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The Lively Poster Arts of Rockwell Kent

By Eliot H. Stanley

Eliot H. Stanley holds an honors degree in history from Harvard University and a law degree from George Washington University. For several years, he has written and spoken about the art and life of Rockwell Kent. He chairs the American steering committee for a proposed 1992 national tour of artworks given by Kent to the USSR.

The American artist Rockwell Kent (1882–1971) is best known as our pre-eminent book illustrator of the 1920s and 1930s. Most who know his work recall the vivid illustrations for Melville's *Moby Dick* (1930), or scenes of arctic adventure from Kent's own *Wilderness* (1920) and *N by E* (1930). Others may be familiar with his delicate and seductive drawings for Voltaire's *Candide* (1928) or Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* (1931). In all, he contributed illustrations for over 140 books, of which about 25 were authored by him.

In addition to his primary work in the book arts, Kent saw himself first and foremost as a painter. As in other areas of work, his output was prodigious—well over 300 major canvases and countless smaller oils and watercolors. Only now in the second decade after his death are his paintings attracting substantial prices; that the oils never sold well, despite an early favorable reception by critics, forced him by 1914–1915 into an area where there was a market—graphics. Few of his paintings, which at their best are increasingly compared to Winslow Homer's seascapes, resemble the powerful and fine styling he gave to the graphic arts, of which book illustrations are the best known and poster designs the least well documented. Other graphic arts by Kent, such as prints, advertising art, and miscellaneous decorative arts (from textiles to tombstones), have been studied to some extent.¹

For this article, we shall define a poster as a special form of print media employing visual design and/or text whose object is to communicate an idea or sensation to a public audience. A poster is usually of sufficient size to be seen and understood from a distance (to be "posted" or "boarded") and usually is printed in sufficient quantity to achieve mass distribution (although some posters made for the art trade appear initially as signed/limited editions). The ideas or images expressed on posters may be political, commercial, commemorative, or purely artistic; the earliest ones in this country were circus advertisements.

As was the case with a number of other well-known artists of this century,² Kent explored the artistic and polemical possibilities of the poster as early as World

1. The most scholarly work is Dan Burne Jones, *The Prints of Rockwell Kent: A Catalogue Raisonné* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1974). References in the text to DBJ (plus number) refer to Kent plates found therein.

2. For example, see James Montgomery Flagg's famous 1917 poster *I Want You for the U.S. Army*, showing Uncle Sam pointing at the viewer. Norman Rockwell, famed for *Saturday Evening Post* covers, also designed World War Two posters.

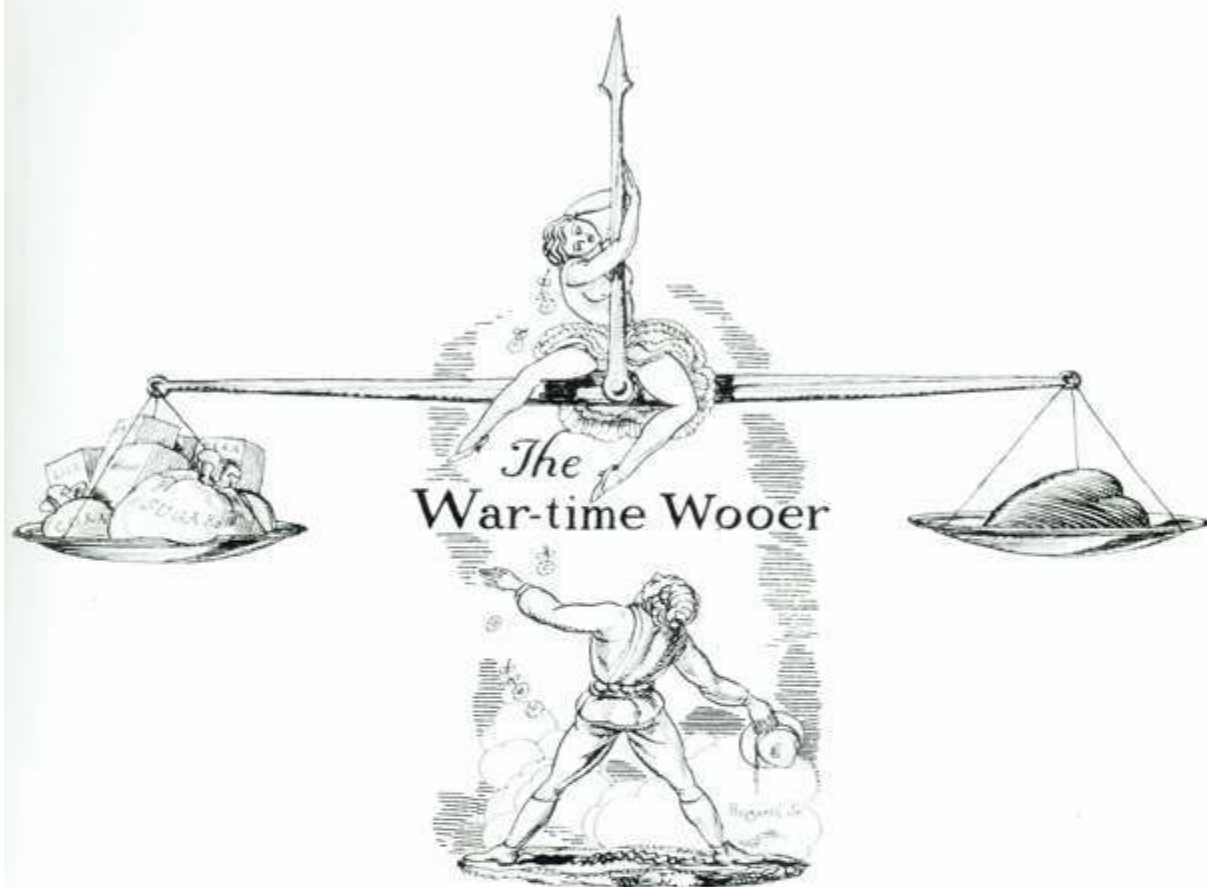


Fig. 1. Rockwell Kent, *The War-time Wooer*, poster study, ink on paper, 7¼ x 10½", ca. 1917–1918. Stanley Collection, Portland, Maine. Photograph by J. York.

War One. Both of the rare examples shown here (figs. 1 and 2) are signed with Kent's *nom de brosse* "Hogarth, Jr.," which he used in his early career to designate lighter works, using "Rockwell Kent" on more serious work such as paintings. No earlier examples of his poster work have been found, nor is it known whether either of these designs was actually submitted to a government office or other potential sponsor. No finished printing has been found.

At the outbreak of World War One, Kent was already thirty-five—too old to fight but still young enough to pursue romance. *The War-time Wooer* (fig. 1) sought to capture the conflicting demands of wartime austerity, where youth's natural preoccupation with romance must be weighed against the staples and necessities of life. At least that is one interpretation of a message not altogether clear. Thus, this drawing violates one of the tenets of good poster design: clarity and simplicity of message.

The other World War One untitled poster study (fig. 2) appears to suggest that the young soldier must put aside the attachments of loved ones and the demands of education to take up arms. The symbolism of the walled city in the background, which may be a university town, is not clear. Both *The War-time Wooer* and the other World War One design show the early strength of Kent's drawing ability, the former having a cartoon-like quality in its clean and direct presentation, and the latter, which is a printer's proof attributed to Egmont Arens of the Flying Stag Press, revealing the light/dark contrasts which lead to Kent's later mastery of woodcut technique.

Fig. 2. Rockwell Kent, untitled poster study, ink on paper, printer's proof from drawing, 7 x 8½", ca. 1917–1918. Stanley Collection, Portland, Maine. Photograph by B. Kennett.



Kent's affinity for socialist political ideals was already well developed at the outset of World War One. An important American organ of socialist thought and art was *The Masses* magazine (1911–1917), which featured the artwork of several of Kent's close associates.³ Although Kent did not contribute artwork to *The Masses*, its dominant artistic style (of the crayon drawing in the Daumier tradition) appears to have influenced his developing graphic technique. The poster design in figure 2 and his 1921 poster for the Junior Art Patrons of America (fig. 3) are both reproductions from pen, brush, and ink drawings but have a strong "woodcut" feel.

