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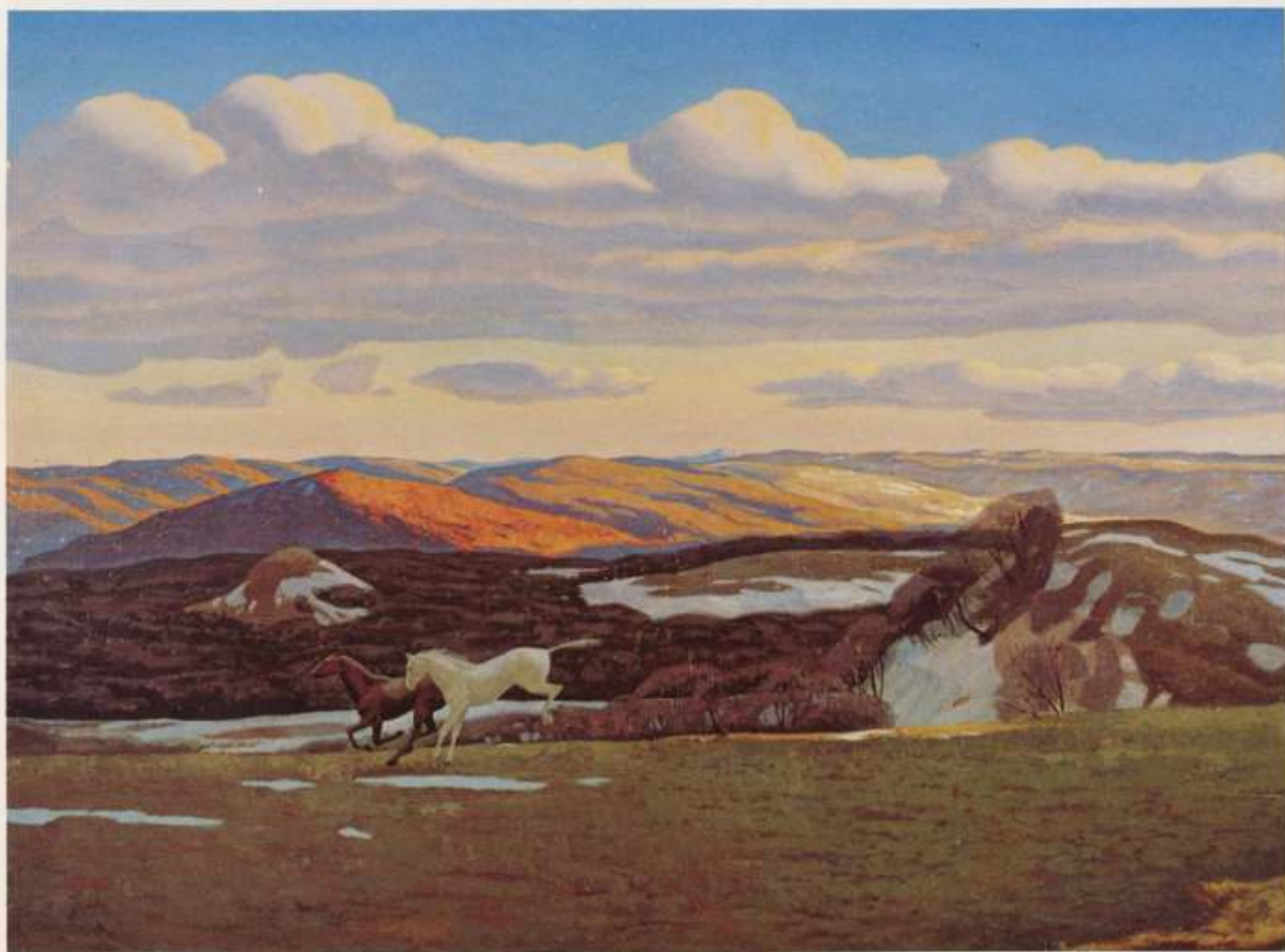
Rockwell Kent Reconsidered

by Richard V. West

The artistic fortunes of the American painter and printmaker Rockwell Kent (1882–1971) poses certain paradoxes with roots not only in the cultural history of twentieth century America, but in the social and political events of the past seven decades. In tracing Kent's career, one is faced with the phenomenon of an artist acknowledged by many as a major talent; described as "perhaps the best known of all contemporary American painters" in the mid-nineteen-thirties, who then virtually disappears from discussion in most American art surveys published since the late nineteen-forties. Such changes of fortune are not unique, of course, but in the case of Rockwell Kent, was it simply an inevitable process of critical re-evaluation that brought about his precipitous descent from the artistic pantheon he once shared with Edward Hopper and George Bellows?

This question cannot be answered without taking into account Rockwell Kent's formidable *persona*, which colored and shaped the attitudes of his contemporaries towards his art to a far greater extent than most artists of his generation and continues to affect the proper appraisal of his art even to the present. The late Carl Zigrosser, a long time friend and appreciative critic of the artist, hinted at the complexities involved in properly assessing Kent's work, when he wrote in 1937:

Rockwell Kent is one of the most widely known artists in the United States, and one of the most misunderstood. That



OPPOSITE:

Winter-Monhegan, 1907. o/c, 33 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 44.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
George A. Hearn Fund.

ABOVE:

Spring Fever, Berkshires, 1908. o/c,
Pushkin Fine Arts Museum, Moscow.



