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Sculpting the Wind

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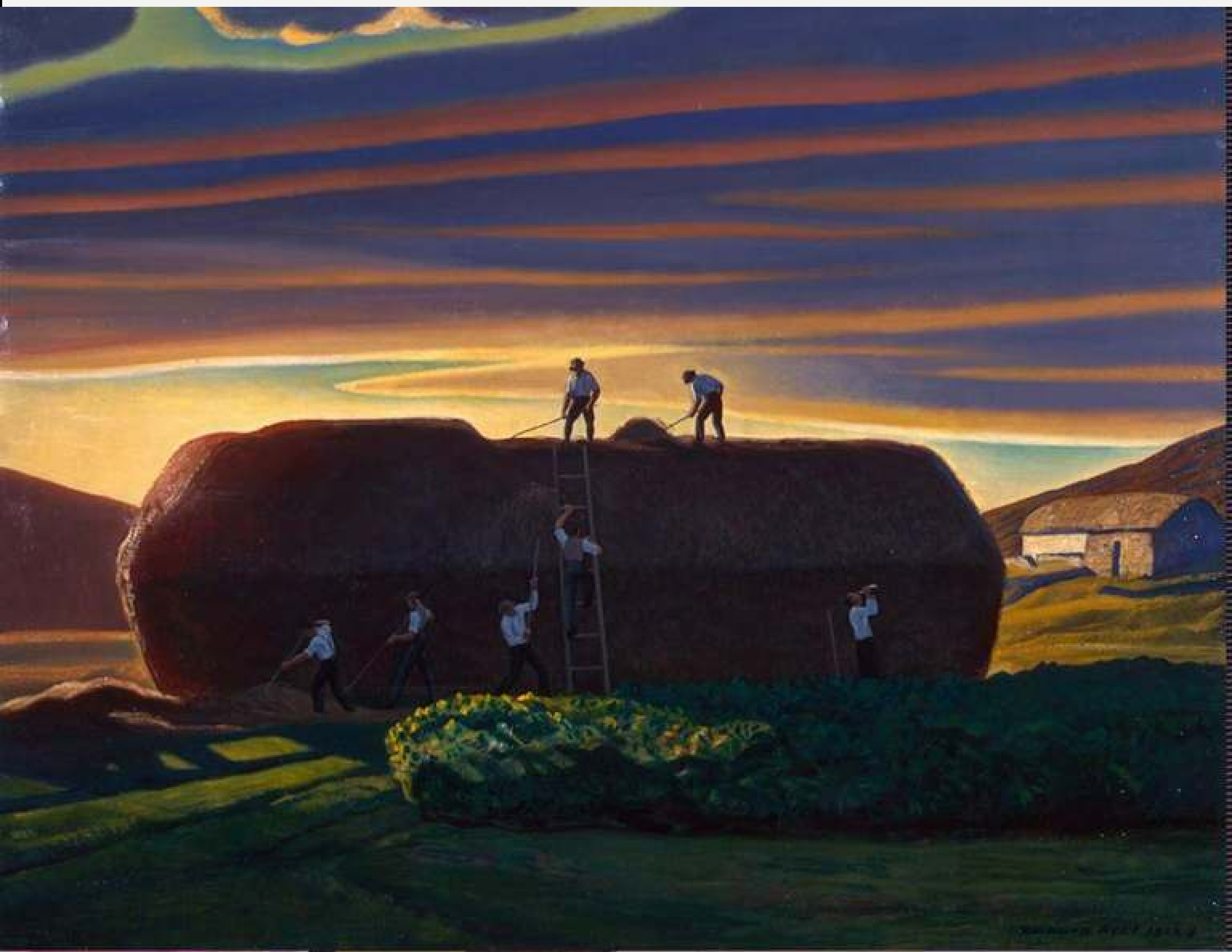


Kent's stylized rendering of the sunset sky in *Dan Ward's Stack: Ireland* (1926-27) adds an element of drama to this scene of quiet labor. Kent used photographs he took during his stay in Ireland in 1926 to help complete the painting.

