

# Rockwell Kent

## Connecting Philately with His Art

*The Jazz Age humorist, Renaissance Man, progressive and artist, philatelists drawn to his very graphic art are blessed with the many connections it makes within our hobby.*

BY ARTHUR H. GROTEN, M.D.

**R**ockwell Kent (1882-1971) was arguably the greatest American artist of the 20th Century. His reputation was significantly diminished by his politics and he is just now returning to his proper place. He was certainly one of the most prolific, working in virtually all artistic media, and was, as well, a writer, speaker, polemicist, protester, prodigious letter-writer, carpenter, etc., etc. He was a true Renaissance man. And he left his mark on paraphilately as well.

Perhaps his most well-known creation was the 1939 Christmas seal. Over the years, a number of excellent articles have been written about his design and its complexities, most recently by Doug Lehmann in *The American Philatelist*, in December 2005. Kent signed 100 imperforate sheets between the central slogan seals, each numbered on the back. The signed block is from sheet #70 (Fig. 1).

Various philatelic first day covers were made but finding a commercial first day usage is rather more difficult (Fig. 2).

Probably the most outrageous usage of a Christmas seal I have seen is on a cover (Figures 3a & b) to Tonga with a seal on the front and two more on the back, tied by two of the myriad Tin Can Mail cancels. It left Riverside, Conn., on Dec. 2, arriving Jan. 10 at Nuku'alofa, Tonga, then sent on to Niuafoou where it was received on January 12.



From 1940, this is the last poster stamp known to depict the art of Rockwell Kent—for the Council Against Intolerance in America. Note the Kent signature at the upper left of the central design. (Figure 12)



Fig 1: Rockwell Kent signed 100 imperforate sheets of the 1939 Christmas seal.



**B**ut he had worked in this small format for many years. Upon his return from Alaska in 1917 he revived the ancient art of reverse painting on glass, installing wonderful jewel-like paintings in the upper panel of a mirror frame. The paintings are quite rare with only about a dozen extant. Each frame had a specially designed label applied and they are equally rare (Fig. 4). He used the pseudonym, Hogarth Jr., for what he considered his "less serious" work, including many drawings he made for *Vanity Fair* as well as various advertisements.

The image of the girl is a stylized version of his then-mistress, Hildegarde Hirsch. He created a special label for use only by them

depicting a man (Kent) embracing a deer (Hirsch, in German, is deer). I know of only two copies of this label (Fig. 5).

While he did produce many small bookplates during the 1920s and 1930s, they are a bit far afield from paraphilately even for me. The next true label I am aware of is the famous 1932 Greenland semi-official airmail stamp. Dr. Franck led an expedition to Greenland to make a film for Universal Pictures called *S.O.S. Iceberg* (Fig. 6).

World War I German ace pilot, Ernst Udet, accompanied them and flew supplies in and out of their base camp. Kent was living and working in Greenland at the time. He and Udet met and, it is said, during an evening of drink, hit upon the idea of making a

MILLER TIRE SHOP  
Front and Sycamore Streets  
NILES, MICHIGAN  
**Firestone**



Fig 8: The New York reprint of the Greenland stamp.



F. W. Crawford  
22 S. Fourth St.  
Niles, Michigan

Fig 2: Commercial FDC of the 1939 Christmas seal.



Fig 7: The 1932 Rockwell Kent Greenland semi-official airmail cover properly used on card to Germany, signed by Ernst Udet, the pilot.



Fig 6: A poster stamp promoting the Universal film "S.O.S. Iceberg".



Designed and painted by  
Wm. Hogarth, Jr.  
23 West 12 St  
New York.



Fig 5: Private label for use only by Kent and his mistress, Hildegard Hirsch.

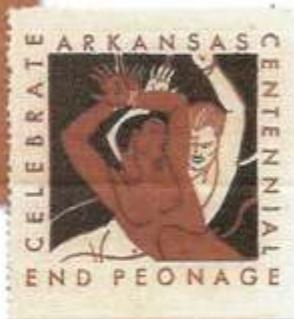


Fig 11: 1936 Arkansas Centennial label exhorting to "End Peonage".



Fig 10a & b: The rubber stamp with reverse design and an impression from the stamp, not known on cover.

Fig 9: A rare Kent ceramic, signed by him on the back at the bottom, for use with an "Air Mail" rubber stamp.

stamp to raise money for the local community center, charging 10 ore per stamp. He hand-cut the woodblock and made between 75 and 100 impressions. Only eight or so are known on cover (Fig. 7). On his return to New York, he made another block of the same design but more refined. Just 400 were printed by Pynson Press and maybe 100 were signed (Fig. 8).

At about this time he made a ceramic dove (Fig. 9) to the bottom of which was applied a padded rubber cancel device for use on envelopes (Fig. 10a & b). I have never seen it used on cover.

By the mid 1930s, Kent had become a left wing protester and produced a rather scarce label for the Arkansas Centennial showing two men, a white having broken his bonds and a black still bound

at the wrists, with the caption "Celebrate/Arkansas/Centennial/End Peonage" (Fig. 11). It is a striking and powerful image for such a small space. That is what makes a great poster stamp and this is a prime example of difficulty of making rigid definitions.

Next came the 1939 Christmas seal, discussed above.

The last label Kent designed that I am aware of is from 1940 for the Council against Intolerance in America, depicting a monumental figure protecting the huddled masses from the flames of discrimination (Fig. 12 on page 23). The cover in Fig. 13 is most interesting being a Union Civil War patriotic used in 1940 with a single 13¢ Prexy paying the first class special delivery rate.

I would appreciate hearing from readers who might know of other labels designed by this important American artist.



Fig 3a & b: Front and back of a cover to Tonga with the 1939 Christmas seal tied.



Fig 13: Unusual use of the Council label on a Union Civil War patriotic envelope.