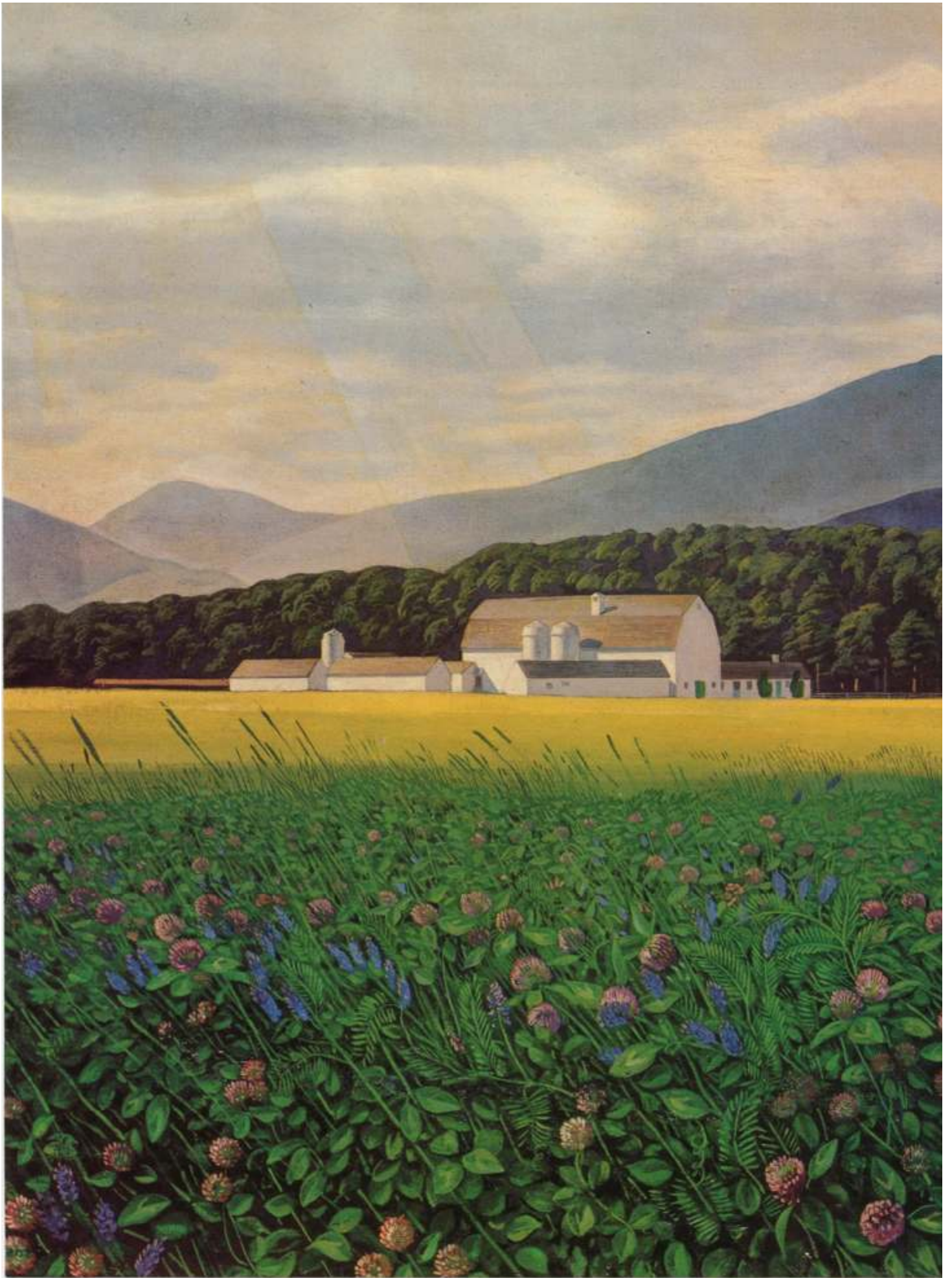
he has a secure place in the roster of American artists is certain. Which of his many talents will be singled out for memorable distinction, time alone can tell.²

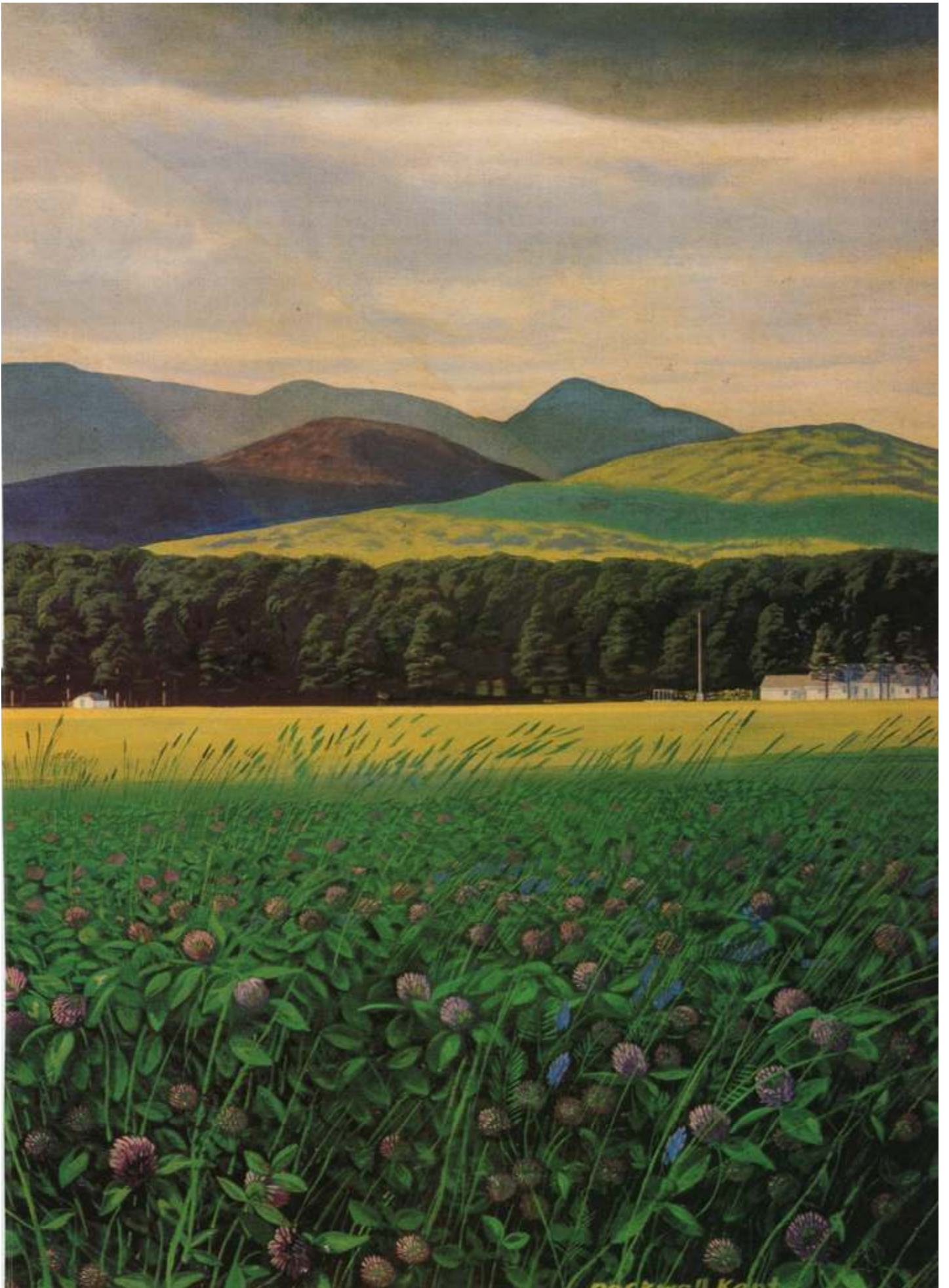
Kent was a brilliant speaker and writer, who made himself only too well understood to those whose aesthetic or political feathers he ruffled. A multifaceted talent, Kent cannot be pegged into the single convenient category of artist. He was not only painter, printmaker, illustrator and designer, but a gifted writer, political activist and spokesman for artists' causes, and voyager extraordinary. He was, in short, an all-around "personality" during a period in American history that doted on them. Despite the fact that he continued to paint and work until a

few months before his death, his public activities tended to obscure his solid accomplishments as a painter. His adamant refusal to acknowledge the avant-garde developments in American art that followed the Armory Show of 1913 isolated him more and more from the critical mainstream, while his political stands often estranged those who otherwise would have responded to his paintings. However, the artist's work as printmaker and illustrator never completely dropped from sight; his illustrated books and prints always remained popular, and it is in this field that his reputation has begun to be rehabilitated.³