Rockwell Kent was a master of bucolic landscapes, but his contentious politics earned him the nickname

"The Stormy Petrel of American Art"

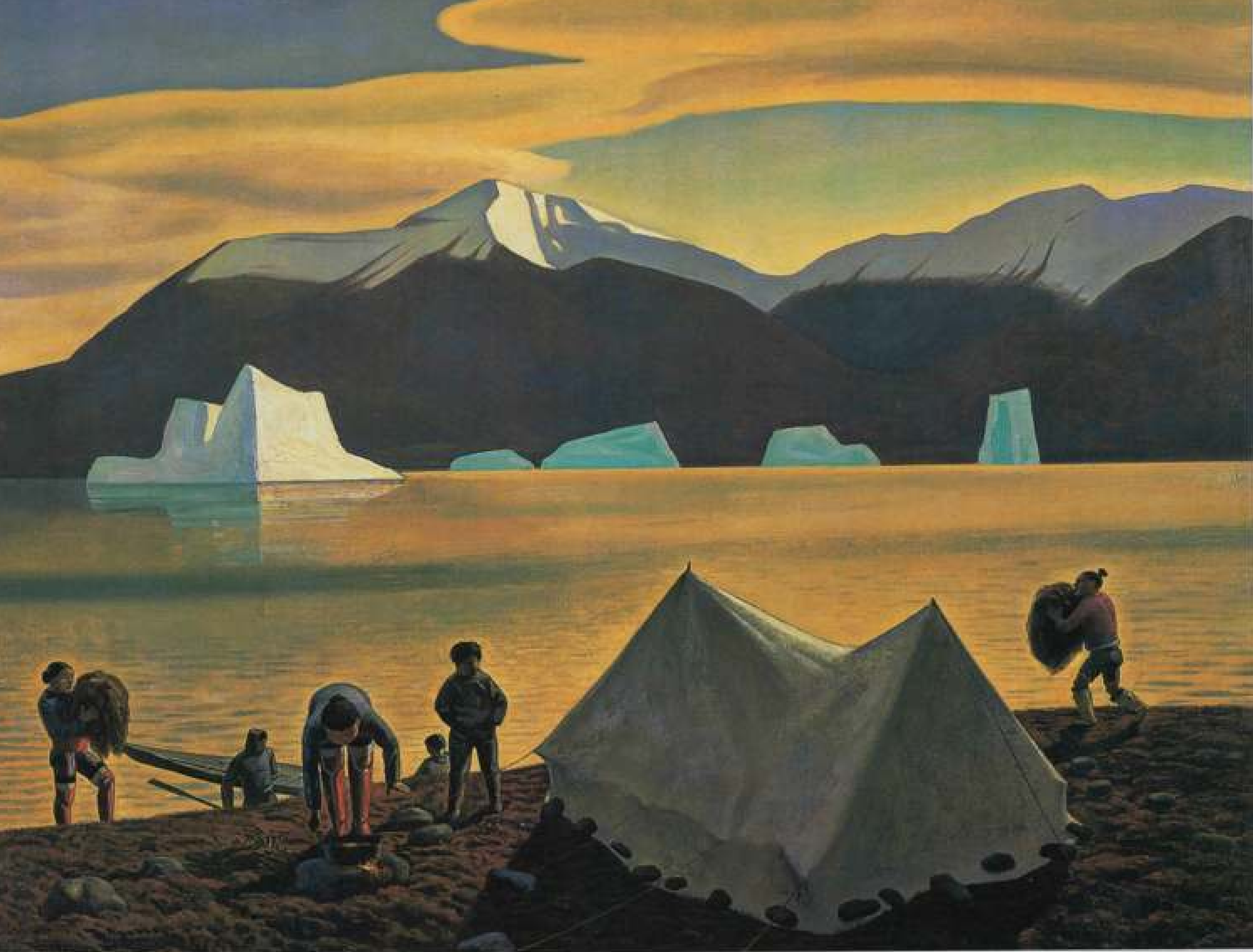
BY SCOTT R. FERRIS

INVOKING THE MEMORY OF LEIF ERIKSSON'S EXPLORATIONS nearly a thousand years before, American artist Rockwell Kent set sail in July 1929 from North America to Greenland across Davis Strait. By mid-July, after tacking their cutter *Direction* for ten days through unpredictable and often foul weather, Kent and his two shipmates anchored for the night in Karajak Fjord, on the southwestern coast of Greenland. By morning, as Kent later recorded in his autobiography, *It's Me O Lord*, the temporary calm was broken by gale-force winds: "Against the hurricane that woke us, that, sweeping downwards from the lofty plateau of the inland ice and ricocheting from the canyon's walls, beat us with rights and lefts, we could do nothing but, like a groggy fighter, hang onto the ropes, our anchor ropes. And once the anchors failed to hold, the game was up. Within a half hour of the time we struck, *Direction* sank."

The three hapless sailors salvaged as much of their personal gear as they could and made for the safety of shore. Kent, more than twice the age of his companions, loaded a pack with provisions, maps, a boat compass, tent, Primus stove and cooking utensils, and trekked nearly 36 hours over rugged terrain in search of help. He finally made contact with an Inuit fisherman, and the two managed to communicate using mimed gestures. Within hours they arrived in Narsaq to orchestrate recovery efforts. Kent's shipmates quickly made arrangements to return home, but the disaster had exhilarated Kent. Rescuing what paints, brushes and remnants of canvas he could from the wreck, and augmenting this with burlap, duck and lumber purchased in the larger settlement of Godthaab, Kent was, he later wrote, "soon well equipped to go to work as if no mishap had occurred. . . ." For the next two months he painted constantly in a natural outpouring of his enthusiasm for all that he beheld in that "vast wonderland of sea and mountain."

