

ROCKWELL KENT REVIEW

PLATTSBURGH STATE ART MUSEUM

VOLUME XLIII / 2017 — 2018



Plattsburgh
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Interpreting the Real and the Ideal

Rockwell Kent's Bituminous Coal Series Rediscovered

Eric J. Schruers

It has been almost twenty years since this article was originally published, first in the SECAC Journal and subsequently in the Kent Collector. The genesis of the research that resulted in its publication was my work cataloging the Steidle Collection of American Industrial Art at the Pennsylvania State University in the early 1990s as part of my dissertation project. Rockwell Kent's Power... for the Wheels of Progress! is one of the only works by a major American artist in that rather substantial collection, and yet there was practically no information available on the painting or the series itself. This led to a fair amount of archival research with most of the crucial material being found in the Rockwell Kent Papers at the Archives of American Art in Washington, D.C.

Initially developed as a graduate seminar paper for Dr. Anthony Cutler at Penn State University, it was then presented as a paper at The Southeastern College Art Conference's annual conference in Richmond, VA, in 1997. Dr. Floyd Martin invited me to publish it in the Southeastern College Art Conference Review, Volume XIII, No. 3, 1998, and the following year it was published with expanded illustrations by Marguerite Eisinger in the Kent Collector, Summer 1999, Vol. XXV, No. 2.

Life and work led me to other projects and research in the years that followed, so it was a surprise in 2015 when I found myself at a reception at West Virginia University seated next to Robert Bridges, curator of the university art museum. I had failed to track down the Bituminous Coal Institute painting presented to WVU in 1948, To Make Dreams Homes Come True, and, as we were being introduced, asked if he had come across this bizarre painting by Rockwell Kent. As he recounted, a professor of engineering named Royce Willis had happened to notice the custodian of the college of engineering and mineral resources heading down the hall with it. Royce called out to him and asked where he was going and the custodian explained that the painting had been in a crowded basement storeroom, where it had been in the way for far too long. So it was destined for the dumpster. Royce rescued the painting, and it hung in his office



"Light for Tomorrow's Lincolns" advertisement, Saturday Evening Post, 10 Nov. 1945. (Will Ross Collection)

for many, many years. What a close call! Today, To Make Dreams Homes Come True has pride of place in the university art museum, where in December 2015, I was invited to present my SECAC paper from long ago as part of WVU's "Art Up Close" series.

A few months after that I received a call from the Rockwell Kent Review asking if I would be interested in having the article reprinted in a revised and full-color format. The results can be seen here. I would like to note that the article is expanded from its original format. My revisions and additions to the text reflect the works that have resurfaced since the article's original publication. I would also like to note that I have never regarded myself to be a Kent specialist, but

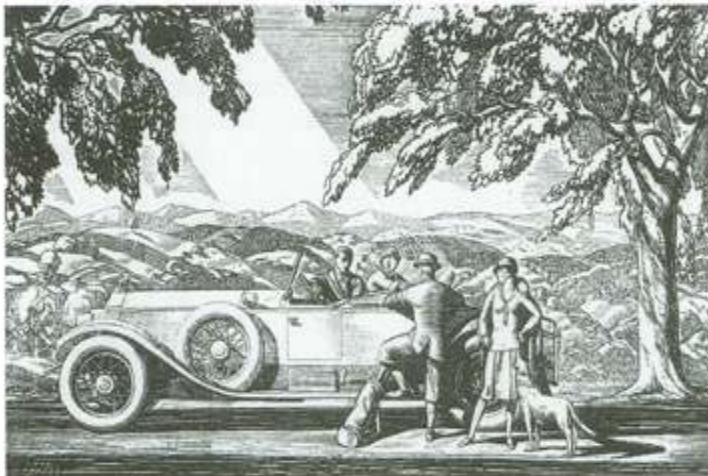
rather that I just happened across a painting that resulted in what I still consider to be a fascinating story about an interesting and somewhat bizarre series of paintings. They offer a view into mid-century American ideals as well as a small and unique facet of Kent's prolific life and output. It has always been a hope of mine that someday an exhibition will be organized to reunite this series of paintings for the first time since 1946. Perhaps the renewed interest in the paintings can lead the way.

