

Kent on Kent

Numerous essays written for exhibition catalogs, books, magazines and journals have traced the varied and extensive accomplishments of Rockwell Kent. His fall from the heights of acclaim during the 1930's to the blacklists of the 1950's is well documented. Kent's own recollections of his past are preserved in THIS IS MY OWN and IT'S ME O LORD. The shortcomings of such written comments are indigenous to the print media. Editing, rewrites, publishers's contracts and flawed research or memory all contribute to the distortion of the persona.

The live interview offers a sharp contrast to the written statement. The flow of words often reveal wandering inner thoughts while knee jerk responses give glimpses of one's true character. The spoken word may elude what the editor's pen tries to temper.

The transcript that follows offers a rare opportunity to "hear" Kent. Rockwell Kent, artist, writer, adventurer, and social activist emerges. His pride and indignation at presumed wrongs underscore his defensive posturing. All that is missing is the whirl of the camera to capture facial expressions and poignant gestures. Now sit back and "listen" as Kent "speaks" to you.

Here is an interview recorded on Sept. 12, 1957 between Rockwell Kent and John Wingate of WABC radio station on the Nightbeat program.

W. Now for our first story, there are few critics who would not agree that our next guest is one of America's great artists. He is Rockwell Kent who throughout his legendary life has embraced activities as painter, writer, orator, activist and political figure. We're going to find out about as many of these careers as possible, all described in his book published by Dodd Meade entitled, It's Me Oh Lord.

W. Mr. Kent, Good evening and welcome from your upstate farms and Nightbeat so we can talk to you about a number of the charges that have been placed against you and about your careers. Just to state the last activity we mentioned, you as a political figure, and take up some specific charges. Newspaper accounts this year have reported how you've been denied a passport on at least three occasions. We spoke with the State Department passport division today and were told, "Mr. Kent refuses to furnish it with affidavits as to membership in the Communist party, thus we wouldn't give him a passport." Section of Section 51142 of the passport regulations spells out that if necessary certain affidavits may be requested of the applicant. Mr. Kent what's your side of the story? Why have you refused to state whether you were a communist?

K. I have refused as a matter of principle. I have stated repeatedly over my life whether or not I'm a communist and I expect to be believed in any statement that I make under oath or not under oath but I hold that regulation of the passport office to be unconstitutional and I feel it a matter of public duty to fight about on moral line like General Grant. Isn't he the one who was going to fight it out on these lines during the Civil War.

W. Mr. Kent what's the principle apparently that's not the same you took an oath, why did you take an oath saying you were not a communist during the I. W. O. trials a few years ago and not to the State Department? What's the difference between the two?

K. Well one is a court. I felt to some extent that they were justified in asking the question and therefore I ought to answer it. But to tell you the truth, I really was so mad at lying Louie Budenz that I wanted to nail him to the cross, and I did. And now I would like to say when I found being there and then from what I had read of other cases in which involved these employed stool pigeons had testified, that no man how ever he might perjure himself for the state was ever prosecuted for perjury.

W. Sir how can you sit here and call Budenz a liar.

K. I call him that in my book.

W. What happened?

K. I have not been sued for libel.

W. And that's why you once took an oath and said you were not a communist.

K. Yes.

W. But you said you believed the question to you at that trial was valid.

K. Yes.

W. How could it be valid and the state department's request invalid?

K. Because it contained their contention that I.W.O was a communist front.

W. Was it?

K. I think not. I don't accurately know what a communist front is. As far as I know, it wasn't a front for anything but itself. It's good purposes and served them well.

W. Alright let's see if we can establish what some people believe to be a communist front. This is from Counter Attack. You are called a party member by Benjamin Gitlow, former executive secretary, at a party in October 1939, member of Civil Rights congress '46, speaker at American Youth for Democracy convention '47, member of the National Nonpartisan Committee to Defend the Rights of the 12 Communist Leaders, last June given a dinner by the National Council of American Soviet friendship announced as its new chairman. You're to be given a testimonial dinner in California this Sunday Sept. 15th Mr. Kent, proceeds to go to People World that's the Daily Worker of the Golden West.

K. Yes and another one in San Francisco.

W. Yes, but you can't understand why people link you with such an organization and why they may be called communist fronts?

K. I'm physically aware that all these organizations have been called communist fronts. That has been publicized. I recall reading Martin Dies book years ago, The Trojan Horse, in which I read to my astonishment that a good percentage of all the organizations in America devoted to making democracy work, I mean organizations in defense of the underprivileged, for improving the lot of the underprivileged, for restoring the Negro to full citizenship in this country were called communist fronts. I recommended to people who I thought were intelligent to read that.

W. Sir, the Justice Department has out an injunction to make make Governor Faubus of Arkansas to show cause. Nobody calls the Justice Department a communist front.