Rockwell Kent was born on June 21, 1882, into an affluent Victorian family. His father, Rockwell Kent, Sr., was a partner in a prominent New York City law firm and an entrepreneur in Central American mining investments. His mother, Sara Ann Holgate, was the niece and surrogate daughter of James and Josephine Banker—one of New York's first millionaire families.

The Kents' earliest days as a family were divided between the fashionable lower Hudson River valley, Long Island and New York City,



In *Campers: North Greenland* (1932), the artist captured the rugged austerity, unique light and local culture of the northern latitudes.

SUSAN MUNIAK, SCOTT R. FERRIS AND CHAMELEON BOOKS/NATIONAL GALLERY OF ARMENIA

each home brimming with cultural amenities. That comfortable life, however, came to an abrupt end in 1887 when Kent Sr. died of typhoid fever, contracted on a business trip to Honduras. This left Sara with the sole responsibility of raising Rockwell Jr., who was only 5, a second son, Douglas, and a daughter, Dorothy, born not long after Kent Sr.'s death. With the support of Sara's mother and sister, Jo, and the erratic financial assistance of "Aunt Josie" Banker, the young Kent family tottered between the upper-middle-class comforts they had enjoyed and the genteel poverty to which they had become re-stationed.

It was during these tumultuous years that Kent was exposed to and struggled with the discrepancies between social classes. "When I was a young fellow," he later recalled, "I was very much disturbed by there being some people with lots of money and lots of people with no money." Predictably, when he participated in his first election in 1904, he voted for the Socialist party candidate, Eugene V. Debs. In Kent's own words, he measured "being an artist and a writer by being heart and soul a revolutionist." His determination and outspokenness on issues he held close to his heart earned him the epithet "the stormy petrel of American art."