IN 1945 ROCKWELL KENT was commissioned to create a series of twelve paintings for use in advertisements of the bituminous coal industry. Kent's only reference to these works is a cursory, disparaging remark in his autobiography of 1955: "And I think that the paintings made in that same year (1945) to advertise bituminous coal show my progressive irritation at the imposition of what by advertising men are termed 'ideas'."¹ Nonetheless, this series, unique in its conception and unusual in its subject matter, is deserving of our attention. Not only does it represent an untold chapter in the life of one America's most prominent twentieth-century realists, but, more importantly, its images serve as icons of the politi-

cal and social mores of American industry and the American people, following the Second World War.

Kent received the commission from the Bituminous Coal Institute (B.C.I.) through their New York City advertising agents Benton & Bowles, Inc. The Institute was the public relations department of the National Coal Association, the Washington lobby for mine owners and operators. As such it was responsible for promoting the use of soft coal and maintaining in the public mind a positive image of the coal industry. In order to send its message to the public, the dozen advertisements would proclaim coal's myriad uses and infinite benefits in the popular magazines of the day, such as *Liberty*, *Newsweek* and the *Saturday Evening Post*.

Rockwell Kent was no stranger to the advertising business. His career as an illustrator began in 1915 with the acceptance and publication of his drawings in *Vanity Fair* and *Puck*. Success as a painter was as yet eluding him, and to make ends meet, he applied his talent to whatever opportunity presented itself. In 1917



Two illustrations by Rockwell Kent for automobile ads: Rolls-Royce Brewster Coachwork, ink drawing (signed "Hogarth, Jr."), 1926, and Nash Motors, lithograph, 1938.

he found his first advertising work, drawing automobile ads for the Chalmers Motor Co. By the end of the 1920s, his illustrations were used to sell everything from perfume and jewelry to Steinway pianos. His reliance on commercial work was the cause of some displeasure, no doubt resulting from the lack of complete artistic freedom. In a letter to Margaret Bourke-White in 1936, he commented, "I support myself by turning my hand to the production of almost every low-down job that commerce, the great prostituting patron of the arts, demands. I can do many things; I perhaps have the gift, but I certainly through necessity had to cultivate it."²

The commission called for more than illustrations, though. Kent was being called upon to produce a series of twelve large oil paintings, in essence a mini-collection of industrial art, devoted to the glorification of the coal industry and its contributions to modern civilization.

The B.C.I. wasn't the only organization in the 1940s to turn to the fine arts for self-promotion. Walter Abell was one of the first to examine the rise of art patronage by labor and industry. In 1946, in his article "Industry and Painting," Abell addressed the cultural and social implications of the recent trend in corporate patronage of the arts:

Like an advancing tide, industrial patronage has swelled, within comparatively few years, from a ripple on the horizon to a powerful force in contemporary American culture. It has lifted many artists to new levels of recognition and affluence. It has transformed several industrial house organs into virtual art magazines, has entered the museums of the country with industrially organized exhibitions, and invaded the field of art books with handsomely illustrated volumes on industrial collections... On the other hand we cannot ignore the fact that these activities are limited in scope, that they are plutocratic in control... In a society faced with acute economic and social problems, the potential dangers of an industry-controlled, rather than a community-controlled, culture are obvious.³

Abell saw 1928 as the beginning of corporate patronage. That year, Steinway & Sons paid Ignazio Zuloaga \$25,000 to paint a full-length portrait of pianist Ignacy Jan Paderewski to be reproduced for advertisements. Although initially considered to be a one-time affair, the venture received such wide attention that it was estimated to have brought Steinway & Sons over a hundred thousand dollars' worth of free publicity.⁴ Heeding the ad's success, Steinway commissioned other artists, including John Carroll, Emil Fuchs and Rockwell Kent to produce paintings for similar advertisements.

The movement towards industrial patronage was slow to catch on, but by the end of the 1930s businesses such as the Dole Pineapple Co. and De Beers Consolidated Mines were commissioning paintings for their own advertisements. Other corporations, including I.B.M. and Encyclopaedia Britannica,

Inc., began assembling collections that were sent out as traveling exhibitions. (I.B.M. had a policy by which no works were used for advertising, but the publicity generated by the exhibition achieved the same results.)