In the case of the Junior Art Patrons poster, Kent first made the design to serve as a trademark for a group headed by Marie Sterner, an early promoter of his paintings in New York. The drawing was titled either *Harvester* or *The Reaper* and appeared on the group's stationery, as the cover for the exhibition catalogue, and even on huge banners Kent designed to hang outside the exhibition hall. Here we see more of Kent's lettering than in *The War-time Wooer*. Kent felt strongly that lettering style, if poorly done, could ruin a good poster; here his text lines lend balance and strength to the overall design.

The classical styling of *Harvester* carried over into Kent's design for a 1924 Carnegie Institute art exhibition poster: an angel looks out benignly from a lofty perch above a mountainscape, in the attitude of a slightly bored goddess.⁴ The Carnegie poster also marks the first known use of more than two colors in a Kent poster—the angel's hair and skin are a sanguine brown, her flowing

►
Fig. 3. Rockwell Kent, *Harvester*, photolithographic poster on paper from drawing, 13 x 19", 1921. Stanley Collection, Portland, Maine. Photograph by J. York.

3. Among Kent's associates who contributed art were John Sloan, George Bellows, and Boardman Robinson, all fellow members of the realist school influenced by the teaching of Robert Henri.

4. Copies of this poster are in both the Rockwell Kent Gallery, SUNY-Plattsburgh, New York, and the Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library.



Rockwell Kent - Vernunft 1921

1689 to 1921

FIRST

RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITION
of

AMERICAN ART

INAUGURATING THE JUNIOR ART PATRONS OF AMERICA
FINE ARTS BUILDING, 215 W. 57th
DAILY, MAY 7 to 21, Incl. EVE'S 9-11, SUNDAYS 3-6

gown white against a deep blue sky, with lettering below in the same red-brown ink as her hair.

The late Carl Zigrosser, in his foreword to Dan Burne Jones's *The Prints of Rockwell Kent*, wrote that Kent's work could be divided into three major phases: first, an "intense mystical period born of lonely spells in Newfoundland and Alaska," which lasted through the mid-1920s; second, a "documentary" period which extended to the mid-1930s in which he was preoccupied with his Greenland voyages and life in the Adirondacks, where he had settled in 1928; and finally, a "socially conscious" period which extended into the early 1950s artistically. Two posters which come from his middle period are the bucolic *We Sell Asgaard Dairy Milk* (fig. 4), a silkscreen advertisement for Kent's farm at AuSable Forks, New York, and the film poster *NANA* (1934), which advertised actress Anna Sten's portrayal. Zigrosser could have added that as a result of his outspoken political views, expressed both in art and public pronouncements, Kent was the American equivalent of a "banned person" the last twenty years of his life.

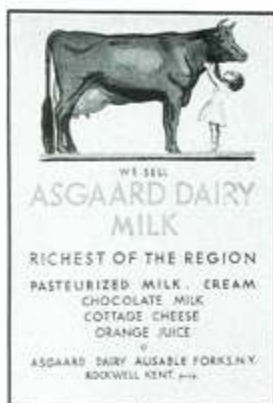


Fig. 4. Rockwell Kent, *We Sell*

***Asgaard Dairy Milk*, four-color**

silkscreen poster with fold-

stand on back, 11 x 17½",

ca. 1935. From Dan Burne

Jones, *The Prints of Rockwell*

Kent: A Catalogue Raisonné

(Chicago and London:

University of Chicago Press,

1974), plate 156, p. 159.

Photograph by H. Wise.

Two particular events helped to shape his social consciousness: the 1927 trial and execution of Sacco and Vanzetti in Massachusetts and the Spanish Civil War of the mid-1930s. The Sacco-Vanzetti trial led to one of Kent's best graphics, the haunting *August XXIII, MCMXXVII* (DBJ:13) (fig. 5), his first significant propaganda art. This was a small wood engraving of which 150 proofs were printed. It was not a poster design in origin but was quite important in Kent's effective use of elements which appear in his later poster work: the use of text to complement the central design and give a feeling of biblical gravity to the scene; the symbolic crucifixion theme with Christ's head on a pike; the three crosses on the backlit hill adding to the message that the executions violated God's justice; and the strong dark and light contrasts which mark his maturing graphic style. Kent was so outraged by the trial and executions that he withdrew an exhibition of paintings scheduled for the Worcester Museum and swore to have no further dealings with the state of Massachusetts.⁵

Just prior to the Spanish Civil War, Kent became caught up in a second New England drama: the embittered strike in 1935–1936 of the Vermont marble workers. Kent volunteered to chair a citizens' board of inquiry into conditions endured by workers and their families during the strike. From this came the artwork for a poster (fig. 6) and a report cover.⁶

Kent chose as text for the design a famous quote by Ethan Allen, who in 1775 had cited the "Great Jehovah and the Continental Congress" as sufficient authority to evict the British from Fort Ticonderoga. In the 1935 strike, the Procter Marble Company sought to evict workers and their families from company-owned housing—in winter. Kent wondered where Ethan Allen would have stood, were he still around. The design of the poster shows a gaunt, frightened worker's family, their household possessions in the snow. The pictorial aspect of this poster is well composed, though the dates and quote might require some explanation to audiences outside Vermont. Inasmuch as the design appeared as the report cover a month before the public meeting in New York announced by the poster, it is likely that Kent intended the first use primarily.

5. He relented later, designing the now-famous ceiling mural for the Cape Cinema, Dennis, Massachusetts.

6. John C. Lawson, *Strike of Vermont Marble Company Workers: Verbatim Report of Public Hearing, Town Hall, West Rutland, Vt., Feb. 29, 1936.*



Fig. 5. Rockwell Kent, *August XXIII, MCMXXVII*, wood engraving on maple, 3 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 4 $\frac{5}{8}$ ", 1927. From Rockwell Kent, *What is An American* (Los Angeles: Plantin Press, 1936), frontispiece. Photograph by B. Kennett.

Fig. 6. Rockwell Kent, *What Vermont Means to N.Y.*, photolithographic poster on poster stock from drawing, 14 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 22", 1936. Stanley Collection, Portland, Maine. Photograph by H. Wise.



The design is interesting as it relates to other graphics Kent did in 1936–1937. A 1936 lithograph, *And Now Where?* (DBJ:110), captures the same feeling of nameless despair found in the marble workers poster. The following year came the dramatic *Workers of the World, Unite!* (cover illustration) and *In the Year of Our Lord* (DBJ:112), both wood engravings. The latter has a similar composition to the Vermont poster—showing an adult female looking disconsolately to the left while comforting a child at her right side. Kent's "socially conscious" period had begun.

Workers of the World, Unite!, never used as a poster as far as can be determined, was if anything a natural design for one. It was very popular among pro-labor groups in the United States and abroad and appeared in Soviet publications.⁷ It was published initially as a 1937 cover for the *New Masses* magazine (1926–1948), spiritual successor to the original *The Masses* magazine of pre-World War One. Kent contributed numerous cover and interior illustrations to the *New Masses*, so that it could almost be said that as Daumier's style had dominated *The Masses*, Rockwell Kent's graphics came to epitomize the look of the *New Masses*. His first article in March 1936 concerned the Vermont marble workers' strike. Another cover illustration for the magazine was entitled *Celebrate Arkansas Centennial—End Peonage*; from that design came the first of another special kind of Kent graphic, the miniature poster or "propaganda stamp" (fig. 7). Previously, in 1932, he had made a postage stamp from a small wood engraving in Greenland—the smallest of his catalogued prints (DBJ:89) (fig. 8).