Few other artists in the history of 20th-century American art have received such praise and nearly equal condemnation. For some his name may conjure up bold, sweeping landscape paintings of Maine's Monhegan Island, austere renderings of Greenland or spiritually invested depictions of New York State's Adirondack Mountains. Others may recall his dramatic visual interpretations of *Moby Dick*, *Candide*, *Beowulf* and the works of Chaucer and Shakespeare. Westinghouse, General Electric, Steinway & Sons, Sherwin-Williams and Rolls Royce all capitalized on his renown and creativity. And his support of and participation in innumerable unions and causes, such as the International Workers Order and the American Artists' Congress, gave rise to the 1937 *New Yorker* ditty, "That day will mark a precedent, which brings no news of Rockwell Kent."

Twenty-nine years after his death Kent has returned with a vengeance. Not since the height of his pre-McCarthyism popularity has so much

of his work been available to the public. His own writings—*Wilderness: A Journal of Quiet Adventure in Alaska*, *Voyaging Southward from the Strait of Magellan* and *N by E* among them—have been reprinted, and several new volumes on his work have been recently released.

Now, for the first time in 40 years, two paintings from the "Great Kent Collection"—a group of works that the artist gave to the Soviet Union in 1960—have returned to their homeland to be showcased in the exhibition "The View from Asgaard: Rockwell Kent's Adirondack Legacy." On display at the Adirondack Museum in Blue Mountain Lake, New York, through October 15, the show—which features luminous landscapes, sociopolitically infused graphics, advertising art, and memorabilia of the artist's life on the Adirondack dairy farm he called Asgaard—offers an unprecedented overview of Kent's later years.

Two other exhibitions are also currently on view: "Commercialism and Idealism: Bringing Art to Advertising" can be seen through December at the Rockwell Kent Gallery on the Plattsburgh campus of the State University of New York, and "Distant Shores: The Odyssey of Rockwell Kent"—which features seven additional paintings from the former U.S.S.R.—is at the Norman Rockwell Museum in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, through October 29 and will travel to museums in Florida, Illinois and Alaska before closing in September 2001.

Kent's first love was painting. His work in book illustration, advertising and architectural rendering, and in designing fabrics, metalware, jewelry, murals and ceramic patterns, was primarily a means to make a living, as were his forays into dairy farming, carpentry, home construction and lobster harvesting. Though he studied architecture at Columbia University, he had a lengthier tutelage in the fine arts under some of the most prominent artists of the day. Kent credited William Merritt Chase with having taught him to use his eyes, Robert Henri with encouraging him to enlist his heart and Kenneth Hayes Miller with urging him to use his head.

For Kent, the Nordic sagas "opened the gate upon that highway" which led to Greenland and Alaska.

In one of Kent's early paintings, *Fishermen*, one sees the Impressionist handling of paint that Chase and Henri employed in their own work, but one also glimpses Kent's concern for the human condition, a trait that had been inspired by Henri.

Of all of Kent's mentors, however, it was perhaps Abbott Thayer (SMITHSONIAN, April 1999) who made the most lasting impression on the young artist. As an early apprentice, Kent aided Thayer with his work on concealing coloration. In return, Thayer provided Kent with what the artist considered to be "one of the richest cultural experiences" of his life. In the primitive but hearty surroundings of Thayer's Dublin, New Hampshire, home, Kent participated in debates on the writings of Tolstoy, Emerson, Darwin and Thoreau, listened to German lieder and was introduced to the Nordic sagas. For Kent, these tales "opened the gate upon that highway to the North which led at last to Greenland and Alaska." It was also at Thayer's home that Kent met the elder artist's niece Kathleen Whiting, whom he would eventually marry.

Kathleen was tall, soft-spoken and beautiful. Kent believed that she "revealed the depths of her emotional nature only when, overcoming her shyness and her natural modesty," she sang and played the piano. A devoted mother, Kathleen remained loyal to the marriage despite Kent's open infidelities.

Eventually, though, Kent's promiscuous behavior, lust for life and tendency to uproot his family in search of his own goals wore on Kathleen, and the couple divorced when their fifth and youngest child, Gordon, was little more than a toddler. Kathleen was the only wife with whom Kent would have children. Yet she, like subsequent wives Frances Lee and Shirley "Sally" Johnstone—a woman the age of Kent's youngest daughter—was expected to serve at Kent's beck and call. Frances and Sally were also in charge of secretarial duties and of hosting the household's baronial parties. All in addition to keeping house and garden on a constant pre-sunrise to post-sunset schedule.