The First Nine Paintings

It was in this flurry of industry-sponsored artistic activity that Rockwell Kent received the B.C.I. commission in March 1945. Following an initial telephone conversation, Sanford (Jerry) Gerard of Benton & Bowles, sent Kent a letter and preliminary sketches outlining the requirements for the first painting in the projected series of twelve, originally titled "We're Feeding Iron Horses for Less than One Cent Per Mile." Gerard's directions would set the tone for all twelve paintings. Each was to depict a scene showing the benefits derived from coal with a large figure holding a lump of bituminous coal superimposed over the scene. After reviewing the notes and sketches that Gerard provided for each painting, Kent would submit a color sketch for approval by B.C.I. and the agency. The final painting was to reflect whatever modifications they demanded.

Kent's conception of the first painting, as seen in the surviving crayon sketch, was rebuffed as being too realistic, with the large figure not symbolic enough in appearance. Gerard's subsequent description of what he called "the Genie" addressed the desired appearance of the figure in specific detail:

The Genie will be naked to the waist and will wear no helmet. He will not look like a "Polack" nor particularly like any other type except he is a very strong healthy man. His face may be wider than normal to some extent. In this connection it has been suggested that an examination of the faces of Notre Dame football players for some years back might produce the most desired type. The Genie's pants will be either very indistinct or simple and not identifiable.⁵ The belt, if the pants show, may be heavy. The hair probably should be curly but this is not a must. The lump of coal should be recognizably Bituminous as nearly as practical. It is not on fire; it just glows contentedly with a whitish light.⁶

That Gerard referred to the figure as a genie would imply that it was conceived of as a being with mystical powers, bringing to mind the genie from the tale of Aladdin. Moreover, the figure was to have the characteristics of a strong, healthy giant of a miner, in a sense a sort of Paul Bunyan of the coal industry. Kent's response to the agency-supplied sketches and Gerard's direction sheds more light on the matter:

First of all: The big man in the layouts is anything but a Genie. He's just a big man, as Gulliver was in Lilliput. And he makes the train look like a toy train. The toy train impression is borne out by the conviction one gets that the



The layout provided by the Benton & Bowles agency for the first ad was headlined "We're Feeding Iron Horses for Less than One Cent Per Mile." Kent's preliminary crayon sketch (above) was rejected as too realistic. The headline was revised as "Power ... for the Wheels of Progress," and Kent's second attempt, an oil sketch (below), won the approval of the agency and Institute. Kent went on to paint an oil sketch for each of the illustrations before receiving a critique and the go-ahead to execute the final work. (Both sketches are from the Rockwell Kent Collection, Plattsburgh State Art Museum.)



man must be standing on something much lower than the surfaces that the train is riding on. So it looks as though the train were running on a table. We mustn't do anything in these pictures to detract from the might and majesty of what coal is doing.... To keep the impression of a monster locomotive we have to make the man unmistakably a symbolical figure of another world, or of space, and not a realistic figure of this world. Strangely, the moment you frankly make him purely symbolical he becomes plausible.



Rockwell Kent, *Power for the Wheels of Progress*, 1945. Detail shown below. (Steidel Collection of American Industrial Art, Pennsylvania State University)



You can establish a consistency between his size and the true size of the locomotive. The best example of that kind of thing is the notion of God. People somehow accept the idea of a Supreme Being. But if that Supreme Being should suddenly appear on earth as a real man of immense size, they might keep on believing in God, but they wouldn't believe any longer in themselves or ascribe any dignity whatever to mankind, mountains or machines. People looking at the pictures might not analyze their impressions, but I think I am right about the effect that the pictures would have. It is, of course, our job to find out why...

He must, in the locomotive picture, be a creature of energy, an embodiment of the energy and power of the machine itself. And if he is a Genie he becomes more plausible if freed

from all necessity of having his feet on the ground. Genii, as I know them and as, I guess, the imagination of all of us inclines us to picture them, are essentially creatures of the air...