As early as August 1936, Kent began to write statements and articles for the *New Masses* about the Civil War in Spain. Groups were forming in the United States to provide aid to the elected government under siege by Franco's right-wing



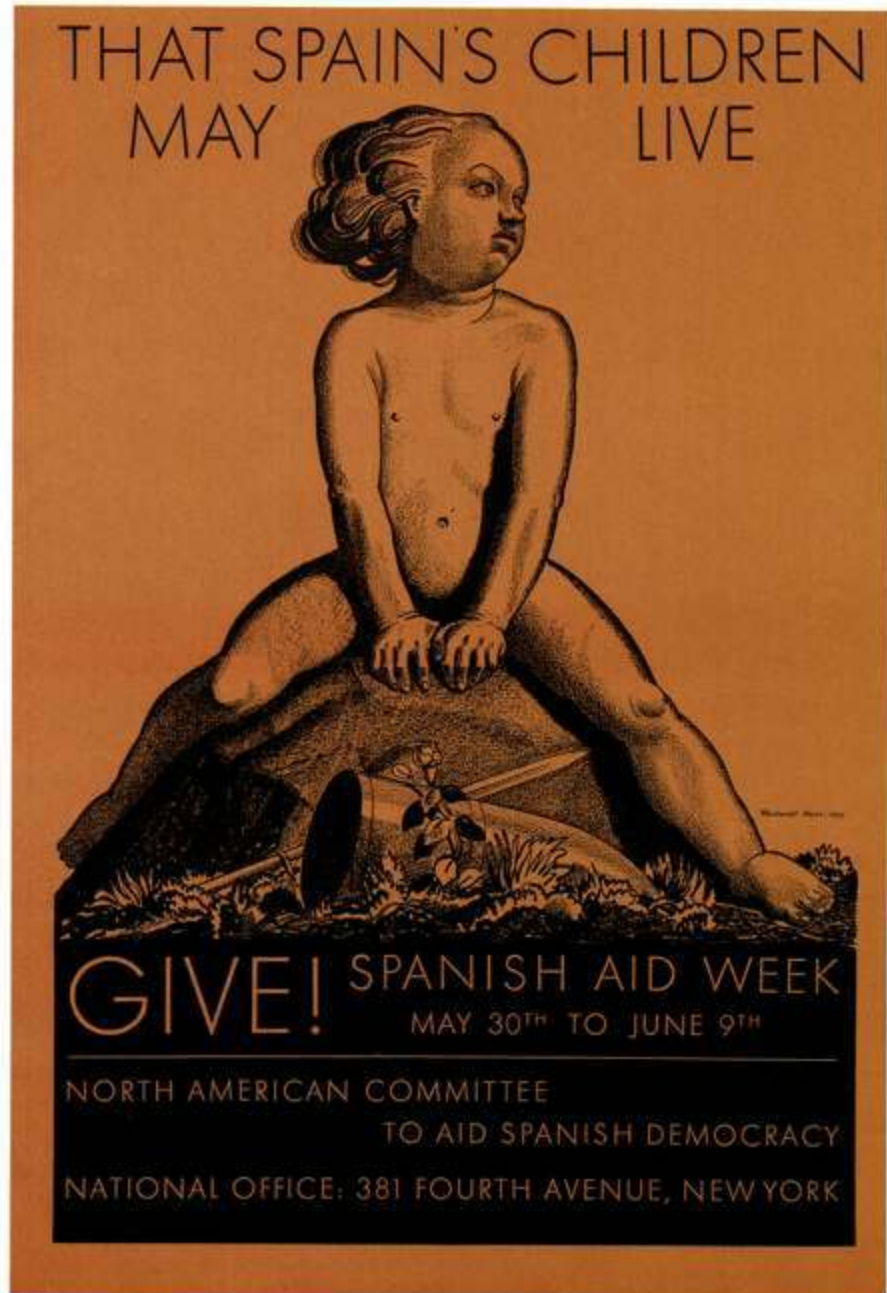
Fig. 7. Rockwell Kent, *Celebrate Arkansas Centennial—End Peonage*, printed reproduction of stamp for the Workers' Defense League, 1 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 1 $\frac{1}{8}$ ", 1936. From Rockwell Kent, *Later Bookplates and Marks* (New York: Pynson Printers, 1937), p. 75. Photograph by H. Wise.

7. For example, see Howard Fast, *May Day, 1947*, cover; also included as a print reproduction to commemorate Rockwell Kent's life by the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship, 1971, and in the Russian *Rockwell Kent* by Andrei Chegodaev (1963).



Fig. 8. Rockwell Kent,
Greenland Airmail Stamp,
wood engraving on maple,
1¼ x 1¼", 1932. Stanley
Collection, Portland, Maine.
Photograph by B. Kennett.

▶
Fig. 9. Rockwell Kent, *That Spain's Children May Live*,
photolithographic poster on
paper from drawing, 15½ x
22¼", 1937. Stanley Collection,
Portland, Maine. Photograph
by H. Wise.



falangist rebellion, and Kent became active in several.⁸ In 1937, he designed what has become his best-known poster image for the North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy: *That Spain's Children May Live* (fig. 9). Here he employs countersymbols—the juxtaposition of a naked, innocent, vulnerable child placed among the deadly implements of war, a bayonet and artillery shell.⁹ The child seems lost and uncomprehending of the danger at

8. Among those were the Medical Bureau and North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy; the Spanish Child Welfare Association of America, and the American Relief Ship for Spain, all of New York City.

9. See Gary Yanker, *Prop Art: Over 1000 Contemporary Political Posters* (New York: Darien House, 1972), p. 60ff. Countersymbolism involves the use of opposition symbols subordinated by more appealing protagonist symbols, as Kent accomplishes with the child rising above weapons of war.

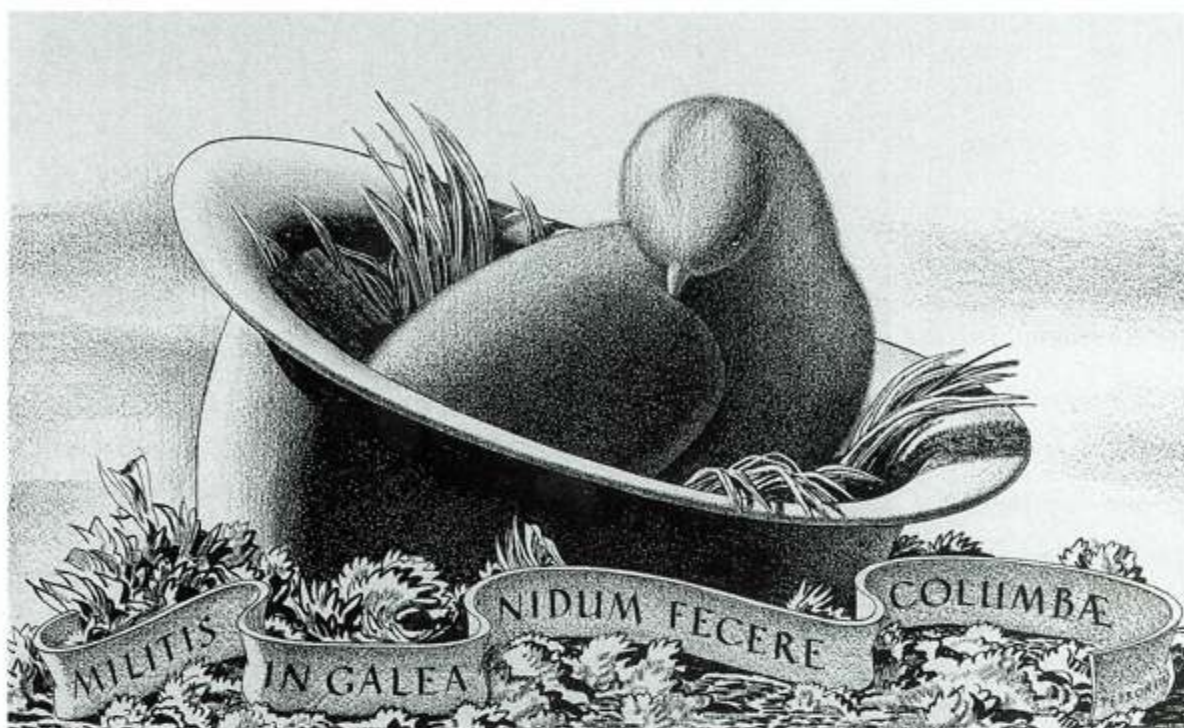


Fig. 10. Rockwell Kent, *Militis in Galea Nidum Fecere Columbae*, photolithograph of ink and tempera drawing on paper, 9½ x 16", 1938–1939. Stanley Collection, Portland, Maine. Photograph by J. York.

hand. Kent used countersymbolism in other works, among which were a tempera drawing *Militis in Galea Nidum Fecere Columbae* (1938–1939) (fig. 10) showing a dove nesting in an abandoned helmet; and *Heavy, Heavy Hangs Over Thy Head* (DBJ: 137), a 1946 lithograph and similar oil painting, with text part of the design as well, in which the innocent babe sleeps as a rat gnaws on the strap of the Damoclean shotgun overhead.