Throughout his life, Kent (pictured here c. 1905) sought inspiration for his canvases in nature.

Not unlike Thoreau, Kent found

ARCHIVES OF AMERICAN ART, SI, ROCKWELL KENT PAPERS; PP. 78, 79 SUSAN MUNIAK, SCOTT R. FERRIS AND CHAMELEON BOOKS/STATE HERMITAGE MUSEUM, ST. PETERSBURG

An early masterpiece, *The Road Roller* (1909) was painted during one of Kent's stays in Dublin township, New Hampshire.

his "Walden" in the wilderness—in sojourns in Newfoundland, Alaska, Tierra del Fuego and Greenland. His trip to Alaska, he wrote, was "in no sense an artist's junket in search of picturesque material for brush or pencil, but the flight to freedom . . . the pilgrimage of a philosopher in quest of Happiness!" Over a period of seven months during 1918-19, Kent, with his 8-year-old son Rockwell III, lived on Fox Island off the coast of Seward, Alaska. There they were secluded from all but the island's sole permanent resident, Lars Olson, and his goats. Their only contact to civilization—Seward, roughly 12 miles away—was reached by means of a sometimes motor-driven, often muscle-powered dory. On their island paradise, father and son kept busy by exploring the mountainous terrain, and cutting and splitting wood to fuel their stove. They bathed by warming themselves by the stove and then rolling outside in the snow. Young Rockwell drew, and wrote letters to his family back home. His father kept him schooled with required readings and entertained him at bedtime with excerpts from such tales as *Robinson Crusoe*. In addition to writing, painting and drawing, Kent, too, read widely from their library, including volumes by William Blake and Nietzsche—works that critics believe influenced his art. Some of the paintings he produced during this period, such as *North Wind* and *Superman*, portray soaring figures that represent the primordial vitality he experienced in the wild and are meant, according to Kent, to symbolize such concepts as "Energy" and "Will." Other canvases, especially his pure landscapes, proclaim his reverence for nature.

During Kent's absence Kathleen had been forced to borrow money to support the family. But a financially successful exhibition of Kent's Alaska drawings at the Knoedler Gallery in New York provided a substantial influx of cash. The purchase of a home in Vermont, however, again drained the family's resources.

For years Kent lived the precarious life of the starving artist and was dependent upon aid from various outside sources. One such supporter was collector Duncan Phillips, who wished to create a "Kent unit," featuring works from each of the artist's adventures, in his new gallery—now the Phillips Collection—in Washington, D.C. Toward this goal Phillips at one point offered to provide Kent

PHILLIPS COLLECTION, WASHINGTON, DC

with a stipend of $300 a month in exchange for first choice of two paintings per year. Over the course of their nine-year relationship, Phillips acquired a number of works, including the masterpieces *North Wind* and *The Road Roller* (opposite).

The Knoedler show of Kent's Alaska drawings proved the marketability of his artwork and convinced a few well-to-do friends to take stock, literally, in the artist's abilities. Thus was born a unique venture—put together by Kent and his friend Carl Zigrosser, a renowned authority on prints—to incorporate the artist. Rockwell Kent, Inc., provided Kent with enough income to secure his household while he got to work. Within two years his income was such that he was able to pay back his investors with a dividend.

For Kent, success begot success. His friend George Putnam published *Wilderness: A Journal of Quiet Adventure in Alaska*, which, according to the British paper *The New Statesman*, was "easily the most remarkable book to come out of America since *Leaves of Grass*." A second showing of Kent's artwork at Knoedler, "The Alaska Paintings," was both a critical and financial triumph. These accolades brought renewed attention to his work as a painter and opened the door to his careers as an illustrator and adventure writer. With change in his purse and the end of his marriage to Kathleen in sight, Kent sought a more permanent "flight to freedom" and the beginning of a new life.