I will look up football players' faces, Notre Dame in particular. But let me suggest: Wouldn't it be better, in view of the fact that this genie should express the energy that is inherent in coal—bituminous of course—or, let us say, the spirit of coal, that he show a little something in his face to indicate he has a spirit—a sort of mixture of Prometheus and Mercury.⁷

Kent's intentions for a mythical, god-like figure are clear. He had used genie figures in illustrations for a 1928 Steinway ad and a 1940 Nash automobile ad. The Nash ad bears a similarity to the coal series: two figures, a male and a female, float above the streamlined Nash, one of them holding the dashboard dial for its new ventilation system, which illuminates the auto below. Kent's association of the coal genie with Prometheus and Mercury also has its implications. Prometheus, one of the Titans, was considered to be the creator of mankind and, more importantly as far as coal is concerned, credited with bringing fire from heaven, the sun, and giving it to man. Mercury, Zeus' messenger and one of the best-known gods, was credited with speed and grace as well as being the God of Commerce and the Market. He was also the Divine Herald, the guide of the dead who led the soul down to its last home, although it isn't known whether Kent had this in mind. His revised oil study met the approval of his client.

As stated by its final title, *Power... for the Wheels of Progress*, the first painting [shown left] was to demonstrate how coal powers the machines that provide transportation for people and goods. One stipulation of this work was that the locomotive be a "modern coal burner" and that "no smoke should be coming out of the engine." Implying that coal is a clean-burning fuel, the lump of coal doesn't burn, but "glows contentedly."⁸ As Gerard directed, the genie would duplicate the action of a primary figure in each painting.⁹ Here, the genie points, one would assume, to the future, mimicking the pose of the engineer seen through the window, while his lump of coal sends out rays of light just as the engine headlamp does, in a sense lighting the way for progress.

It is interesting to note that the outstretched, pointing arm of the genie bears a strong resemblance to that of Adam in Michelangelo's Sistine Ceiling. Kent's use of classical poses is not lost on the rest of the series. To convey his conception of the genie as a god-like being, one would think it natural for him to draw on well-known images of gods and great men. Although the sources may not be readily recognizable, the subconscious association in the public mind of the pose with its historic counterpart would have the desired effect of convincing the viewer that they were seeing a "supreme being."

The second painting, entitled *That the Days of Our Years May Grow Fuller* [right], depicts a hospital scene. As coal tar is used in the making of antiseptics, anesthetics, sedatives and vitamins, it serves an important function as a healing agent. Thus the genie strikes the traditional gesture of the “laying-on of hands” or blessing. Gerard objected, however, to the cool colors of Kent’s initial oil sketch as conveying the image of a deathbed scene, to which Kent replied:

I agree with you about warming up the sketch. About its death-bed aspect, I can only say that I got the impression that was what was wanted. I’ll prop up the child higher, put his hands outside the covers and make him rosy-cheeked and smiling—as, of course, a child smeared with petroleum jelly and filled with mineral oil would be.¹⁰

Kent made the necessary adjustments, enlarging the bouquet of flowers and placing a book in the hand of the child, who will soon be well and, one assumes, back in school.

In the third painting, *Light for Tomorrow’s Lincolns* [cover], coal is shown as the substance that makes education possible by providing electricity for light in schools and homes. Here the meditative, Buddha-like genie hovers over a young schoolboy. Holding his book, just as the Genie holds his source of power, the boy sits at a desk with an electric lamp, books and a globe, the traditional symbols of knowledge and learning from the Renaissance on. One could even infer that the globe, or Earth, would be in complete darkness if not for electricity’s “illuminating” light. Kent’s employers, the B.C.I. and Benton & Bowles agency were critical of the genie appearing to stand on the floor instead of floating in the air.¹¹

In *Baker of the Bread of Abundance* [p. 8], the fourth painting, a Norman Rockwell family—far removed from Van Gogh’s *Potato Eaters*—sits about a linen-draped dining table in their Sunday best; father even wears a tie. Arranged in perfect boy-girl order around the table, the figures represent health in youth, maturity and old age as afforded by an abundant food supply. The genie repeats the pose of the grandfather at prayer.

Heat for the Steel that Shapes Our Lives [p. 9], the fifth ad, emphasizes the role played by coal in steel production. The genie’s pants had been causing problems in his placement within the scenes. Gerard reminded Kent, “Please do not forget that our client does not wish the Genie to be too much a creature of flesh and blood, especially below the waist.”¹² From this work on, Kent shows the genie only from the waist up. *Heat for the Steel that Shapes Our Lives* was originally intended to depict a steelworker pouring molten steel from a ladle, an action the genie was to repeat. This presented a problem, as Kent explained:

Duplicating this gesture in the large figure, we’ve got to make both arms doing just what they are doing in the small figure—one arm lifting, one arm pushing. So that bars two lumps of coal. In fact, the whole action of the small figure is