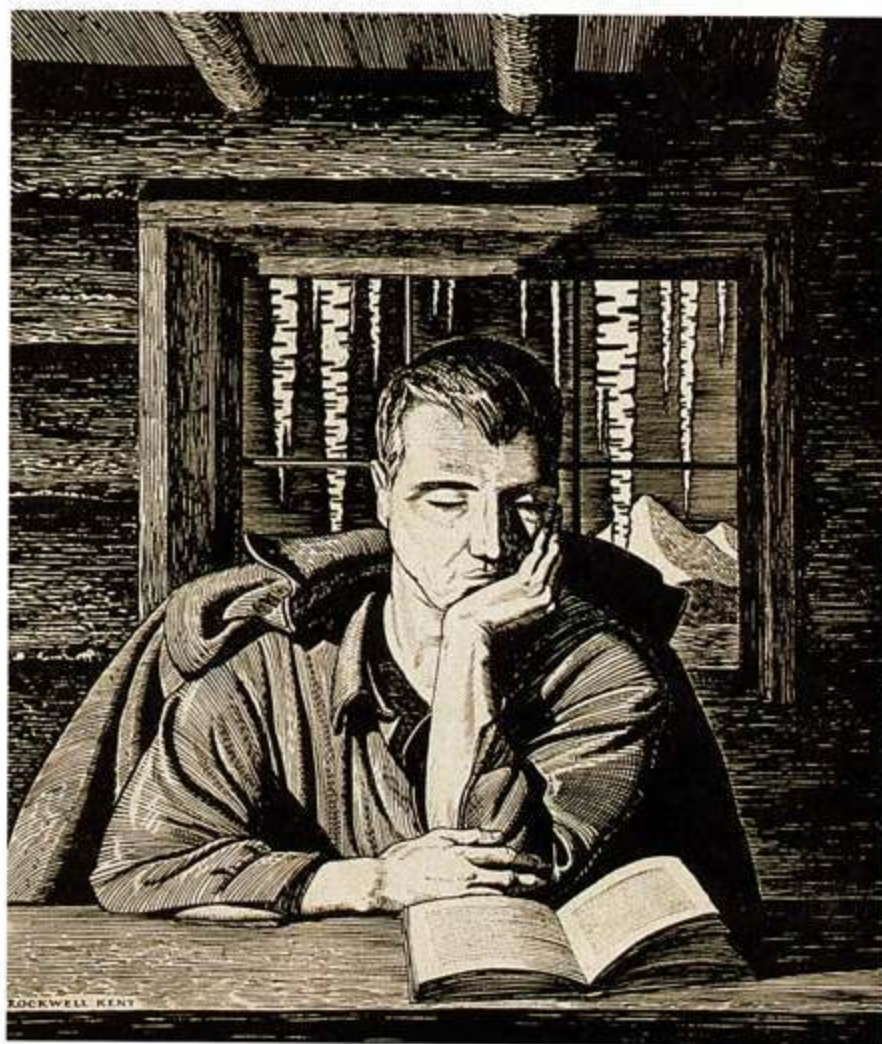
The Spanish Civil War also marked the end of innocence for many idealistic American socialists. For one thing, their ardent opposition to the United States's entry into European wars was sorely tested as they watched the Fascist states of Europe ganging up to destroy Spanish democracy. Kent worked tirelessly as public speaker and artist to argue the case for the Spanish loyalists; in April 1937 he gave a \$600 prize won from the National Academy of Design to the American Friends of Spanish Democracy, stating that "no artist counts upon prize money for the expenses of living. Every artist does count upon democracy for life."¹⁰ In April 1938, Kent wrote President Franklin Roosevelt urging repeal of the Neutrality Act, which the American Left saw as a barrier to effective relief efforts. "How long, for the sake of high-sounding verbal neutrality, are the American people to remain the practical allies of the enemies of all they stand for?" he asked.¹¹

In September 1938, Kent joined William Gropper and six other artists to set up easels around New York City and paint posters to aid the American Relief Ship

10. *New York Herald Tribune*, 6 April 1937.

11. "Spanish Causes 1937–38," letter to Roosevelt and other officials, 22 April 1938, Rockwell Kent Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Fig. 11. Rockwell Kent,
Books Make the Home, cover
of printed auction catalogue,
14 x 21" (original drawing), 1938.
Stanley Collection, Portland,
Maine. Photograph by
B. Kennett.



for Spain.¹² What became of the design Kent made at that time is unknown, although Columbia University has an undated sketch showing a child weeping at a tombstone, a warplane overhead. The epitaph reads:

In Memoriam
Mother, Father, Sister, Brother
†
God Help What's Left Of Us
Save the Children of Spain

Spanish relief was not Kent's only cause during the later 1930s. In 1938, he contributed a large drawing to benefit the National Committee for Christian German Refugees at an auction in New York hosted by, among other luminaries, Thomas Mann and Albert Einstein. The drawing, which was essentially a self-portrait of Kent (with hair added to his virtually bald pate) reading in the firelight of a cozy cabin with icicles visible through a nearby window (fig. 11),

12. *New York Times*, 15 September 1938. The other artists were John Groth, Philip Evergood, Abraham Birnbaum, Harry Gottlieb, Sidney Hoff, Fred Ellis, and Louis Lozowick. This effort and other fundraising projects secured over 200 tons of food and supplies for the relief ship to Spain. More on Lozowick in *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* (Spring 1988), p. 40.

Fig. 12. Rockwell Kent,
Buy Christmas Seals, color
lithograph poster on poster
stock from drawing, 11 x 15",
1939. Stanley Collection,
Portland, Maine. Photograph
by H. Wise.



became a popular poster, *Books Make the Home*. Copies of the drawing were run off with the title in block letters below, in various sizes, and other prints were made without printed lettering, which Kent signed and titled in pencil.

In 1939, Kent turned his poster talents to the service of two important but non-political clients, the National Tuberculosis Association and the American Bible Society. For the former, he did both the 1939 Christmas Seal stamp and a handsome four-color poster (fig. 12). Here Kent uses a hovering and benevolent angel sprinkling flowers from aloft. The floating angel motif shows up quite early in his work, appearing initially during the 1917–1918 trip to Alaska when he was influenced by William Blake's art. Sometimes the good angel floats parallel to the earth or, as in the logo Kent designed around 1936 for the Vermont Symphony Orchestra (fig. 13), hovers protectively, playing a violin.

Fig. 13. Rockwell Kent, *Vermont Symphony Angel*, color lithograph for artist's Christmas card, 5 x 7¼", ca. 1936. Stanley Collection, Portland, Maine. Photograph by H. Wise.



The face of the NTA angel has lines now associated with art deco styling, with hair radiating like rays of light into the halo.

A somewhat similar head design, with radiant hair under hands which hold the Book above as a proclamation to the viewer, made the staid deacons of the American Bible Society a bit uneasy:

This is more the face of a Greek fury than that of a stern and wise Christian archangel or of the more conventional goddess of liberty. In our judgment the expression of the face would rather be one of stern command or calm assurance.