Within a year of his divorce from Kathleen in the summer of 1925, Kent met a young divorcée, Frances Lee, at a luncheon party at the home of mutual friends. Kent was enamored with Frances and immediately began courting her. In his bid for her hand, Kent gave her stationery that he had had engraved with the initials "F. L. K." It was a gift she could not refuse.

In 1927 the newlyweds purchased an abandoned 257-acre parcel of farmland south of the village of Ausable Forks, New York. There, in full view of Whiteface Mountain, the couple conceived plans for their new home, for which Kent drew up the blueprints. They moved in the following year and eventually added a studio, dairy barn and numerous support buildings. Kent named this now-operational dairy farm Asgaard, Norse for "home of the gods." It was here that Kent found his "Paradise," the final home where he chose "to spend eternity." Asgaard was close enough to the hub of Kent's livelihood, New York City, to easily maintain business, yet far enough away to allow him his freedom.

> *"Sometimes (in spite of the physical evidence) I suspect he is not a person at all, but an Organization."*

Kent was a man of boundless energy. His friend, the poet and anthologist Louis Untermeyer, considered him to be "the most versatile man alive. . . . Sometimes (in spite of the physical evidence) I suspect he is not a person at all, but an Organization. . . ."

Kent traveled to Greenland three times after moving to Asgaard and wrote three books about those travels, two of which are as much an anthropological record of 1930s Inuit life as they are the story of their gallivanting hero. The artwork he created abroad kept him knee-deep in exhibitions for years to come. At Asgaard the Kents hosted elaborate dinner parties that usually extended into the wee hours of the morning, at which time Kent would begin his tireless daily regime of work. The guest list for the Kents' parties included many of New York City's socialites—the Cowdins, Pulitzers and Putnams—his fellow Arctic enthusiasts Peter Freuchen and Vilhjalmur Stefansson, and such notables as actor Paul Robeson, writer John Dos Passos and singer Pete Seeger.

Kent's artwork, especially his Adirondack paintings, radiates with pride in his personal accomplishments and with his nationalistic fervor. Whereas *Adirondacks*, with its grand view toward Whiteface Mountain from the vantage point of an abandoned farm, can be interpreted as representing the seed from which Kent's Asgaard grew, *Asgaard's Meadows* (pp. 86-87) seems to represent his farm in full blossom—meadows are pruned and an abundance of Jersey cattle graze. *America*, on the other hand, depicts civilization's reach into the "New World." In Kent's *America* we see a small ridge of land—jutting up from a vast sea of broad valleys and endless templed hills—on which

Kent turned out numerous wood-block illustrations and prints. *Workers of the World, Unite!* is from 1937.

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

Kent's publicity stunt worked. Newspapers all over the country covered the story.

When Kent first tried to ship *My Daughter Clara* (1914) from wartime Newfoundland to his dealer in New York City, Canadian officials, convinced the painting concealed secret information meant for the Germans, blocked its passage.

SUSAN MUNIAK, SCOTT R. FERRIS AND CHAMELEON BOOKS/PUSHKIN STATE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, MOSCOW

a pioneer family is bathed in hallowed sunset light. Robert Henri once aptly observed that Kent's canvases were the "proclamation of the rights of man, of the dignity of man, of the dignity of creation."

The artwork that is on display in "The View from Asgaard" demonstrates Kent's long commitment to realism as well as his romantic and social-realist tendencies. He was at once a regionalist, depicting the American scene around him, and a modernist, creating compositions that featured simplified, stylized forms and a reduced palette not unlike those of his contemporaries Edward Hopper, Arthur Dove and Georgia O'Keeffe.