Above: Rockwell Kent, *That the Days of Our Years May Grow Fuller*, 1945. (Hoole Special Collections Library, University of Alabama) **Below:** Kent’s oil sketch for *That the Days of Our Years May Grow Fuller*, 1945. (Rockwell Kent Collection, Plattsburgh State Art Museum)



so specialized that it can’t be simulated in the large figure except by making him do just exactly the same thing. So I have made him holding his lump of coal on a shovel.¹³

This solution was abandoned in favor of the final composition, which shows a glowing bar of steel being pushed along on rollers. This allowed the genie to adopt a sort of Greek “Discus-Thrower” pose to duplicate the action of the figure.

The sixth painting, *Blueprint of the Future: To Make Dream Homes Come True* [p. 10], was the first in the series with the genie acting alone; no other figures are present. Here we see him placing homes on a valley floor that has been “blueprinted” for a subdivision. The sketch genie’s delicate placement of the house drew some derision from Gerard and goes to show the



Above: Rockwell Kent, *Baker of the Bread of Abundance*, 1945. (Art Museum of the University of Kentucky) **Below:** Kent's oil sketch for *Baker of the Bread of Abundance*, 1945. (Rockwell Kent Collection, Plattsburgh State Art Museum)



form homophobia took in the 1940s: "That is a very dainty hand with which the Genie is laying down the house. 'Pansy' is the expression used by the boys who saw the sketch."¹⁴ Kent was quick to rise to the defense of his figure:

"Pansy," you write, is the expression used by "the boys" who saw the sketch. Now, you have me at a distinct disadvantage, living in the city where you can have the privilege of knowing "pansies" or at least of knowing "boys" who are familiar with them. Is it really true that "pansies," just like most decent, ordinary human beings, incline to touch

a delicate, fragile object delicately? I incline to have too little respect for city dwellers, believing that, adjusted to the sounds and smells, and hurly burly, of city life, their sensibilities incline to be blunted so as to produce in reality such a monster as your sketch portrayed—one who would reach out with a hand appropriate to the Beast of Belsen as, in our imaginations, he might have clawed at the guts of a murdered Jew. Or maybe "the boys" who are so suspicious of "pansy" attributes are overly self-conscious of their own unmanliness and think of he-men as a kind of brute.... See how delicately even [a] strong man would touch it with his thumb and second finger, as delicately even as the hand of Jehovah touches the hand of Adam in "The Creation of Man." Believe me, I have given much thought to the action of this hand, and I am not going to put up with any god-damned criticism of it by "the boys" or anybody else.¹⁵

Kent goes on in the four-page letter to outline other dissatisfactions he had with the series and its patrons. His irritation derived from the lack of freedom he had in the pictures' compositions as well as the quality of reproduction of the paintings in the ads, especially in regards to color changes the photo-engraver was making.

The modeling of the genie in the seventh painting, *Generator of Jobs* [p. 11], is rendered in more of a classicizing manner, striking a pose somewhat like the classical sculpture *Apollo Belvedere*. The thinner, more angular physique and paler complexion of this genie, as well as the one in the next painting, would result in further complaints from the Benton & Bowles advertising team.

After Kent presented his painting for the eighth ad, *Might... to Move Mountains* [p. 12], with a leash-holding genie that appears to have been inspired by the ancient Greek sculpture *Charioteer of Delphi*, Gerard wrote to advise him of the firm's continuing concern about the genie's appearance:

We received the painting. It is magnificently done in every respect except the one thing which I cautioned you particularly about. You will remember that I said the client was particularly anxious to have the man appear to be straining at the leashes. To my mind, the value of the picture is not impaired at all by the fact that the man, like the architect in the former painting, is mighty dainty, and as it happens, we are forced to run the picture exactly as it is due to lack of time. This is probably just as well since I wouldn't really want to alter any part of it. However, as I keep telling you, it sure does irritate them when you thumb your nose at their instructions. It is, as I said before, a magnificent painting and should reproduce beautifully... Now here is some more meat for you to put your teeth into, to wit, the next two paintings. The first one, running in May, represents coal activating a gigantic dynamo... I wish to reiterate a comment which I seem to keep making all the time to the effect

that the man should appear to be awful strong. He is not to be a young god-like youth but rather the more mature Kent, knotted and muscular from years of active toil about the farm. Please let him be browner and brawnier than the Genies we have been getting.¹⁶

Kent's response to Gerard is a classic example of his acerbic wit:

I realized, of course, that I was disobeying instructions when I made the genie pulling half-a-dozen trains without effort. I had the choice of just blindly doing what was wanted or following the dictates of ordinary common sense and avoiding, thereby, perpetrating a grotesque absurdity.