When Rockwell Kent died in 1971, he received a front page obituary in the *New York Times*.⁴ Charac-

teristically, in recounting his career, the more spectacular private and political aspects of his life overshadowed his achievements as an artist: he is described as an activist for artists' rights in the nineteen-thirties; a delegate to various peace congresses in the nineteen-forties; a witness called before the House Un-American Activities Committee during the McCarthy era; a participant and victor in a Supreme Court battle to restore the citizen's right to passport; a recipient of the Lenin International Peace Prize in 1967 and donor of these proceeds to the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam. No matter how one judges his role as stormy petrel today, the fact remains that his reputation as an artist was affected by the varying





as Kent left a poetic record of his feelings, thoughts and activities in a series of autobiographical books published between 1920 and 1962. A complete bibliography of Kent's writings on subjects artistic, personal and political covers several pages.⁶ A prolific letter writer, his correspondence has been deposited with the Archives of American Art and gives compelling evidence of the wide scope of his interests and acquaintances.⁷

The paintings can be found scattered in numerous private and public collections, including the Metro-

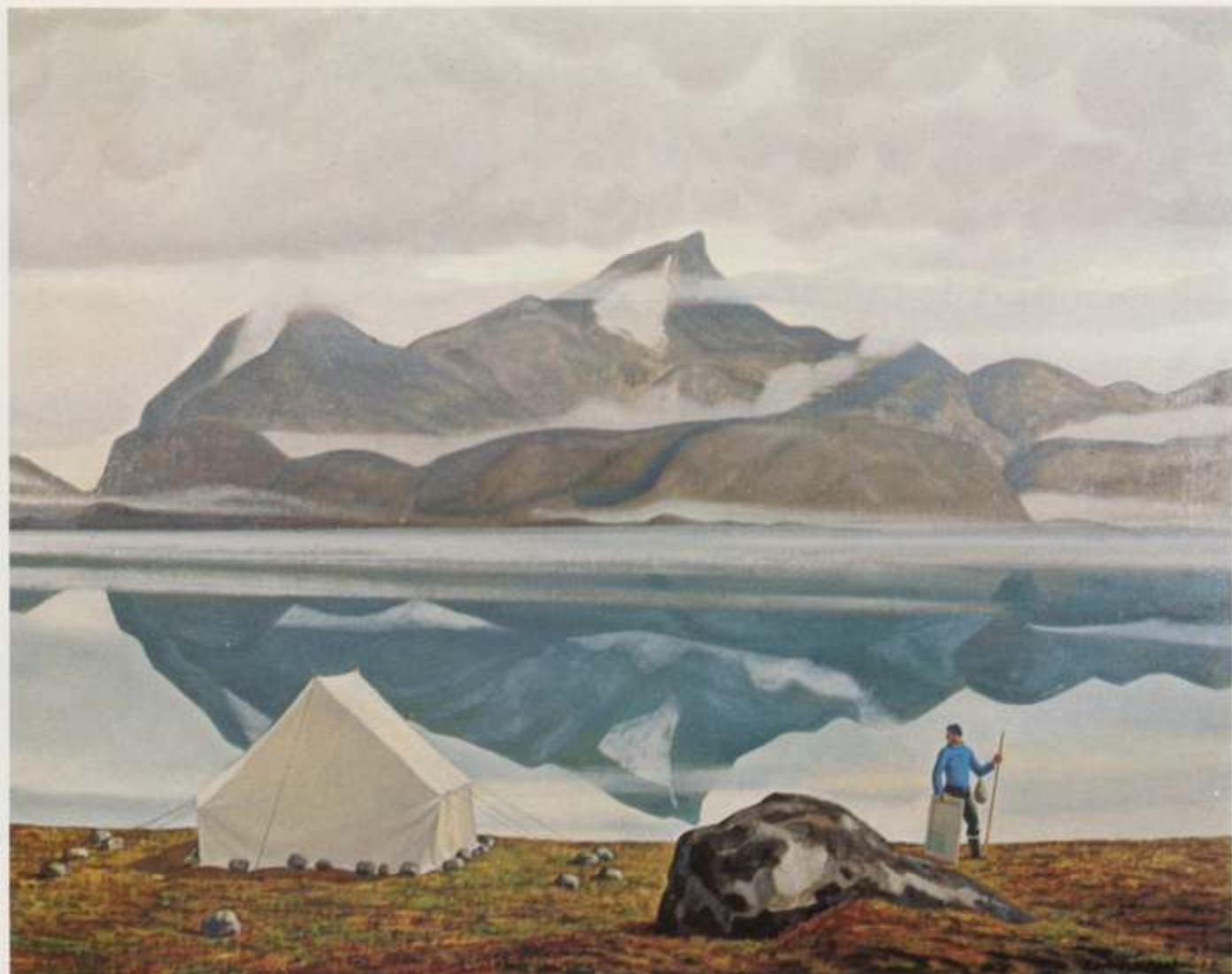
politan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Phillips Collection, the Corcoran Gallery, the Hirshhorn Collection, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the Cleveland Museum of Art and the Art Institute of Chicago. Carl Zigrosser's extensive collection of Kent drawings, prints and watercolors is now part of the collections of the Philadelphia Museum of Art; Kent collections have recently been established at Columbia University, the Bowdoin College Museum of Art in Maine, and at the State University of New York, Plattsburgh. From

these collections a general idea of Kent's development can be drawn, but it is noteworthy that a good portion of the artist's *oeuvre*—some eighty-two paintings spanning the years 1906 to 1960—are no longer in the United States. They were a gift of the artist to the people of the Soviet Union in 1961 and are presently divided among several museums there, the greater number being in the Hermitage Museum (Leningrad) and the Pushkin Museum (Moscow). The circumstances leading to the gift reflect the tensions and uneasy atmosphere of the nineteen-



ABOVE:
Sermilik Fjord, Greenland, 1929. o/c,
86 x 111. The Hermitage Museum,
Leningrad.

OPPOSITE:
Artist in Greenland, 1929. o/c. The
Pushkin Fine Arts Museum, Moscow.



fifties. The collection was originally intended for a museum in Maine because of the artist's long affection for and connection with Monhegan Island. The museum was also planning a retrospective exhibition, but abruptly cancelled it when word of Kent's appearance before Senator McCarthy was received. The artist's feelings of anger and betrayal at this time are well expressed in his autobiography. "In the experiences of my long life-time, exhibition arrangements have invariably been conducted on the basis of gentlemen's agreements. This would seem to be a hazardous basis when some of the parties are not gentlemen."⁸ As a result, Kent eventually decided that his work would be better appreciated and preserved—and cer-

tainly more often displayed—in the Soviet Union. It was a gesture for which no parallel exists in the history of American painting.