K. No.

W. But what's your point that everyone supporting the Negro and the underprivileged has been called a communist front?

K. My point is in stating that Martin Dies did call it that and that my comment on reading the book was this: one had two choices. Either Martin

Dies lied or what would America be without the communist. It's nothing to me whether it's communist that back a good cause or Catholics or Jews or anybody else. If the cause is good. I'm with them.

W. Just briefly, why do you want a passport now?

K. I want a passport. My last application for a passport was to go to Europe to travel and to paint. I've been to Europe before to paint. The passport application before that was to go to Ireland. In Ireland to the county of Donegal. In the county of Donegal to the west coast to go there and no where else for the purpose, sole purpose of painting pictures.

W. You want very much to do it.

K. Oh, I'd love to do it.

W. Sir, why can't you simply tell, once again, the State Department that you said at a trial that you were not a communist. Certainly, your personal reason is valid to you.

K. Unfortunately, perhaps I have a civic conscious. I'm not just a painter. When I took up my brush and pallet, I didn't quit being a citizen and I've got to defend all people's rights as best I can and stand up for our people's rights in every chance that comes my way. I'm standing for principle in this passport matter. I hold it to be completely irrelevant to the granting of a passport whether or not a man is a member of this party or that, what his political beliefs may be, because, may I go on?

W. Yes.

K. A passport I hold, I don't know whether my lawyer supports me fully in this, is not to be construed as a permit to travel, the right to permit people to travel never having rested with our State Department or it is an official certification of citizenship which it happens other countries want to know who travels to those countries.

W. (May I)

K. I as an American citizen am entitled to it.

W. You're under no oath. May I ask you if you would tell us here on Nightbeat are you or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party.

K. I've said that I would tell the truth whether I'm under oath or not under oath. I'll tell you the truth and look you straight in the eye, I've never, and this is not to be construed as any criticism of the Communist Party, it's just a fact.

W. Why do you say that?

K. Because, I'm not repudiating the party, I don't know much about it.

W. But you're not repudiating it?

K. No, I'm merely stating that I am not and never have been a member of the Communist Party and I'll go farther and say I can't conceive of my ever being a member of the Communist Party from what I know about it.

W. What do you mean, from what you know about it?

K. Well, I read that their regulations are very strict, that they make people conform to their policies whatever they may be, I'm not a conformer, I never have been in my life and I don't think I would willingly subject myself to any such discipline.

W. You tell us this, that you've not been a member, yet you realize your passport can't be had because you won't tell the State Department.

K. Yes. I realize that fully.

W. Alright Sir, how would you describe yourself politically. In the manner of the boxtop promotions, do it in 25 words or less if you can.

K. Alright let me think of 25 words, like writing a telegram.

W. Get brief -----

K. I am a conservative in that I pin my faith on the Declaration of Independence and our Constitution. I'm a radical, an old revolutionist if you like, in that from the age of 20 until now I have been a believer in socialism as the system best suited to cure our troubles.

K. I think that's 25 words

W. As a socialist, how well or how badly do you think socialism is being practiced in the Soviet Union today?

K. I think that they have socialism and when I speak of socialism I have in mind the definition that you will find, I think, in every dictionary as certain economic systems which the ownership of the land, the instruments of production, and so forth are in the hands of the people. To have achieved socialism they have not got strict democracy.

W. But what about the intervention, what about the intervention of Russian tanks to put down the revolt in Hungary? Does that bother you?

K. I hate violence, of course it bothers me very very much.

W. Would you repudiate it now?

K. Uh, that is a question that I thought about a great deal. I read a great deal about it, I think it's definitely a question of two sides.

W. Would you renounce it now? Does the violence bother you?

K. Not from what I know of it.

W. Why?

K. Because, I think that that violence though it started from a perfectly legitimate strike for redress of just grievances, I think that it was taken advantage of and exploited by other forces and that eventually might have been the illusion of Hungary to (s-----)
that existed in Hungary under the admiral of the Hungarian fleet forces.

W. One last question on socialism but not our last on politics.

W. Mr. Kent, would you agree with Nikita Khrushchev's recent statement on CBS Television that our grandchildren in America will live under socialism.

K. Well, I don't think so at all. I don't think we'd make any such progress as that. I think it was said to be amusing and mock his answer to the media and say that I hope our grandchildren, my grandchildren, anyhow will all be capitalists.

W. Then you don't from what you say disagree with the express desire, or be it said jokingly, of Khrushchev's.

K. I am a socialist. I would love it if the people of the United States by the democratic processes which are available to them should decide to establish socialism in this country.

W. Mr. Kent, a straight question. What do you object to in capitalism? Don't you like getting some c c's (money) for your paintings and your work? What do you dislike about it here?