The genie, being beyond the horizon, is at least twenty miles away. The actual size of a locomotive in relation to the genie would be as a flea to a man. Picture a man with five strings of fleas in tow by the aid of five strings of cobweb, and you have an idea of what effort the genie would have to put into pulling those trains. Sometimes an artist has to ask people to use a little common sense.¹⁷

The ninth in the series would be titled *Endless Energy for Limitless Living*. [p. 13] Gerard described the concept:

The dynamo can be substantially like the one for which I include scrap [Gerard's reference to the enclosed concept sketches]. The wires running off into the distance split up into tendril-like veins like those in the human body and are intended to represent the break-down of cables into wiring for homes, etc. I haven't the slightest idea what the little people are supposed to be doing even though I did cause them to be added to the picture to give scale to the giant dynamo. I forgot to mention, when discussing the Genie, that the right hand is up in a gesture intended to imply he is shielding his eyes from the blinding flash. This is probably the silliest one yet.¹⁸

Gerard might have found the concept silly, but Kent would go on to produce a work that succeeds in conveying a dramatic sense of energy and power, a blinding lightning flash emanating from the lump of coal and connecting to the factory-like dynamo. Kent also appears to have catered to the desire of his patrons in his abandonment of the thin classicizing and white-marble tonality of the previous two genie figures. Gerard later expressed the agency's positive reception: "The dynamo painting made a small sensation. It was considered the best of the series by everyone here including myself. The Genie has just the virile quality that is liked, and his face is charming. Your manner of handling the lightning amounts to sheer genius. We are very, very, happy."¹⁹

With three paintings remaining, Kent's issues with Benton & Bowles' concepts would only grow larger.



Rockwell Kent, *Heat for the Steel that Shapes Our Lives*, 1945. Private Collection. Shown as printed. (Photo: Will Ross Collection)

The Final Three Paintings

The fate of the final three paintings in the series is unknown; only one can be verified to have been completed. The correspondence concerning these lost works provides valuable descriptions of them and, at the same time, offers insight into the intersection of the worlds of art and advertising in the post-war era. The entire series of letters, too lengthy to include here, makes for an endlessly fascinating reading experience.

The tenth painting in the series was to depict a bridge scene, which, if it survives, may be one of the great lost works by Kent. It was mentioned along with *Endless Energy for Limitless Living* in Gerard's letter of January 18, 1946:

*The second one [of the two agency-supplied concept sketches] comes off, I think, very well. I, myself, will be very annoyed in this case if you rearrange it too much. The man is almost exactly the kind of figure we are trying to get. I think the composition is interesting. No one would object to such things as dropping the man slightly so that his head will not bleed [off the top edge of the canvas] or raising the landscape slightly, if you wish to do so, but this, like the railroad picture you just finished, is one that everyone is very enamoured [sic] of. I include a scrap of the bridge and the snatch hook.*²⁰*

In a letter from February 17, Kent's response captures his

*Gerard was probably referring to a *snatch block*, the heavy-duty hook and pulley used to unload a ship's cargo.



Above: Rockwell Kent, *To Make Dream Homes Come True*, 1945. (Art Museum at West Virginia University) **Below:** Kent's oil sketch for *To Make Dream Homes Come True*, 1945. (Rockwell Kent Collection, Plattsburgh State Art Museum)



mounting frustration with the concept and composition he was asked to develop from the agency's sketch:

Now that I am about to start with the bridge painting, I am trouble[d] by certain inconsistencies in the sketch. You show a landscape that goes off to a far horizon and a figure, whose hand is in the near foreground and whose body in consequence can't be farther away than, at most, the middle of the bridge, disappearing in clouds that are beyond the horizon. Do you want him to be just a truncated figure emerging out of a little wreath of nearby clouds? It's all

very well to suggest effects like this in the sketch, but I must confess to being stumped by the problem of making it look anything but ridiculous in paint. Ordinarily this would be my problem, but you, by all out endorsement of the sketch as it is, make it yours.²¹