Nevertheless, despite the frequent ups and downs of his private and political life, and the episodic nature of his painting activities imposed by a consuming spirit of *Wanderlust*, Rockwell Kent must be considered one of the important American artists to emerge in the first half of the twentieth century. His art was firmly based in a realist tradition, the basic direction of which had been set by Winslow Homer, and was given shape and vigor by the teachings of Robert Henri and the example of Abbott Thayer. Kent was also attracted by the extraordinary visions of Albert Pinkham Ryder and

Arthur B. Davies. From these often contradictory modes Kent forged a powerful, mature style of great rhythmic and formal grandeur which culminated in a series of Arctic scenes painted in Greenland in the nineteen-thirties. These "landscapes of isolation" evoke not only American luminist painting of the previous century but in their icy clarity and mystery seem to hark back to the existential riddles of the early nineteenth century German painter Caspar David Friedrich.

Kent's formal training as a painter began after he enrolled as a scholarship student in architecture at Columbia University in 1900. While at Columbia, Kent attended the summer painting classes of William Merritt



Chase (1849–1916) at Shinnecock, Long Island. Chase was a brilliant painter who in his teaching and own practices emphasized the virtues of productivity and the quick grasp of essentials. His own style had been grounded in the sober realism of the Leibl circle in Munich, but by 1900 he had developed a dazzling virtuoso brush technique which emphasized the superficial qualities of the scenes that he painted. Nevertheless, he imbued the young Kent with basic technical skills and a strong sense of purpose, and did him the honor of painting his portrait as a class demonstration. Kent soon won a scholarship to the so-called "Chase School," actually the New York School of Art, the principal teachers of which were at that time Chase, Robert Henri (1865–1929) and Kenneth Hayes Miller (1876–1952). At first enrolled in night

classes, Kent gave up the study of architecture in his junior year and became a full-fledged art student at the School, taking classes from both Henri and Miller with such various fellow aspirants as Bellows, Hopper, Guy Pene du Bois (1884–1958) and Glenn O. Coleman (1887–1932).

While still attending the Chase school, Kent went to Dublin, New Hampshire in the summer of 1903 to work as an assistant for Abbott H. Thayer (1849–1921). Thayer, a distinguished painter whose works are too little appreciated today, agonized over every step in his own paintings and used assistants in a special manner of his own device to help him in the completion of his projects. After a painting had proceeded to a point where Thayer felt that further work would undo what he had already achieved, an assistant would paint a

copy which the artist would work on until he had solved his problem. Thayer would then return to the original and transfer his solution.⁹ While Kent was soon set loose to do his own painting, Thayer's influence on Kent's perception of nature was to be an important one. Kent returned frequently to Dublin during the next six years to do his own painting and to assist Thayer and his son in the illustrations for Thayer's *magnum opus*, the first major study of natural camouflage, *Concealing Coloration in the Animal Kingdom*. Two paintings done the first summer with Thayer were accepted for the 1904 Society of American Artists annual exhibition. Both were sold; one, *Dublin Pond*, purchased by Smith College, was the first of the artists' paintings to enter a public collection.¹⁰

A painting such as *Stone Bridge*,



N.H. of 1903 may be taken as typical of this period. Although still in the Shinnecock tradition in subject and general treatment, the characteristically loose, virtuoso brushwork associated with Chase's students was already being relinquished under the impact of Henri's example and teaching in favor of greater substance and delineation of shapes. In his autobiography, Kent credits Thayer for helping him develop beyond the formulas learned at Shinnecock.¹¹ Henri, too, urged his students to develop their own approaches without recourse to conventional solutions. This advice served to reinforce Kent's innate archi-
Text continued on page 100

OPPOSITE:

North Greenland Fjord, Gray Day, 1932.
o/c. 86 x 111. Hermitage Museum,
Leningrad.

LEFT:

William Merritt Chase. *Portrait of
Rockwell Kent, 1903.* o/c. 22 x 18.
Richard K. Larcada.

BELOW:

Eskimo in Kayah, 1933. o/c. The Pushkin
Fine Arts Museum, Moscow.



Rockwell Kent

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tectonic sense which, even in this early transitional painting, regulates the arrangement and composition of the landscape elements.

In 1905, following Henri's suggestion and example, Kent began visiting Monhegan Island, Maine. During the next few years, Kent was constantly travelling and living in New Hampshire, the Berkshires and New York City. Monhegan, however, was the prime shaping force on the artist's life at this time: living and working on the island for extended periods, he soon identified himself with the fishermen and other inhabitants who braved the hazards of existence there. The sea is inescapable on the island and forms part of almost every vista, even if only glimpsed in the distance, with lobstermen coming and going. So the sea, and the headlands which give Monhegan its character, can be found in practically all the paintings from this period.

One of the finest is *Winter-Monhegan Island*. Painted in 1907, the artist subsequently presented it to Henri: a significant gesture as it marks at once the culmination of Henri's inspiration as a teacher and the assertion of Kent's maturity as an artist. While Henri was a powerful influence as a teacher and emancipator who stimulated many of Kent's early attainments through example and counsel, it should be noted that Kent never wholeheartedly subscribed to many of Henri's theories concerning painting. Kent was later to write that Kenneth Hayes Miller's emphasis on the more formal aspects of picture construction were an important counterbalance to Henri's looser and more emotive approach.¹² Nevertheless, *Winter-Monhegan Island* pays homage to Henri, not so much by studious imitation as by the bold grasp of essentials and directness of means. Kent shows himself in full command of his resources as a painter, using the brush soberly as a means of shaping and modelling forms, while keeping the atmospheric

freshness of direct observation.

Another painting from the same year, *Maine Coast*, 1907, evokes the spirit of Winslow Homer. The simply composed picture, with stark bare expanse of snow set off by the dark bands of trees and shining bulk of headland, a wedge of ocean and distant sail on the horizon, shows familiarity with and admiration for Homer's views of the Maine coast painted at Prout's Neck in the previous decade. When John Sloan saw these and other works at Kent's first one man exhibition at the Clausen Galleries in April, 1907, he was moved to write in his diary:

Splendid big thoughts. Some like big prayers to God. I enjoyed them to the utmost and accept them as great. I'd like to buy some of them.¹³

The exhibition marked Kent's acceptance into the circle of older artists forming around the charismatic personality of Henri. That artist's regard for Kent can be gauged by the fact that he offered to recommend the younger artist for the directorship of the Columbus College of Art and Design in 1910 after giving John Sloan first refusal.¹⁴ Kent became close with Dolly and John Sloan, sharing a common interest in Socialism and other issues of the day. Of the other artists that comprised "The Eight" (beside Henri and Sloan, there were George Luks,

Ernest Lawson, Everett Shinn, William Glackens, Maurice Prendergast and Arthur B. Davies), Kent formed friendships with Luks and Davies.