We are not quite certain as to the rays behind the figure's head, whether they are intended to be rays emanating from the Book or from the head or whether they are intended to be the hair of the figure. If they are supposed to be rays, then the Committee would like to suggest that they emanate from the Book or from the head more precisely than they appear to now.¹³

Kent thereupon made a few modifications in the design, and his clients were satisfied. They printed the poster and distributed it throughout the United States and in many foreign countries, making it probably Kent's most widely circulated poster design.¹⁴

13. "American Bible Society," letter from Rome A. Betts, Associate Secretary of the American Bible Society (ABS), to Kent, 23 June 1939, Rockwell Kent Papers, Archives of American Art.

14. The Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library has sketches and a final drawing for this poster. In correspondence with the ABS, Kent states that his usual fee for a poster design was \$1,000, although he had promised the ABS to do theirs for \$200 and accepted that payment (Rockwell Kent Papers, Archives of American Art).

Following the onset of World War Two, with the German invasions of Belgium and France in 1939–1940, Kent initially was opposed to American intervention, particularly during the nonaggression pact between Germany and the USSR (signed in 1939 and repudiated by the German invasion of Russia in June 1941). A Kent poster study *Get the Hell Out!* (fig. 14) from 1940 reflects opposition to American entry into the war. Death, wearing Uncle Sam's hat and waving the American flag, is about to be attacked by a workingman, his child shielded at his knee. Whether this study was submitted or printed is unknown. It is well designed to give the viewer a sense of drama and imminent action. The faces of the man and child show terror at the presence of the ghastly skeleton. Its bony hand already clutches the shoulder of the man—whose weapon is not a gun but a shovel. In the progression of Kent's posters we have examined, this is the first in which there is near unity between the pictorial and textual messages, despite the possibility that confusion might still arise as to whether the workingman is intended to be an American or European. Be that as it may, Kent was approaching his full power in poster design as the decade of the 1940s began.

Kent had long been a student of European politics and art. He was a confirmed social realist in art theory; despite his political affinity with such a great artist as Picasso, Kent criticized abstractionism, cubism, and other modern art of the twentieth century as being the decadent art of bourgeois capitalism and its museums. He liked the realist art he saw from the Soviet Union, and he probably learned something about poster art from the Soviets as well as the Nazis, both of whom used it to inform, incite, and mobilize the masses. In fact, the theory of the poster as an instrument of propaganda was propounded most fully by the Nazi propagandist Erwin Schockel in 1939.¹⁵ He argued that an effective poster should arouse strong emotions in the viewer. For example, he praised a French World War One recruitment poster because it "expressed an almost religious enthusiasm, nourished with the thought of possible revenge."¹⁶

In another case, Schockel credited a British war poster as having been "purely directed toward the goal, [showing] simply and clearly the sacrifices that must be made in order to obtain victory." Examining posters of his own Third Reich, he pointed out that if the symbol of the clenched fist is to be used effectively, it must be used in action, smashing something, not merely raised in defiance. Others who have studied poster design hold that overly sophisticated art style, which may not appeal to the average person, lessens the poster's effectiveness—if it requires too much analysis to be understood, it is useless. Schockel also wrote that the most effective mode of presentation in the political poster was allegory (which Kent used in several instances), as it stimulates thinking, gives the viewer a vivid impression of any political issue, and can be used to disrobe the opponent of his pretended strength.

If Kent required a shove to cure him of his own neutrality toward American involvement in World War Two, Germany's invasion of the USSR sufficed. In mid-October 1941, well before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Kent

15. Erwin Schockel, *Das politische Plakat: Eine psychologische Betrachtung* (Munich: Der Schriftenreihe der Reichspropagandaleitung der Zentralverlag der NSDAP, Franz Eber Nachs, 1939).

16. Yanker, *Prop. Art*, p. 46ff; other quotes in this paragraph and the next are from the same source.

Fig. 14. Rockwell Kent, *Get the Hell Out!*, poster study, pen and ink and gouache drawing on board, 15 x 20 $\frac{1}{2}$ " , 1940. Photograph courtesy of Associated American Artists, New York.



again wrote President Roosevelt urging full utilization of American artists in a united, all-out effort to stop Hitlerism:

The Soviet artists who were not serving at the front were serving their country in every way through their art. They wrote that they were sending me a large collection of anti-fascist posters, etc., and asked that we send them what we American artists had done.

We'll send them something, but it won't be much. That it is not much, that walls and bill-boards and water-tanks and gasoline storage tanks, and every available space all over America that could carry a picture or a slogan that would awaken the people to their country's danger now is not utilized is due, not to the lethargy of artists, but to our Government's failure to organize them for production for defense.¹⁷

Kent shortly received a federal bulletin announcing a "call to artists" to submit war- and defense-related drawings, sketches, oils, and watercolors to be used "for the information of the public."¹⁸ Much to his shock, however, the government proposed to pay but \$30 for a watercolor or oil, \$15 for a sketch, and \$5 for a print! He hadn't intended to make quite that much of a sacrifice, particularly in a period of his life when his artwork for private clients was well paid.¹⁹ He fired back a snappy letter:

"What is wanted," reads the bulletin, "are first-rate pictures." When the Government wants first-rate planes, tanks, ammunition and first-rate labor for the making of these first-rate things, it pays first-rate profits to American industrialists and first-rate wages to first-rate mechanics. Artists certainly don't expect the profits of industrialists, though they do have to maintain their plants—their studios—and do have to bear the cost, in models and materials, and of the general expenses of production.²⁰

Apparently his letter and protests from other artists had an effect: by the spring of 1942, some government departments were paying more, and Kent began preparing poster designs. By August, he had twelve sketches ready to submit to the Office of War Information (OWI), a White House agency.²¹ Although none of the twelve (of which seven can be traced) actually became a poster for the OWI, the sketches as a group represent some of Kent's best poster work, and his subsequent use and reworking of the designs is instructive.

17. Letter of 13 October 1941 from Kent to FDR in Kent's capacity as president of United American Artists. He also offered to head up the mobilization at one point; a secretary to the president, Edwin M. Watson, replied on 25 October 1941, advising Kent on steps to take and noting that the American system of government did not permit "drafting artists...as is being done in Russia" (Rockwell Kent Papers, Archives of American Art).

18. Rockwell Kent Papers, Archives of American Art.

19. See footnote 14 regarding his going rate for a poster design. The fact that Kent was at the peak of his career during the 1930s probably accounts for his conspicuous absence from the roster of WPA poster artists of the 1935–1943 period, most of whom were a generation younger and struggling to make a living during the Depression era.

20. Letter of 11 December 1941 from Kent to William Phillips, Director, Division of Information, Office of Emergency Management, Washington, D.C., Rockwell Kent Papers, Archives of American Art. This office later became the Office of War Information (OWI).

21. The Treasury Department offered up to \$250 for an accepted full-size color poster to "Buy U.S. War Bonds." A pencil sketch of a Minute Man with the words "For Defense...Buy" roughed-in is in the Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library, but there is no indication that this design was submitted or accepted.

►
Fig. 15. Rockwell Kent, *Man and Snake*, poster study, pen and ink and crayon, mounted on board, 11¼ x 12¼", 1942. From Fridolph Johnson, *Rockwell Kent: An Anthology of His Work* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), p. 64. Photograph by B. Kennett.

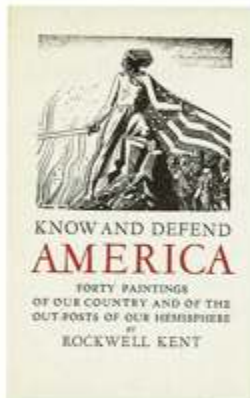


Fig. 16. Rockwell Kent, *Know and Defend America*, printed cover for exhibition catalogue, Wildenstein Galleries, New York, 6 x 9½", 1942. Stanley Collection, Portland, Maine. Photograph by H. Wise.

Of the twelve designs, only one was retained briefly for further consideration — *Man and Snake* (fig. 15), which featured a simple theme. A Paul Bunyan-like character is poised to smash a snake which had the misfortune to be decorated with swastikas along its side.²² Here the design was unambiguous.