Followed a couple of days later by his expression of struggles with Gerard's vision:

Here is a suggestion for the bridge pictured. Don't worry about his lower limbs. Besides being pretty thoroughly hidden by the pylon in the foreground, their values would be relatively so light as to make them virtually non-existent. The more I look at the figure in the sketch, the more grotesque the thing appears. Besides that, I don't think it is a good composition.²²

Their letters were crossing in the mail, as Gerard, for his part, attempted to placate Kent:

I cannot see why you are disturbed about any inconsistency in the bridge picture, since the two layouts are essentially the same. In the case of the Genie of the dynamo, he would appear to be standing in a pit six feet deep in order to appear in the position he occupies in your canvas. In the case of the Genie of the bridge, he is still standing in a hole, but this time it is only four feet deep. In each case the fact that he is standing in a hole is obscured by clouds swirling about his body. If it makes you happy, I will admit that this is a pretty ridiculous situation, but it doesn't seem to me that it is any more ridiculous than the whole conception has been from the start; a man two thousand feet high holding a lump of hot coal in his hand is pretty silly to start with.

If you still insist on logic, suppose we consider that the man is floating horizontally over the landscape shown and that his feet are sixteen miles away over the hills in back of the of the bridge. If this were the case, it would be logical for his forearm to be up close to you, as we have drawn in the layout.

I hope you appreciate that fact that I respect your desire for integrity. This instinct is apparent in all of your pictures and is probably one of the things that makes them so good. You must remember that I am just a very cynical art director who gets his living by explaining things off to people. Sometimes I explain things off to clients, sometimes to artists.²³

Their continuing back-and-forth banter includes gems like this:

Kent: I had considered the floating, horizontal man and thought of asking you for a photograph of yourself doing the swan dive. But I don't think that would be a good solution.²⁴

Gerard: *I have no front views of myself doing a swan dive, and besides, you have a better figure. I am sure you will be ingenious [sic] enough to be able to rig up a block and fall and paint yourself in a mirror.*²⁵

Kent's frustration with the "Bridge" ad reached its peak at the end of February. In his letters to Gerard, he barely contained his anger:

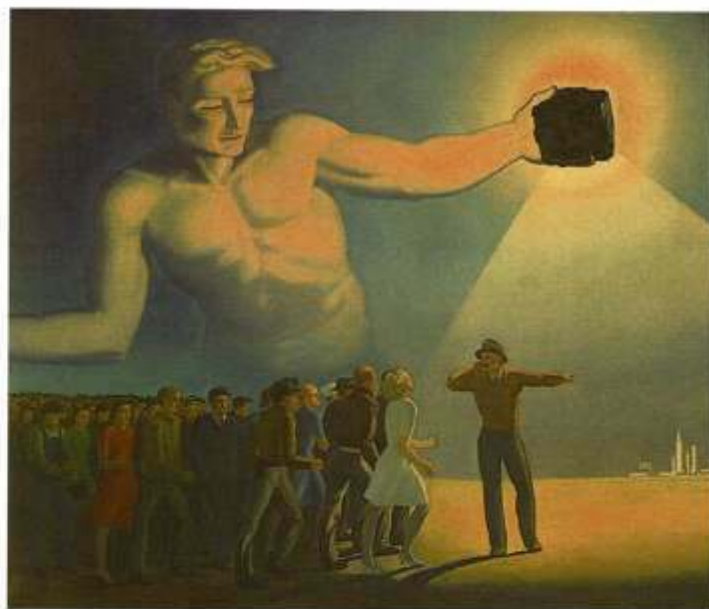
Despite your most emphatic denial some months ago of my assertion that it appeared clear that Benton & Bowles had only employed me as a hack painter to carry out their ideas, it is now beyond dispute—for your own letters confirm it—that is exactly what they want of me.

The sketch that I am to carry out without change is God awful. The legless figure is an utter and preposterous absurdity, of the kind that you, at the commencement of the campaign, yourself denounced. It is leaning forward and, with far-outstretched left arm (you doubtless purposely made him left-handed, for most of the figures have been drawn that way), he's holding up a block and heavy chain and, presumably, a terrific weight of some sort. That is, of course, ridiculous. Moreover, the composition is bad. But I won't change it. Benton & Bowles is doubtless as proud of this design as I am abhorrent of it. They would quite properly object as strongly to attaching my signature to it as I would.