The relationship between Kent and George Bellows is more difficult to analyze. Bellows, too, had precocious gifts as a painter and had early recognition, being elected to the National Academy shortly after leaving the Henri classes. Although Kent and Bellows often found themselves taking different sides in the various discussions and debates that characterized the Henri circle, their paintings from this period frequently display similar approaches and attitudes in their handling of the subject. In Kent's *The Road Roller* and Bellows's *Pennsylvania Station Excavation*, both from 1909, we are aware of the way in which monumentality is imposed on the subject by the dramatic contrast of scale which dwarfs the human figures.

One significant difference that set off Kent from most of the other artists associated with Henri is that he never treated the urban scene, the milling mass of humanity among the city canyons that so fascinated Sloan, Luks, Bellows, Glackens, Shinn and Jerome Myers. Although Kent had occasion to treat urban foibles in the witty illustrations he produced for *Vanity Fair* and other periodicals under the pseudonym Hogarth, Jr., as a painter he responded primarily to the challenge

of the landscape. It was to become the prime vehicle for his development during the following three decades.

The high point of Kent's association with the Henri circle was the "open door" Independents Exhibition of 1910. The original "Eight" had been established in the public eye by a successful exhibition at the Macbeth Galleries in 1908, and the Independents Exhibition was seen by Henri as a logical extension, which would provide a number of younger artists an opportunity to gain recognition. With the exception of Luks, the artists of the original "Eight" all submitted works, and were joined by a number of promising talents. Kent, of course, was included and assisted in the initial stages of organization. The exhibition was considered a great critical success, but sales of paintings were disappointing. Kent supported himself as an architectural draftsman for the firm of Ewing and Chappell throughout this period.

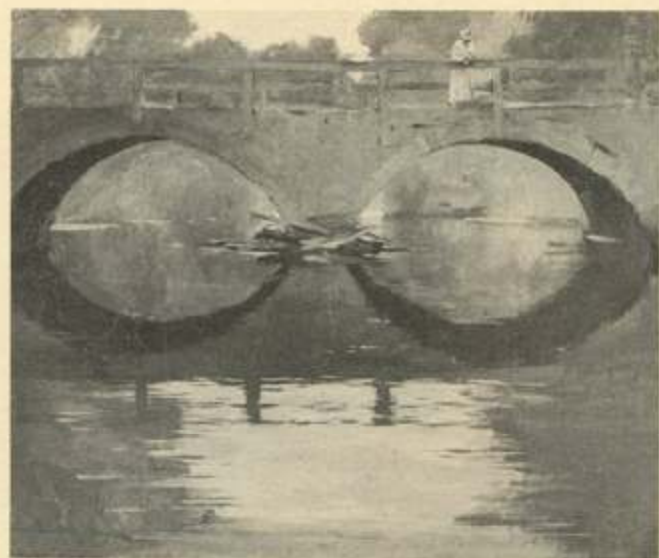
Nevertheless, the following year Kent proposed another Independents exhibition to Henri, but with the stipulation that any artist who exhibited in

LEFT:

Stone Bridge, Keene, New Hampshire, 1903. o/c, 20 x 24. Private Collection.

RIGHT:

The Road Roller, 1909. o/c, 34 x 44½. The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.



Rockwell Kent Continued

it would not exhibit at the National Academy. In Kent's words:

The issue between the Independents and the Academicians was not merely one of bitterly conflicting ideals, but one of substance in that it involved the Academy's not unnatural control, a monopoly of virtually the only public exhibition space in the city; and through the exercise of that monopoly an actual coercive power over artists. Conform, it might have said, or remain unknown. My own impulse had been—founded on the realistic view that the Academy to live must draw new blood into its ranks—that youth and all the dissidents should boycott it.¹⁵

A similar notion had at one time been discussed by Henri and John Sloan as a possible premise for a future exhibition, but it had been discarded.¹⁶ Whether or not Kent was aware of this, Henri was adamantly opposed to the policy when it was proposed to him by Kent. Kent persisted and a schism was created, with Bellows agreeing with Henri that the stipulation would hinder rather than help the artists in storming the bastions of the artistic establishment. Sloan initially sided with Kent, but after some soul-searching eventually withdrew his support.¹⁷ The exhibition was held, however, with assistance coming from a surprising quarter:

Arthur B. Davies agreed with Kent that some steps should be taken to shake the monolithic and pervasive influence of the Academy.

With Davies' moral support and financial aid, the exhibition was mounted in March, 1911. Kent had secured the use of the gallery of the Society of Beaux Arts Architects at 16 E. 33rd Street through the architect George Chappell for whom he did renderings. Although the catalogue announced "An Independent Exhibition of the Paintings and Drawings of Eleven Men . . ." there were actually twelve exhibitors. With Kent and Davies, the artists represented were George Luks, Homer Boss, Glenn O. Coleman, Guy Pene du Bois, Julius Golz, Marsden Hartley, John Marin, Alfred Maurer, John McPherson and Maurice Prendergast. The inclusion of Luks, who had not exhibited in the 1910 Independents Exhibition, particularly irritated those colleagues who had decided not to exhibit with Kent, and was testament to the younger artist's persuasive skill and Davies' influence. "Kent's Tent" as the exhibition was dubbed, established the artist in the public eye as a maverick; a reputation he was to enhance vigorously in the succeeding decades.

At about this time, Kent began contributing playful and witty illustrations to such publications as *Vanity Fair*, *Judge* and the *New York Herald-*

Tribune. His commercial work proved to be very popular and provided a source of income more secure than the occasional sale of paintings. This was not an unusual situation, and both John Sloan and Edward Hopper were active as illustrators during various phases of their careers. In Kent's case, however, his reputation as an illustrator was to rival and eventually overshadow his work as a painter.

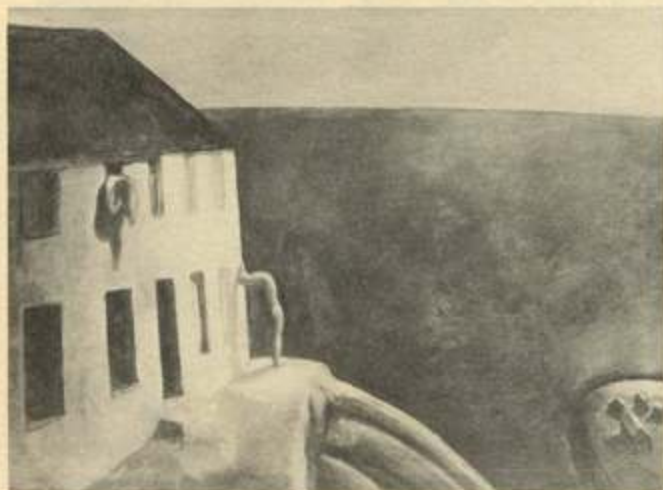
Fascinated by the rugged coast of Newfoundland, Kent made two trips to paint and to scout out the possibility of establishing an artist's commune. On his second trip in 1914, Kent brought his family and intended to settle in the town of Brigus. The sojourn ended abruptly in the hysteria generated by the outbreak of World War I. Suspected of being a German agent, because of his insistence on singing German *lieder* and his sketching expeditions, Kent was ordered to leave. Once more in New York, the artist continued to produce illustrations and was involved with several of

LEFT:

Men and Mountains, 1909. o/c, 34½ x 44½. Gift of Ferdinand Howald. The Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts.