A second study, *Democracy Defended*, had appeared earlier in 1942 as *Know and Defend America* (fig. 16), the logo for a national patriotic tour of Kent's paintings sponsored by the Wildenstein Galleries, New York. It shows the cover of the exhibition catalogue. In the poster proposal, Kent used the identical drawing with watercolor added and text below: "DEMOCRACY / The Right to Freedom / Happiness and Peace / The Right to Live / DEFEND IT."²³

A third design submitted to the OWI was entitled *Well America, How About It?* (fig. 17),²⁴ showing a female figure crucified on a wooden swastika, a burning city in the background, and in the lower portion the names of sixteen nations graphically canceled or lined through, leaving only China, Britain, the USSR, and America not yet under the Nazi yoke. A slightly different version of this idea also appeared in 1942 as the cover and frontispiece for a limited, illustrated edition of Lillian Hellman's *Watch on the Rhine*, from which sale proceeds went to the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee. Eleven prominent artists contributed

22. After the OWI held this sketch for a few weeks, Kent asked for it back, stating that for the government to retain unpublished poster ideas was "tantamount to...sabotaging of the propaganda branch of our war effort" (Kent to OWI, 19 October 1942, Rockwell Kent Papers, Archives of American Art).

23. This sketch is in the Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

24. The original sketch was sold by the Associated American Artists Gallery, New York, in 1987; catalogue price \$4,500.

illustrations to that book.²⁵ This is a striking, evocative design in both book and poster versions. Here Kent effectively mixes allegory and symbolism as well as strike-through of textual line, to produce a strong poster idea.

The fourth design of the OWI series was *Heil Hitler*, a gruesome study in which the title appears at the top in dripping, blood-red letters over the emaciated dead body of an old woman, her hand nailed through, again in crucifixion allegory. Despite its powerful imagery, this study was also turned down and did not appear in other contexts.

►
Fig. 17. Rockwell Kent, *Well America, How About It?*, poster study drawing, pen and ink, watercolor, crayon and pencil, mounted on board, 7¼ x 11½", 1942. Photograph courtesy of Associated American Artists, New York.



Fig. 18. Rockwell Kent, *It is Later Than You Think, Wake Up America!*, lithograph, 9¼ x 13¼", 1945. Stanley Collection, Portland, Maine. From *Rockwell Kent 1882-1971*, a memorial portfolio by the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship, 1971. Photograph by H. Wise. (See page 22.)



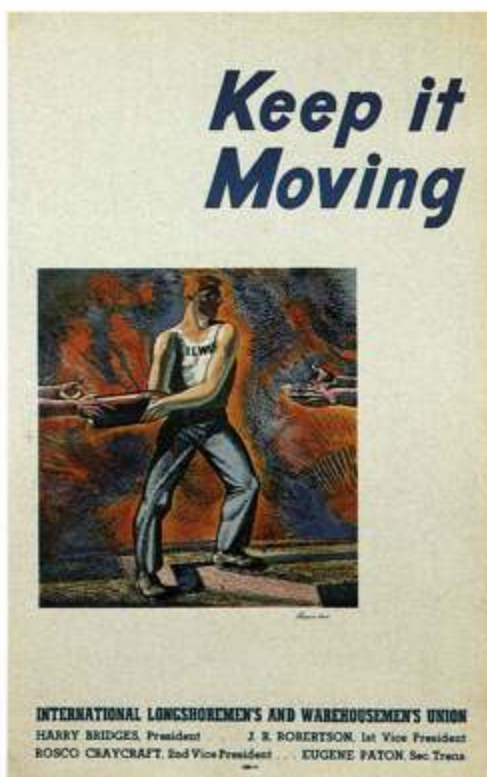
25. Of these, only William Gropper had been involved in the sidewalk poster project for Spanish relief in 1938. In the two versions, there were also slight differences in the lists of nations that were canceled.

►
Fig. 19. Rockwell Kent,
Save This Right Hand, color
 lithograph poster on paper
 from drawing, 11 x 15½", 1949.
 Stanley Collection, Portland,
 Maine. Photograph by H. Wise.

Fifth, Kent proposed a design entitled *It is Later Than You Think, Wake Up America!* (DBJ: 136) (fig. 18). This idea became a 1945 limited-edition lithograph, but Kent later (1959) would say that it had been "motivated by that threat to our democratic freedom which is known as McCarthyism."²⁶ So this particular idea, which started as a World War Two poster proposal to awaken a sleepy nation to external danger, saw service again in the internal political "wars" of the 1950s, but not as a poster.

A sixth proposal entitled *Produce for Victory* shows a civilian passing an artillery shell from one pair of hands on the left to another pair outstretched to receive on the right. After this idea was turned down by the OWI, Kent made it available to the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU) and it was printed, probably in 1943, as their poster *Keep it Moving* (fig. 20).²⁷ Beginning in the early thirties, the leadership of the ILWU had come under repeated attack for alleged infiltration by Communists; over the next two decades that union was on the legal defensive but was ultimately vindicated in the courts. One way to develop a more favorable image was to be shown as patriotic in World War Two—*Keep It Moving* helped in that effort, and Kent was accorded honorary membership in the ILWU in late 1943. As a design, this poster is one of Kent's weakest efforts of the period: the coloring is peculiar and the figure seems frozen. For the union version, Kent changed the original war poster design only slightly; adding "ILWU" to the undershirt. This and the other ILWU poster, *Save This Right Hand* (fig. 19), are among the scarcest Kent posters.

Fig. 20. Rockwell Kent, *Keep It Moving*, color lithograph poster on paper from ink and watercolor drawing, 14 x 22", ca. 1943. Stanley Collection, Portland, Maine. Photograph by H. Wise.



26. Jones notes the discrepancy between the date of the lithograph (1945) and the fact that Senator Joseph McCarthy did not start his anti-Communist crusade until 1950, but he was unaware that the design originated as a poster idea in 1942.