Kent's dedication to brotherhood and world peace is perhaps best conveyed in his 1944 mural *On Earth, Peace*, originally commissioned by the Air Transport Association as an easel painting for the House Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce. Once Kent saw the 16-by-11-foot arched niche in the committee room, however, he offered to decorate it instead for the same $2,500 fee. The mural depicts cars, buses, boats, trains and airplanes in a landscape that reaches out to the horizon. Kent even included his beloved Asgaard Farm. But the overwhelming element in the artist's painting is four angels hovering above, spreading bounty and peace to all corners of the world—Kent's vision of peace for a world caught up in a protracted and devastating world war.

As *On Earth, Peace* espoused Kent's concerns for world harmony, his 1937 murals *Mail Service in the Tropic and Arctic Territories of the United States* dramatized his devotion to human rights. The two panels, mounted on both sides of a hallway entrance in what is now the Ariel Rios Federal Building in Washington, D.C., illustrate the far reaches of the United States mail service, from Alaska to Puerto Rico. On the left we see Inuit sledge drivers bringing mail to a pilot (who bears an uncanny resemblance to the artist) for delivery, presumably, to Puerto Rico. On the right, a postal carrier on horseback delivers that mail to eagerly awaiting Puerto Rican citizens. Kent purposefully draws attention to a group of four women by exaggerating their expressions of surprise following their reading of a letter. The letter, which is written in an Alaskan Inuit dialect, translates: "To the peoples of Puerto Rico, our friends: Go ahead, Let us change chiefs. That alone can make us equal and free"—a direct reference to the Puerto Rican Nationalist independence movement.

Kent had written the letter in Inuit as a ploy calculated to attract attention to that cause. To that end, he had enlisted the help of his friend Vilhjalmur Stefansson and a newspaper reporter by the name of Ruby Black. Black wrote of endlessly searching for someone who could translate the letter when at last she came upon the renowned Arctic explorer Stefansson. Kent's publicity stunt worked. Newspapers all over the country covered the story. Embarrassed conservative Puerto Rican politicians and employees of the U.S. Treasury Department—which had commissioned the work—scurried to denounce Kent's actions. "My simple little trick," Kent stated, "has given the Nationalist movement more front-page publicity than was accorded to the Ponce Massacre. . . . " (Eighteen Nationalists had died and more than 100 had been wounded when police fired into a crowd of demonstrators on March 21, 1937.)

By the 1950s Kent was totally immersed in the political upheavals of the day. His call for recognizing human rights throughout our society, his pro-Communist and premature anti-Fascist activities during the Span-

Asgaards's Meadows, part of the Great Kent Collection given to the U.S.S.R

ish Civil War, his support of more than 80 unions and causes, his endorsements of Henry Wallace and of the American Labor Party, and his steadfast belief in socialism as a means of curing our social ills resulted in the boycott of his dairy business in 1948 and ignited his prolonged legal battle with the U.S. Department of State for his right to a passport. Later that year he mounted an unsuccessful campaign as the American Labor Party candidate for a seat in Congress.

In the summer of 1953, when Kent was 71 years old, he began making plans to disseminate a large portion of his own artwork and manuscripts from what he "amusedly termed" the Great Kent Collection. He personally met with Wendell Hadlock, the director of the William A. Farnsworth Library and Art Museum in Rockland, Maine, about an exhibition of his work for the following summer. This discussion led him to believe that he had also found a home for his collection. But following a summons for Kent to appear before Senator Joseph McCarthy's Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, the once convivial atmosphere initially shared between Hadlock and Kent disintegrated, and the artist's hopes of giving his collection to an American museum evaporated.

Four years later, in honor of his 75th birthday, Kent was invited to the Soviet Union to celebrate the event and to become the first American artist to be given a solo exhibition in that country. Though he was still embroiled in litigation with the State Department over his passport and could not attend, he organized the shipment of 55 canvases and approximately 163 graphic works for the exhibition. While the show was on its five-city tour, the U.S. Supreme Court handed down the decision that Kent and every American was entitled to a

passport; immediate travel plans allowed him and his third wife, Sally, to catch up with the exhibition during its stay in Kiev. The overwhelming support and friendliness extended to the couple during their visit encouraged the Kents to give their "Great Kent Collection"—80 paintings and more than 700 graphic and literary works—to the people of the Soviet Union. On November 16, 1960, in a ceremony in Moscow, Kent stated, "I can only hope that the American people, who have often shown their liking for my work as a painter, realizing that their access to it is hindered by institutional and governmental control, will understand the compelling motives of my gift."