RIGHT:

House of Dread, 1915. o/c, 28 x 38. State University of New York, College at Plattsburgh.



the exhibitions which succeeded the earlier Independent exhibitions and the Armory Show. In 1917, he acted as chairman of the installation committee for the exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists.¹⁸ But by this time much had changed. The new currents stimulated by the 1913 Armory Show, the general uncertainty induced by social unrest and the *war mood*, all served to rekindle the artist's desire to return to the stark challenge of Arctic regions. In 1918, financed in part by the sale of a few paintings and a small mural commission, Kent and his eldest son travelled to Alaska, settling on the isolated Fox Island in Resurrection Bay. The sojourn resulted in a number of drawings and paintings later exhibited at Knoedler's and in a book, *Wilderness: A Journal of Quiet Adventure in Alaska*, which was critically acclaimed and brought the artist to the attention of a large public previously unaware of his art.

Between 1910 and 1915, Kent's paintings became more somber in subject and color. The human figure is given an increasingly dominant and expressive role, often weighed down with *Weltschmerz* or gazing at the stars, with features hidden or only summarily treated. Certain aspects of the human dilemma are treated often: leave-takings, funerals, loneliness and isolation. A symbolic treatment of isolation, for example, is the "man on a mast" theme, subject of several drawings and at least one—incomplete—painting. It took its definitive form in a later print, *Masthead* (Burne Jones 7). The result of growing introspection and seriousness of purpose, many of the paintings and drawings reflect aspects of the artist's personal life or attempt to find a deeper meaning in scenes witnessed during travels, as in *Down to the Sea* (Brooklyn Museum) or *Burial of a Young Man*.

Just as "Kent's Tent" marked a philosophical break with Henri, the *Burial of a Young Man* shows a new direction in the artist's perceptions. The mourning figures are stretched out in a frieze-like arrangement, with sea and headland as backdrop. The foreground is

divided into flat bands which run the width of the picture. Although the painting was suggested by an actual funeral, and the setting inspired by a specific location in Newfoundland, the treatment is that of a classical tragedy. John Sloan felt the painting showed the influence of Arthur Davies when it was first exhibited at the Union League Club Exhibition in 1911,¹⁹ possibly because of the painting's air of poetic mystery. Kent was on friendly terms with Davies at this time and undoubtedly saw a great deal of the older artist's work as a result of the organization of the 1911 "Kent's Tent." *Burial*, however, is more an outgrowth of the artist's own change in outlook, the introspective reverse of the playful *Spring Fever*, *Berkshires* or the boistrous *Men and Mountains*, of 1909 to which *Burial* appears almost as a pendant.

A painting much more indicative of the way Kent absorbed Davies' romantic vision is *Pastoral*, painted in 1914. The landscape elements appear in other works of this time; the stylized shapes of hills and sea, the toy-like animals and figure create a fairytale atmosphere at odds with the realistic character of the earlier landscapes. It suggests that Kent had in mind a model such as Davies' *Unicorns*. *Pastoral*, however, is more decorative and explicitly simplified than the Davies painting, and implies familiarity with the work of other artists as varied as Albert Ryder and the German Franz Marc. Critics called the work of this period "mystical," a label Kent repudiated; he subsequently regretted many of the paintings done at this time and the circumstances that brought them about, feeling that he had gone off on a tangent.²⁰

The few paintings that survive tend to support the artist's misgivings, being sometimes clumsy or awkwardly "experimental." The more frankly decorative patterns were to find their way into the illustrations and decorative designs, such as glass painting, which the artist executed later in the decade. As early as 1915, in the *House of Dread*, expressive forms are sub-

dued and integrated into a clearly delineated compositional scheme. Painted during the last stages of the artist's short-lived immigration to Newfoundland, it draws upon his feelings of foreboding and despair to create an ambiguous, disquieting picture of loss and alienation and remains one of Kent's most powerful and moving paintings.

In Alaska in 1918, the mood changed from the Ibsen-like broodings of the Newfoundland paintings to an evocation of man and nature more in keeping with the artist's profound admiration for Walt Whitman. In writing *Wilderness* and books that followed, Kent found a more appropriate means of expressing the feelings, thoughts and emotions which for a time had threatened to overpower the paintings. A fresh vision of nature begins to emerge in the Alaskan paintings. An enhanced precision and clarity enter into the landscapes, shapes become simpler and colors more resonant. This development, embodied in a painting such as *Resurrection Bay, Alaska (Blue and Gold)* of 1919, was one that would become a hallmark of the artist's style for the next thirty years.

At the suggestion and urging of Carl Zigrosser, Kent took up printmaking upon his return from Alaska in 1919. Both George Bellows and Edward Hopper had shortly before begun to make prints, and it is interesting to note that each artist chose to make a particular medium his own. Bellows preferred the painterly effects of the lithograph, Hopper the rich potential of etching and Kent the incisive clarity of wood engraving. Although Kent later produced some remarkable lithographs, it is on the basis of his wood engraved prints that his fame as a printmaker was established. His mastery of the medium created a "style" that was frequently imitated in the late nineteen-twenties and early nineteen-thirties. The prints often took up the dilemma of man and nature in a more symbolic way than the paintings, using a vocabulary of the human figure harking back to the work of the En-

Rockwell Kent Continued

glish visionary William Blake. The prints also became the vehicle—next to writing—through which Kent's strong social concerns were reflected from time to time.

In the nineteen-twenties, trips to Tierra del Fuego and the Straits of Magellan, France and Ireland each produced sets of sketches and paintings. The more ambitious paintings continued to develop the theme of man in nature, generally picturing an

scape, while at the same time being absorbed into it.

The motive of a figure turned toward the landscape was one used by the German Romantic painter, Caspar David Friedrich, in a series of memorable landscapes. It is difficult to escape the impression that Kent knew of and admired Friedrich's paintings. We know that German was the second language in the Kent family when the young Rockwell was growing up, and that he read Goethe's *Faust* and *Wilhelm Meister* with pleasure as a

The development of Kent's painting from about 1920 on has interesting points of similarity with the paintings of Edward Hopper and George Bellows. All three came from the matrix of Henri's class with its emphasis on emotive and spontaneous responses to nature. In the years following the Armory Show of 1913, they responded in not dissimilar ways to the need to develop the formal underpinnings of their art. Bellows became interested in theories of "dynamic symmetry" and the implications of adapting it to the construction of his paintings. Kent's and Hopper's approach was more intuitive. Both simplified shapes a great deal, and created compositions in which perspectives were reduced to overlapping configurations across the canvas. Both eschewed the earlier bravura painting techniques they had learned in favor of a sober, almost anonymous touch. And with both, light became an important unifying device. Although Hopper's best known works are of an urban milieu, while Kent dealt primarily with landscape in his paintings, both were concerned with the twin themes of isolation and detachment.