27. Charles Blum, "Rockwell Kent and the ILWU," *The Kent Collector*, vol. 6, no. 1 (Summer 1979), pp. 1–17.

SAVE THIS RIGHT HAND



DEFEND BRIDGES — ROBERTSON — SCHMIDT

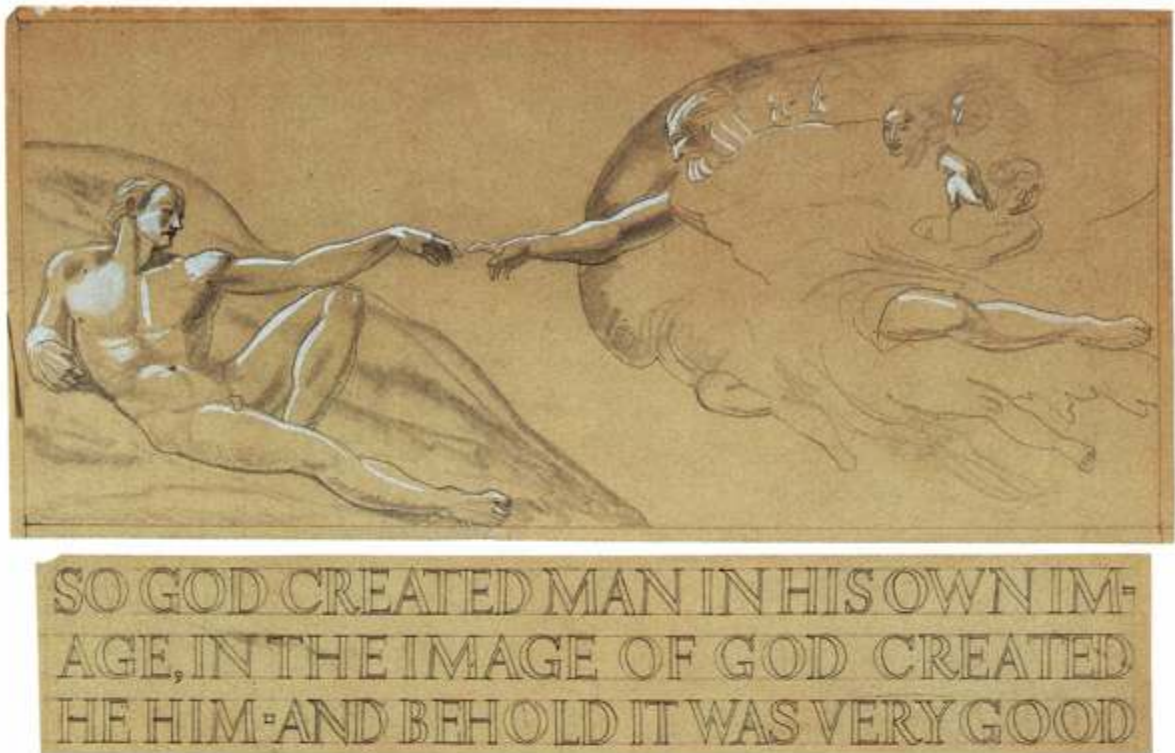


Fig. 21. Rockwell Kent,
***The Creation of Man*, pencil**
and tempera poster sketches on
brown paper, mounted on
board, 13½ x 17¼", 1942. Stanley
Collection, Portland, Maine.
Photograph by J. York.

A seventh design, and the last of the twelve which can be definitely traced to Kent's 1942 OWI proposals, is *The Creation of Man* (fig. 21). It was turned down along with the rest of his ideas. It may have been too "artistic" and a little complicated to appeal to the masses. To incorporate Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling into a war poster was pretty high art by government standards!²⁸ In the opinion of some Kent authorities of the 1980s, however, this design is one of his great works of art. It has sweep, philosophical content, and expressive composition. It is an eloquent summation of Rockwell Kent's view of the tragedy of war and of the divine potential of mankind degraded and broken by war. It does not appear in any other format or setting.

Fire! (fig. 22), produced for the Forest Fire Fighters Service, U.S. Office of Civilian Defense in 1943, turned out to be the only design by Rockwell Kent which actually became a government poster.²⁹ In 1924, Kent had illustrated an edition of Esther Shepherd's *Paul Bunyan*. The figure with the ax in *Fire!* and the one in *Man and Snake* (fig. 15) are both very Bunyanesque characters, as is the larger-than-life lookout in *Eternal Vigilance is the Price of Liberty* (DBJ:135) (fig. 23), a 1945 lithograph which could well have been one of the original twelve OWI proposals judging from its composition, integration of text in the

28. The OWI offered no critiques of the designs; they said they "like some and might develop them later into posters." Kent wanted them to make quick decisions to buy or return, as he had other uses in mind. The OWI did purchase other drawings from Kent for small propaganda booklets which were used without attribution to him.

29. Kent was paid \$300 for the accepted poster design; the text used on the poster was "Forest Fires Aid the Enemy." Wood products were considered a vital defense need.



Fig. 22. Rockwell Kent, *Fire!*, lithograph, 9¹/₈ x 13⁷/₈", 1948. From Dan Burne Jones, *The Prints of Rockwell Kent: A Catalogue Raisonné* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1974), plate 143, p. 146. Photograph by H. Wise.



Fig. 23. Rockwell Kent, *Eternal Vigilance is the Price of Liberty*, lithograph, 10¹/₈ x 13⁷/₈", 1945. Stanley Collection, Portland, Maine. From *Rockwell Kent 1882-1971*, a memorial portfolio by the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship, 1971. Photograph by B. Kennett.

design, and the war year in which it appeared in a limited edition. *Wake Up, America!* (fig. 25) is the watercolor study for an oil painting thought to be based on another of the five “missing” OWI 1942 proposals. Files of the OWI, which were long ago warehoused, would reveal the missing designs, as all were photocopied.

Why did the OWI reject so many of Kent’s designs? The answer was partly bureaucratic—as noted above, Kent gave them a short time to decide and they couldn’t. His designs were among the first they received after the office got under way in 1942, and they may have wanted to wait and see what other major artists produced. It has also been pointed out that Kent’s style of illustration may not have been quite right for war posters—one has only to look at those which were printed by the OWI to see a style closer to Norman Rockwell than Rockwell Kent. Realism was carried virtually to the photorealist degree. By comparison, Kent’s figures seem either stylized, overly heroic, statuesque, or at the other extreme, like cartoons. A design illustrating the cartoon quality is a skeleton wearing a Hitler mask (fig. 24) which dates from 1940 but may have been one of the missing OWI proposals.³⁰

In the later years of World War Two, Kent’s output of poster designs began to decline. In 1944, he made by hand a poster, *Clothing for Russia*, of which there is only one copy. This poster appears to have been used in his hometown of AuSable Forks, New York. It portrays a young woman, babe in arms, looking forlornly at a distant Christmas tree, with the words handlettered below: “Bring all that you can / that’s clean and wearable.”³¹

In late 1946, he designed a poster which was printed by the Student Christian Association Movement, a YMCA-YWCA activity. This poster, which shows the head of a youth with purposeful look against an American flag in the background, carries the text: “We are called upon to Face a New World / To Recognize the Will of God / To commit ourselves to Him.”³²

And, in 1948, he designed an election poster to promote his own candidacy for Congress on the American Labor party ticket. Ironically, this poster bore no pictorial design, only block lettering which could have been done in any print shop, despite the rich treasury of art Kent might have used for his own benefit.

Fig. 24. Rockwell Kent, untitled drawing, pen and ink, 4¼ x 5”, 1940. From Rockwell Kent, *This Is My Own* (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1940), p. 355. Photograph by B. Kennett.



30. A pencil sketch of this untitled design is in the Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library; the words “Once In...” are roughed-in behind the figure. Its first publication was in Kent’s *This Is My Own* (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1940).
31. In 1942 he had done a poster, *Give Seed to Russia*, for Russian War Relief, Inc., New York. Sketches for that poster and the single copy of the clothing poster are in the Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library.
32. The poster advertises a national assembly to be held 27 December 1946–3 January 1947 (Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library).