K. Well, I might say that I have nothing to complain of whether as an artist I must say that I and few other artists have had any extended periods in our lives when we have been unable to earn our living through art. That is a fact. And that today, many artists that are well known in America have to work at other things to support themselves. That's not good! It's not for myself, I have no kick, I've done very well in life. I've gotten what I want out of life to a large extent, but countless thousands, hundreds of thousands and needy haven't. Under socialism this situation as we have now could be -----and secondly-----

[TAPE IS SKIPPING HERE]

W. As I sit here listening, the views of other political convictions, I look back to an interview I see with another painter and two other people before them in which you said that an artist -----

K. Sir,

K. I never heard of him but I have a better authority

K. Way back, much as good authority goes back, some of it goes back to the great Athenians who speaking of Athens and of the obligations of it hold him that dealt not in affairs of state indulgent and good for nothing.

K. I think that an artist who by renouncing political interests renounces his obligations as a citizen, and I know that it applies to an awful lot of our artists and writers, and I think, I feel it should be reflected in their work and the illusion there is an ----- of important American art in this country and important American writing today is just that.

W. Your goal to art, your views on it, your relationship to it in a moment.

W. But you've implied that you've been censored in the expression of views similar to these tonight by a network, Is that correct?

K. Yes, I gave an interview to (What network?) NBC.

W. What network is that?

K. The NBC building over in Radio City.

K. Which was a nice interview. I had a good time. I was asked questions about my passport and I answered them very much as I answered yours.

W. You say, roughly what you told me tonight.

K. Just about that.

W. To whom did you give the interview?

K. To Mr. Fitzgerald Smith, nice fellow, wonderful fellow and he liked my interview. Not like the interview tonight, the schedule it was withdrawn, it was considered--

W. How do you know that?

K. Because I checked on it and called up and found it out why and I was told

W. What, what what was told you? Not who told you, what was told you?

K. It was told me by, I won't name my informant but someone who spoke with authority who said you must realize, Mr. Kent, that in an organization like this we have several people who are reactionary and they considered your interview too, what's the term, controversial. And by the way, I think that it's a wonderful job that you are doing here with this program; really, think of the fear from men and women, women who have ideas that are not generally popular or

generally publicized let us say, in our press, papers and magazines, it is very important.

W. Let's see if we can draw our sketch of you as an artist. An artist pure and simple, that's what we'd like to get.

W.

You said that today's American art is sterile but you haven't been to an exhibition in 25 years.

K. I study a lot of reproductions. I haven't been to an exhibition in 25 years because while you touch on art, I've got to make a confession to you, I'm not interested in art,

W. [WHAT]

K. If I were interested in art, I'd be an art critic or I'd be at the Metropolitan museum copying pictures.

W. Is our art as bad as all you say?

K. No, I'm speaking of my own art, I'm not interested in my own art except as it serves me to express the things that I am interested in.

W. Well then, how bad is American art? How sterile?

K. From what I see, it doesn't express any enthusiasm about the human world that we live in, it doesn't deal to any extent of social problems and figure painters should to some extent reflect our social problems whether or not are our people to achieve full democracy, won the privilege in this country. I expect our art today to carry on and develop and perfect the tradition that was begun when our state supported art, that was done under the WPA.

W. Wouldn't art be an eunuch if it expressed only the feelings of the underprivileged, doesn't art cover everything in nature?

K. It doesn't express only the feelings of the underprivileged. (It should.) No it should not. Look at the art of a writer Balzac who doesn't deal with the underprivileged at all, almost exclusively with the privileged, day to day employed for their amusement and gratification.

W. How does Russian art stack up as far as you are concerned?

W. In art.

K. Yes. From what I've seen of Russian art, I was there a few years ago spending a week in Moscow which isn't much you must admit, no more than a week and not as

much or more but not much more than week in New York and I went to the museums, and I talked to the academicians and I thought their realistic art was in general pretty bad.

W. Bad.

K. Yes. The pictures of Stalin with medals all over his chest, of generals with medals, were nauseating, were dreadful. I spoke to --- Edinburgh about this and he asked me what I've seen and I told him, he laughed, and said you haven't seen Russian art.

W. What did he mean, you haven't seen the best?

K. I only had seen the art that was approved by the state and was subsidized presumably by the state. I haven't seen the art that was made by people in their spare time who probably did not support themselves by their art, but who painted very much under the conditions that you paint under here. We're not subsidized and very few of us are supported through the sale of our works.

W. Let's find out how you would feel as an art critic if you could be one for a minute? What if you ----- as it runs through, let's call the flare up of genius of Picasso or the masterful brush of Georges Braque. What do you like in art now?