Kent's development during the nineteen-twenties was climaxed by a series of sojourns in Greenland between 1928 and 1935. As he had at Monhegan and in Newfoundland, Kent lived with the inhabitants, sketching, painting and sharing in their work and activities. He built a small house for himself in the settlement of Igdlorssuit in the Umanak district of North Greenland and began the most productive period of his life as a painter. In the everyday life of the Greenlander and in the grand panoramas surrounding the settlement, Kent perceived the components of an epic landscape and noted it in his journal:

As I look over the settlement from my window, Igdlorssuit is like a stage upon which the epic drama of the lives of the people deploys unendingly. There, seen in sunlight and in shadow, rain and snow, wind and calm, day and night, as

Burial of a Young Man, 1910. o/c.
28 x 52. The Phillips Collection,
Washington, D.C.



anonymous or ambiguous figure subsumed into the landscape. For example, in a major painting of 1921, *The Trapper*, the rhythmic repetition of clouds, hills and shadows on the snow take on a movement and life of their own to which the figure (in this case the artist himself) is a contemplative witness. In *Donegal*, painted in Ireland in 1926 or 1927, the role of the figure is more enigmatic. Kent was fascinated by Celtic history and the monuments of the Druids; hence, the figure—which may simply be that of a woman with a shawl—operates here on a symbolic level, brooding over the land-

young man. At the age of thirteen, Kent took the first of several trips to Germany, accompanying an aunt to Dresden, where Friedrich had spent most of his working life and where most of his surviving works are yet to be found. It is tempting to speculate that Friedrich's evocative landscapes found a response in Kent's own developing attitude toward the landscape. In *Donegal*, as in Friedrich's paintings where a foreground figure peers into the landscape, we experience the landscape with the figure, and our attitude is conditioned by our perception of the figure.

if responsive to the elements and hours that bestow their mood upon each day and hour of the drama, the people come out of their houses and in all the perfection of entire artlessness perform their parts. . . . It is an *epic* drama in that it is at once local and universal. Its elements are the essentials of all human life presented here as though this were Bayreuth or Oberammergau, colored and costumed in the conventions of this unique and special culture. . . . The front part of the stage is the land: the settlement of Igdlorssuit and the broad smooth crescent of the strand that reaches right and left to the lookout head and the mountain that like two wings shut the backstage world from view. . . . Early this morning the clouds lifted like a curtain rolling up. It was all gray at first. And then as the lower mountains showed themselves, the color-reflected dawn crept over them, and they were bright with it. Then all at once a shaft of the true sunlight shot somehow through the ceiling of clouds and fell upon a far-off, snow-white mountain peak. And by the splendor of that, all that seemed bright before was now as though in shadow. All day the cloud curtain hung suspended just below the height of the higher mountain peaks. Night was its cue to lift. . . . The sea was motionless but for the tide. This bore the innumerable little icebergs past in unending procession. They are like Lohengrin's swan boat, I thought.

As a flower is sometimes described as so beautiful that it looks like wax, so have I described the region of sea and mountains surrounding Igdlorssuit in

terms of canvas, compo board, and paint. Yet the reduction of the infinite to terms of human comprehension is all that art and science ever can achieve or try. That, in recognition of the limitations of human faculties, is the function of art and science.²¹

In the Greenland paintings, the artist's developing tendency towards simplification and monumentality meshed with an ideal subject matter. Stark contrasts of light and dark, large areas of pure unmodulated color, and distances unobscured by atmospheric haze were all inherent aspects of the Greenland vistas. These elements are already evident in *Mirrored Mountain (Sermilik Fiord)* of 1929, one of the earliest of the Greenland series, which takes up the theme of reflected images already noted in the early painting, *Stone Bridge, N.H.* The simplification of landscape elements is accompanied by a subtle schematization of the observed effects of light. In particular, the phenomenon of the sun shining from behind a prominent geographical feature, lightening the color and tone of the sky just at its edge, is turned into a formal and decorative device emphasizing the profiles of shapes seen against the sky. The paintings were often arranged with the natural features parallel to the picture plane, with recession implied by superimposed bands of color laid on with straight-edge precision.

With few exceptions, when figures

or animals appear at all, they are generally dwarfed by the landscape. Rather than witnesses to it, as in *The Trapper* and *Donegal*, the figures are of the landscape, giving scale to the elemental hills and mountains. Even the artist, when he occasionally appears as one of the *dramatis personae* in a landscape, is subsumed into the overall vastness, as in the *Artist in Greenland*, also from 1929. The landscapes were usually painted on the spot, with the canvas and painting supplies mounted on the artist's dog sled. Early photographs of paintings which now contain figures, seem to indicate that figures (based on drawings and sketches) were added later, after the landscapes had been completed.

The artist's admiration of the Eskimo way of life, customs and hardships is well documented in his writings and is evident in the number of drawings, watercolors and lithographs of his friends and fellow villagers. In the paintings, however, the Greenlanders usually play a symbolic role, going about his or her activities without any hint of "local color" or "pic-

LEFT:

Pastoral, 1914. o/c, 34 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 44 $\frac{1}{2}$. Gift of Ferdinand Howald. The Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts.

RIGHT:

Donegal, 1926. o/c, 34 x 44. Richard K. Larcada.



Rockwell Kent Continued

turesque" patronization by the artist. While there are some exceptional paintings of specific Greenlanders, most are similar to *Seal Hunter, North Greenland*, 1933, in which the danger and excitement of the task is only implied in stark shapes and emptiness of the landscape.

The Greenland paintings are also remarkable in their use of color. Rather than the "white on white" effect one might suppose would come from the subject matter, the variety of colors, which in fact are observable in Arctic regions, are used to reinforce the formal and emotive impact of the paintings. In *Gray Day, North Greenland Fjord* of 1932, the atmospheric implications of the scene are carried by the subtle shades of yellows and purples contrasted with the unremitting tones of sky and snow. These are indeed "landscapes of isolation", evocative and mysterious, a grand design in which man and the elements each play a role.

Isolation also permitted the artist to work uninterruptedly and to produce an enormous number of canvases. Many he brought back with him to finish later in his studio. They are unquestionably one of the most compelling bodies of landscapes produced in this century by an American artist, yet most remained unsold for many years and—as a series—they received little critical notice. Some of the reasons are not difficult to find.

