthorn of July 1952 (Vol. 9, #3), brings us the illustrated article, *A Rockwell Kent 'Forerunner'* by Lauson H. Stone. The cover in Mr. Stone's article is described by him as follows: "(The) used cover ... has, in place of a stamp, an ink drawing similar to the Kent airmail stamp. One notable thing about this cover is that the ink drawing, while practically the same as the stamp, will on careful examination be seen to be in reverse, i.e., the gull is flying to the right rather than to the left as in the stamp. It is well known that the stamp was printed from a woodcut which had to be prepared in reverse of the manner in which the final stamp was to appear. In other words, in order to have the gull in the stamp fly to the left, it was necessary to make the woodcut with the bird flying to the right. This indicates that the artist was making the drawing on the cover in the same way it would appear on a woodcut rather than imitating or copying the stamp. Thus it seems logical to conclude that this cover was prepared before the stamps were printed."

Mr. Stone also comments on the fact that Udet had signed and dated this cover. The date of June 20, 1932 is probably before Kent prepared the stamp, or first printed it. This is also seen by the fact that the first known cover is postmarked in Denmark on or about July 31, 1932. In those days, the voyage to Denmark took from three to five weeks. Since this one was mailed "in country" it was not date cancelled. It does, however, have the "Nr. 30 - Avane" mark described before as well as two different types of "Kolonien Umanak" cancellations.



The author asked for Kent's comments on this item. Kent replied: "The cover with the hand drawn air-mail stamp is definitely genuine. I recognize the drawing of the stamp, and the lettering under it, as my own; and the handwriting on the envelope is that of my wife, Frances Kent. I have a vague recollection of having made that hand drawn stamp before I got to printing the stamp subsequently used. Just what I, or my wife, was writing to Porsild about, I don't recall. Probably it was only a greeting sent to him to take advantage of a trip to Godthavn that Udet was making in his plane."

Mr. Stone also describes a second forerunner, unused and unaddressed. What one can assume to be that cover was offered in the same November 19, 1980, Sotheby's auction described earlier. In addition to a similar drawing, it has attached an unused copy of the original printing of the stamp. The envelope has the Fanck expedition stamp and a Kolonien Umanak mark as well. It was sold in a lot along with one of the reprints and a water-color painting of the stamp without lettering or figure of value for \$3,080.00, including 10% buyer's premium.

In addition to these, there may be others as yet unknown to me. Mr. Hildes-Heim stated that he suspected there were some in Europe and South America. The literature speaks of two copies mint and six or less on cover. Any covers from Igdlorssuit, or Greenland in general, during these periods may very well be from Kent. They are certainly companion pieces worth looking for. Covers containing letters from Kent would, of course, be worth much more to Kent collectors than to a Greenland collector under most circumstances. Letters from Kent might well contain small drawings or caricatures, something he was in the habit of doing.



At one point in time, it appears that President Roosevelt had a copy of what is assumed to be the reprint in his collection. It is alleged by Mr. Hildes-Heim to have been sold as part of the auction of the President's stamp collection. In an excerpt from a letter published in the May 1951 **Sanabria's Airpost News**, Kent states, "When, later I met him (the President), he spoke of it and said, laughing of course, they should make me Postmaster General of Greenland!" While Kent was not the Postmaster General of Greenland, of course, he did design and produce the first stamp-like item to be created on Greenland proper.

CODA

An article about Rockwell Kent's importance to Greenland philately is an improper place to discuss the controversies that swirled around his sojourn on the island. He is a man who continues to inspire great feelings, both pro and con, to the present day, almost 25 years after his death. There are many who disagree with his politics, his philosophy of life and how he decided to live while in Greenland. The Danish colonial authority of the time was, frankly, paternalistic and Kent had a life-long antipathy to all forms of authority. However, any fair readings of his books will show that he had great sympathy for, and empathy with, the native Greenlanders. His books and illustrations provide a priceless look at the native Greenlanders during a time when their frozen island could still seem to some like Paradise, not just a laboratory.

As for his Greenland Air Mail Stamp, for far too long it has been neglected in the literature. The American Philatelic Research Library could find no article later than 1962 in its files. It should be seen for what it is, both one of the most beautifully designed "stamps" ever made and one of the finest works of art of a great American artist. It is said that time heals all wounds. If Rockwell Kent wounded anyone by what he wrote 60 years ago, that wound should be assuaged. In retrospect Kent is probably the most important artist ever to visit Greenland. He is also one of the most significant American authors to call on the island. His three books on Greenland are still read and enjoyed, in fact N by E is soon to be reprinted. The Air Mail Stamp is a true gem that deserves to be seen and appreciated by a much wider audience than the lucky few who have the privilege of owning one of the originals or a reprint. It is more than appropriate that the Greenland Postal Administration issue a "stamp on stamp" design incorporating the Greenland Air Mail Stamp. It would commemorate a man, and a time when the little settlement of Igdlorssuit made an impression on history.