For years Kent dashed off whimsical drawings for *Vanity Fair* under the pseudonym William Hogarth, Jr.

Following Kent's bequest to the Soviet Union, he continued to paint from his home at Asgaard. It was that view, "westward and heavenward to the high ridge of Whiteface, northward to the northern limits of the mountains, southward to their highest peaks," from which he drew his inspiration to create such radiant canvases as *Cloud Shadows* and *Winter Sunrise, Whiteface Mountain*. He also resurrected for publication the diary of his second trip to Greenland (*Rockwell Kent's Greenland Journal*), released the tales of his 1968 return to Newfoundland (*After Long Years*), and continued to work on an update of his autobiography—which to this day has yet to be published.

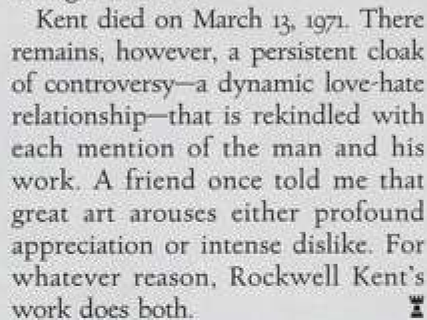
The Kents made numerous trips to the U.S.S.R. and Eastern Europe and often brought with them additional gifts for their Soviet friends. In 1967 they returned to Moscow for Kent to accept the Lenin Peace Prize.

The following year, at the invitation of Premier Joseph Smallwood, the Kents traveled to Newfoundland. In 1914 Kent had moved his family to Newfoundland in search of the "stark grandeur" that inspired his creativity. He renovated an abandoned house, painted, and hiked the hillsides, singing German folk songs. Suspicious neighbors began rumors that he was a spy, concealing charts of coastal fortifications within his paintings and maintaining radio contact, regarding refueling, with German U-boats. When the villagers turned their backs on him and community officials sought his expulsion, Kent responded in a typically brash manner by feeding their suspicions. On one occasion he placed a sign above the doorway of his studio that was decorated with the German imperial eagle and the words "Bomb Shop, Wireless Station, Chart Room." The Kents were ordered out of Newfoundland in 1915. Fifty-three years later, Kent returned to the province as an honored guest of the government to receive an official apology for the wrong that had been done to him.

Throughout his later years Kent's health deteriorated. In 1962 he had suffered a stroke that had paralyzed his left side, and in 1965 a pacemaker was implanted after his heart began to fail. Four years later lightning caused a fire that destroyed his Adirondack home and most of its contents, including some artwork and a life's worth of memorabilia. Fortunately, most of his art was either in his studio, which was a distance away from the main house, or in a gallery in New York City. At the time, 50 cartons of Kent's papers had been readied for shipment to the Archives of American Art, now at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. Some of these papers were destroyed, while others still bear the telling effects of the conflagration.

Always the fighter, Kent set about drawing up plans for a new house the morning after the fire. He later wrote a friend, "one can't start life again at eighty-seven and hope to have much time for rest." Sally Kent recalled a similar expression of her husband's desire to live life to its fullest: on a radio interview, asked if he had accomplished all that he had set out to do, Kent replied, "I look back over my life, and see my one little wandering track and realize all I haven't done. Is what I've done enough? Lord no!"

Kent died on March 13, 1971. There remains, however, a persistent cloak of controversy—a dynamic love-hate relationship—that is rekindled with each mention of the man and his work. A friend once told me that great art arouses either profound appreciation or intense dislike. For whatever reason, Rockwell Kent's work does both.



Scott R. Ferris, the author of two books on Kent, served as guest curator for "The View from Asgaard" and is currently compiling a catalogue raisonné of the artist's paintings.

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