K. Well, let me start by saying I love life. I love the world in which we live. I love its people and I'm not interested in any art that doesn't stimulate my enthusiasm for life and waken, reawaken, my interest in life and give me a greater understanding of it. For I must understand the art and I want art to help me and to help all people to reach that understanding.

W. Alright, what about Picasso?

K. The man, I don't like him.

W. Why?

K. Because I don't understand him. I didn't like Gertrude Stein's writings because I couldn't understand it. No, I have simple tastes.

W. Then what do you understand. Do you understand Braque?

K. I understand

W. The man said not to have quite the flare of genius of times as Picasso but more of a master.

K. I like Braque's pictures as decorations but they leave me little beyond that. I like that tactile quality, now I'll get down to professional terms. It's very much like

W. What about Morandi (??)?

K. The same thing, but Morandi no, he has some extraordinary characterization in his subjects. I'm very much impressed by him. And I think that there is a real, fervent, spirit in his religious paintings.

W. Who else do you like?

K. You are asking a man who has admitted he knows little about art, along with that I look little at art

W. He's betraying that admission right now by talking about it, so

K. You are asking certain questions which I happen to be able to give some sort of answer to.

W. Mondrian

K. Who?

W. Mondrian

W. What Russian artists have you seen that you think that you could like?

K. I like the work of Repin. I don't know whether you pronounce it that way. Maybe it's pronounced the French way Repin. He was of the 19th century. a good realist, not a world beater.

W. How often are you confused with Norman Rockwell, who does covers for the Saturday Evening Post?

K. Very often.

W. What happens?

K. Well, I get letters addressed to me suggesting wonderful subjects as barefoot urchins and little boys helping little ladies across the street and things like that; that are very cute ideas and I think that Norman Rockwell could do them well and I'm sure they were meant for him and I understand he could.

W. Mr. Kent, you illustrated that bawdy tales of the Decameron the Candide, the memoirs of Cassanova, you've done it with the brush of sensualist. How often have you been typecast as, what will we say, a shy, pornographer.

K. Well, I've never heard myself so cast.

W. Are you a shy pornographer?

K. Well, I don't think I've been particularly shy and I don't think I have any abnormal pornography, a healthy interest in it I guess is good. I hope you and all of us have some of it or God help the human race.

W. Didn't you write a letter recently saying you were fed up with drawing what a certain publisher called erotic stuff?

K. Yes, I did write such a letter. I must explain why I was subjected to this. Not actually because I'm considered a specialist in that kind of art, but because books like that have a pretty sure sale in America and they want me to illustrate the book that they are going to make some money on because I illustrated them on a royalty basis.

W. Is that because it's the brush of sensualists?

K. No. That it's the brush of sensualist, you say, that my brush is

W. Is it?

K. No? Not at all

K. Look at my landscapes. Look at my illustrations of Moby Dick.

W. Let's look again, Rockwell Kent, the hermit.

W. You spent a year in Alaska, you stayed there alone with your son. Why?

K. I wasn't alone if I was with my son.

W. Well, you were alone together.

K. I live alone with one woman in the Adirondacks that's enough.

W. But why Alaska for a year, a year of solitude, the life of a hermit?

K. Because I love the big silence, I love the vast outdoors and I don't like to be intruded upon by people, I like back to nature, nature stark and bare and preferably coolness as I live in Greenland.

W. Mr. Kent do you believe in God?

K. That word, I think you must admit needs definition. You can give me a definition or I'll give you one.

W. Well, you're the guest - You give it to me

K. Well, I can think of an original one which would be the definition of Jesus.

W. Because of time, make it, if you would, brief.

K. It would be definition of Jesus. God is love. In that God, the God of Jesus, I believe.

W. After almost four score years on this earth, sir, are there any area, any spots of unfulfillment that you don't like.

K. Oh Lord, I look back on my life as from a mountain top that I reached walking through snow and that I might think that I covered all other area below the ice, I see my little wandering trail coming across and all the rest is unknown. I know very little. I've gotten all that I could get out of life with my limited resources and so forth. But all I want. No, I want it all. Don't you.

W. When I'm in your seat I'll answer you. Thank you very much for coming on Nightbeat.

K. Thank you John Wingate.

W. Perhaps the most apt accolade that I could use now about the life and work of Rockwell Kent would be, he's in a bit of a hurry to get off here, will be the words written by Shakespeare, "Age cannot wither him nor customs spoil his infinite (?) variety."

The publication of this transcript is only possible because of the contributions of three individuals. First and foremost is Gladys Spector who loaned me the original tape, reviewed the transcript and enthusiastically encouraged its publication.

The actual transcript is the work of Carol Greco. It was a formidable task to transcribe a faulty and aged tape. Her skill and patience were remarkable.

A number of constructive comments and significant additions were supplied by the Kent scholar, Will Ross.