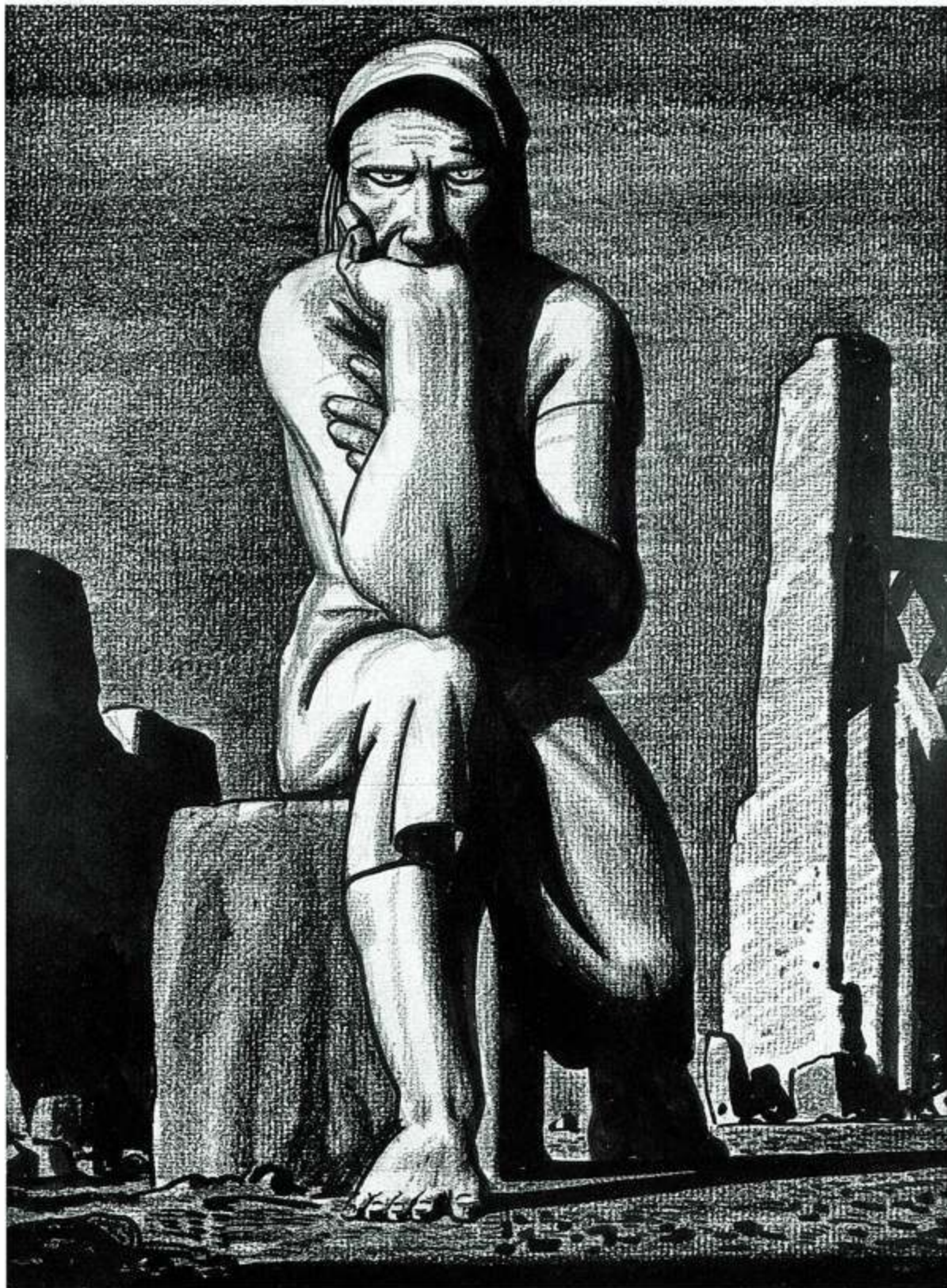
Fig. 25. Rockwell Kent, *Wake Up, America!*, watercolor study for oil of the same title, 4 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 5 $\frac{1}{2}$ ", ca. 1942. Stanley Collection, Portland, Maine. Photograph by H. Wise.

He already knew from past run-ins with local "America firsters" around AuSable Forks that the pastoral valleys of the Adirondacks were not fertile ground for his style of Americanism. Thus, he was not surprised that he went down to defeat along with Henry Wallace, the presidential candidate of the national Progressive Labor party.³³

His last known poster design, *Save This Right Hand* (fig. 19), was, in my view, also his finest. The labor movement had long been important to him—he was a member of several unions and had always found time to come to the aid of workingmen and women, particularly when their political views were under attack. For the membership of the International Workers Organization (IWO), Kent had done a stirring lithograph in 1941 (DBJ:131), printed in large quantity to enable IWO members to own an "original" in their homes.³⁴ And when the

33. The American Labor party (ALP) was the New York branch of the Progressive Labor party (PLP). Kent also designed a poster for the 1941 "Liberty Ball" of the ALP in New York City; a copy of which is in The Rockwell Kent Gallery, SUNY-Plattsburgh, New York. Kent used one of his earlier poster designs (fig. 16) on a campaign leaflet or handbill in 1948 with the text: "Roosevelt or Dewey / Which one would Hitler Vote For?" Both Roosevelt and Hitler were then deceased.

34. This was never made into a poster but was widely used on IWO publications, for example, Albert E. Kahn, *The People's Case: The Story of the IWO* (New York, ca. 1948), cover design.



◀
Fig. 26. Rockwell Kent, *Europe*, original drawing for lithograph, ink and conté crayon on paper, 9½ x 12½", 1946. Stanley Collection, Portland, Maine. Photograph by J. York.

Fig. 27. Rockwell Kent, *Harry Benner—Coal Miner*, color lithograph from oil, 25 x 36", 1947. Stanley Collection, Portland, Maine. Photograph by J. York, courtesy of the Baltimore & Ohio Railway Museum, Baltimore, Maryland.



Chesapeake & Ohio Railway commissioned him in 1947 to paint a scene of "life along the railway;" he chose to portray a workingman, *Harry Benner—Coal Miner*, as a noble and heroic figure (fig. 27).³⁵ Accordingly, he gave it his best effort in his 1949 *Save This Right Hand* for the defense of Harry Bridges and other top officials of the longshoremen's union.

Following his first ILWU poster in 1943, Kent was made an honorary member of the union, which he proudly shows in adding "ILWU" to his signature at lower left. This poster is so graphic that it makes those who work with their hands wince. It requires no analysis. It exemplifies what Schockel said a good poster should have: strong allegory (in this case, metaphor), immediacy, clarity, simplicity, and gut-level communication. And it didn't hurt the cause, as Bridges, Robertson, and Schmidt had perjury convictions set aside by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1953.

After World War Two ended, Kent felt only brief elation over the great victory. The grim task of reconstruction in Europe lay ahead, captured profoundly in his great lithograph of 1946 entitled *Europe* (fig. 26). At home, Kent and others who supported the Soviet system found themselves targeted as "reds" as the Cold War began. Protesting the removal and destruction even of his travel books from American embassy libraries abroad, Kent turned once again to his art to express outrage. *The Smith Act* (DBJ:145) (fig. 28), a 1951 lithograph, shows his once benevolent angel burning on a fire of books, the dove of peace dead at her feet. This was to be Rockwell Kent's last important political art.³⁶

In 1953, Kent was called before the McCarthy committee in Washington, where he took the fifth amendment. Outside the committee room, and on numerous other occasions before, he denied ever having belonged to the Communist party, although he left little doubt that his sympathies lay with communism as a philosophy and worldwide movement. In the remaining eighteen years of his life virtually no American galleries would show his works, and few major commissions came his way. Embittered, he gave his personal collection of over 80 canvases and hundreds of manuscript and graphics materials to the people of the Soviet Union in 1961.³⁷

In sum, Rockwell Kent's poster work was a significant but, until now, largely neglected element in his art. At certain times, ideas he developed in the poster context stimulated his other graphic designs, as in the mid-1930s and again growing out of the 1942 OWI sketches. And there were examples of his taking earlier design ideas and attempting to fashion them into posters. Kent probably would have done more posters had there been more money in it—while he

35. A large color poster of this painting is available from the Baltimore & Ohio Railway Museum, Baltimore, Maryland.

36. A variant title for this work is *The Book Burners*. The Smith Act of 1950 also authorized the Attorney General to compile a list of "subversive" organizations—Kent had been active in several.

37. Arrangements are now being made to bring the Kent Russian Gift back to the United States on tour, under the direction of Richard V. West, Director, Santa Barbara Museum of Art. The artist Jamie Wyeth is chairman of the national advisory committee, and the author chairs the American steering committee for this project.



sought good fees for such work, he rarely received them.³⁸ As he developed his mature graphic style generally, his posters improved in composition and effective presentation, although they have yet to be recognized in major art museum collections alongside the work of James Montgomery Flagg, John Warner Norton, Ben Shahn, or Jean Carlu, American artists who excelled at the propaganda poster. Kent's poster designs were more passionate and intense, if less polished, than most by other major artists of his time. There was an essential unity between his life and art, and his poster arts gave lively expression to that fact.³⁹ □

Fig. 28. Rockwell Kent,
The Smith Act, lithograph,
9⁷/₁₆" x 13¹/₄", 1951. Stanley
Collection, Portland, Maine.
Photograph by B. Kennett.

38. His posters now bring much more than he was paid for making them; he usually received around \$200, about the same as he got for making a bookplate. Major contemporary poster designers currently command fees of \$8,000 and up.
39. His posters have not been definitively catalogued—hopefully this article is a beginning toward that end. Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library has a number of additional undated, out-of-context studies and sketches which bear further study. Some miscellaneous designs Kent did for projects not connected to poster design have been classified as "poster studies" for lack of another category. The Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin, has an important collection of Kent's books, but few posters or other artworks.

Note

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