Between the years from 1928 to 1935 a profound change swept American art. The Depression and the social upheavals it triggered affected every aspect of the art scene. After his return, Kent was increasingly taken up with the major social issues of the day, starting with the formation of the Artist's Union (UOPWA) and extending through the war years into the Cold War atmosphere of the nineteen-fifties and nineteen-sixties. The issues, as he conceived them, were not simply that of the artist in society, but involved the fabric of society itself. He threw himself into those issues, even running for

the United States Congress on the Progressive Party ticket in 1948.

As an artist, his energies were taken up by illustration, printmaking, decorative designs, mural commissions and lecturing. Paradoxically, as the artist became better known (some would say notorious), his paintings became less known. A small series of paintings were produced after World War II, mainly of the area near his home at Asgaard in the Adirondacks and following a visit to Monhegan in the early nineteen-fifties, but the artist's periods of relative tranquility were short and his priorities elsewhere. The critical climate had also changed, as had the marketplace. The small number of Greenland paintings which were sold went into the private collections of friends and supporters, while the rest remained in the artist's studio. Many of these latter works were included in the gift to the Soviet Union. Thus they have remained practically unknown, except for an occasional reproduction, to an entire generation of artists, critics and art historians.

As contemporary realist painting is being considered with new awareness and understanding, it seems an opportune moment to reconsider Rockwell Kent's contributions. The strong formal underpinnings of the landscapes, the skillful architecture of their construction, the reduction of means and the elimination of all unnecessary gesture in the later paintings, point to Kent's kinship with a number of advanced developments in American paintings in the twentieth century. Yet, at the same time, he kept his roots in the nineteenth century: the obvious relish in translating the colors and shapes of nature, the inescapable undercurrent of quiet drama, mystery or melancholy suggested by objective means, and finally his concern with the landscape as the symbol for the forces that govern man and nature, show him to have been an heir to a tradition extending from the very beginning of the landscape tradition in American painting.



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After undergraduate work at UCLA and UC, Santa Barbara, Mr. West did graduate studies at the Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna and UC, Berkeley. He was a Ford Fellow in 1965 at the Cleveland Museum of Art and in 1966 at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo. He has been Curator and Director of the Bowdoin College Museum of Art in Brunswick, Maine from 1967 to 1972. In 1969, organized *Rockwell Kent: The Early Years*, the first major retrospective exhibition of the artist in the United States during his lifetime. He is presently organizing *Munich and American Realism in the Nineteenth Century* to be seen in Sacramento, Cincinnati, Milwaukee, and other cities in 1978-1979. He has been the Director of the E.B. Crocker Art Gallery in Sacramento, California since 1973.

Footnotes:

¹Bernard Myers, "American Painting Today," *Lessons in Art Appreciation*, Number 12, Jersey City, The National Committee for Art Appreciation, Ltd., 1937, 1. It is of interest to note that in this pamphlet, obviously designed for a mass audience, Edward Hopper and Rockwell Kent are linked as "among the two most important pupils of Robert Henri" (p.1). The other artists discussed in Dr. Myer's essay are Grant Wood, John Stewart Curry, and Jon Corbino.

²Carl Zigrosser, "Rockwell Kent: Painter, Lithographer and Book Illustrator," *The London Studio*, XIII, April, 1937, 199.

³The most recently published study of the artist is on this subject: Dan Burne Jones, *The Prints of Rockwell Kent: A Catalogue Raisonné*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1975. Another example of revived interest is *The Kent Collector*, published quarterly by George Spector, 34-10-94th Street, Jackson Heights, N.Y. 11372. Now in its third year, the publication is devoted to all aspects of the artist's career.

⁴"Rockwell Kent, Artist, Is Dead. Championed Left-Wing Causes," *New York Times* March 14, 1971.

⁵A major survey exhibition has been organized by the Hammer Galleries, New York, February-March 19, 1977. The last previous major survey of Kent's paintings was the exhibition catalogue for *Rockwell Kent: The Early Years*, Brunswick, Bowdoin College Museum of Art, 1969. At the time this is being written, a biography of the artist is being prepared for

publication by David Traxel. The author of this article is presently collecting data for a projected catalogue raisonné of the paintings.

⁶Jones, *op. cit.*, 205–207 and *idem*, “A Descriptive Checklist of the Written and Illustrated Books of Rockwell Kent,” and “Books Illustrated by Rockwell Kent,” both in *American Book Collector*, XIV, Summer 1964, 21–24 and 43–50.

⁷Garnett McCoy, “The Rockwell Kent Papers,” *Archives of American Art Journal*, XII, January, 1972, 1–18.

⁸Rockwell Kent, *It's Me O Lord*, New York, Dodd, Mead & Company, 1955, 613–615. Hereafter referred to as *IMOL*, this book is the major autobiographical writing by the artist, covering his life up to 1954.

⁹*IMOL*, 99.

¹⁰Reported in the *New York Art Bulletin*, April 23, 1904. At that time entitled *Evening*, it was purchased by Professor Seelye on behalf of the college. The other painting exhibited was *Monadnock*.

¹¹*IMOL*, 100.

¹²*IMOL*, 83. Even as a student, Kent took exception—albeit playfully—to Henri’s “simple palette” theories by participating in and winning a school election which pitted the Henri disciples against those who professed a brighter spectrum.

¹³*John Sloan's New York Scene*, ed. Bruce St. John, New York, Harper & Row, 1965, 121 (April 13, 1907). Hereinafter cited as *Sloan*.

¹⁴*IMOL*, 239 and *Sloan*, 407 (April 6, 1910).

¹⁵*IMOL*, 226.

¹⁶*Sloan*, 412 (April 20, 1910). “Went to see Henri in the evening and we talked over matter of next year Ex. We decided to incorporate. To disqualify any artist who sent to the National Academy. . .”

¹⁷Two versions of this episode are recorded in *IMOL*, 228–229, and *Sloan*, 512–513 (March 2, 1911).

¹⁸This was the exhibition to which Marcel Duchamp submitted the urinal signed “R. Mutt.” Although permitted by the rules to enter the work without jurying, the installation committee found a way to place it behind a partition so it was not seen by the public. Kent’s disenchantment with avant-garde trends was undoubtedly reinforced by this incident.

¹⁹*Sloan*, 527 (April 17, 1910).

²⁰*IMOL*, 313. The artist’s despondency and introspection during his Newfoundland stay is reflected in the titles of his paintings, e.g. *Ruin and Eternity*, *The Voyager Beyond Life*, *Newfoundland Dirge* and *Man the Abyss*.

²¹*Rockwell Kent's Greenland Journal*, New York, Ivan Oblensky, Inc., 1962, 82–85 (October 23, 1931).

²²Kent also painted differing versions of the same scene, with and without figures. For example, another version of *Mirrored Mountain* exists as *Greenland People, Dogs and Mountains* (Bowdoin College Museum of Art) with a boat filled with Greenlanders pulled up at the edge of the fiord.