*Now, I will paint this damn picture, but only on condition that it is accepted unsigned and published without my name in any way associated with it. A much fairer thing would be for Benton & Bowles to sign it, so that no one might suspect, through the manner of painting, that anyone but Benton & Bowles own artists had had a hand in it.*²⁶

While Kent was obviously exasperated with the project, he continued to work on the final installments for the series. "I am at work on the monstrosity," is how he opened the following day's letter, which along with subsequent discussions went into great detail about various elements including the specifics of bridge design. From the discussion and descriptions, the composition included three masonry arches with something resembling suspension bridge sections in between. Kent describes the central section as a "long, continuous arch of the bridge itself rising to its highest point at the central masonry arch," and continues, "I venture to say that no such bridge has ever been built, or ever would be built."²⁷

Gerard's follow-up letter described the bridge as a link to "a manufacturing community ... on the far bank," the genie hovering overhead, holding the lump of coal, his body stretching back over the horizon and disappearing into clouds. In closing, he added, "Am now at work on two new monstrosities for you



Rockwell Kent, *Generator of Jobs*, 1945. (Purdue University Galleries)

to worry about."²⁸ As Kent completed "Bridge" on March 9, he reiterated his refusal to be identified with it: "It is all ready for shipment. I repeat that my name is not to be used in connection with its publication. I refer you again to my letter on this subject, to which you made no reply. I will affix a notice to the back of the painting to the same effect."²⁹

Kent soon received the design concept and sketches, dated March 19, for the first of the "two new monstrosities" that would complete the series: "Where Industry Gets Its Go-Ahead":

Unlike previous advertisements in this series, which have been based upon one particular industry, this advertisement is based upon all industry's dependence on coal. Therefore, the painting should illustrate the close relationship between industry in general and bituminous coal. Our sketch does not do this in sufficient detail. It merely suggests a large group of diversified factory buildings to represent industry. We believe that the finished painting should show an even greater diversification among the buildings—particularly as to shape and color. Possibly the picture would better convey the impression of all industry if a railroad were in the picture with a freight train hauling away the products of the factories. The manufacturing district represented by the buildings might even be located on a busy river or harbor, with a city appearing in the background. The attached photograph, more closely than the sketch, shows what we are thinking about. It would be clearer yet if the buildings were spaced a little bit farther apart and if they included one or two unusual types, such as a synthetic rubber or chemical plant with its bent tubing and perhaps a steel mill along the river front. Regardless of the handling, the painting should



Rockwell Kent, *Might ... To Move Montains*, 1945. (Wilson Library, Missouri University of Science and Technology)

*epitomize industry in general and indicate its dependence on bituminous coal.*³⁰

On March 26, Kent wrote, "The new painting is almost finished. I'll ship it in a few days."³¹ Whether this was an oil sketch or the completed painting is unknown.

A day later, Gerard sent details concerning the final ad in the series, *Creator of Climate for Happy Homes*. It was to focus on the use of bituminous coal for home heating: to "convey the impression of the matchless comfort enjoyed in the home with coal's abundant, uniform, healthful heat, and do this by sharply contrasting indoor warmth with the bitter cold of wind and snow on the outside... We think a house, with enough of its exterior removed to show the family in the comfortable, radiant living room is basically the way to do it, even though the idea may be somewhat corny."³²

Kent was formally notified in an April 12 letter that the Institute had decided to abandon the series of advertisements: "It has been decided to cancel the last advertisement and also to cancel all insertions except for one in *Liberty* on the next to the last picture."³³ Kent responded to the news: "I had begun the picture as soon as the sketch for it arrived and, as I told you, it is nearly finished. In fact, it is so nearly finished that it could, in a pinch, be used just as it is. I will keep it as is, awaiting further instructions from you."³⁴ Accounting records indicate that Kent was fully compensated for the sketch and painting for the tenth and eleventh ads, and for his "sketch painting" for the twelfth ad.³⁵ The whereabouts of the last three works remain unknown, and there is no evidence at this time that a final ad appeared in *Liberty* magazine. Analysis of their actual content will have to await their possible rediscovery.

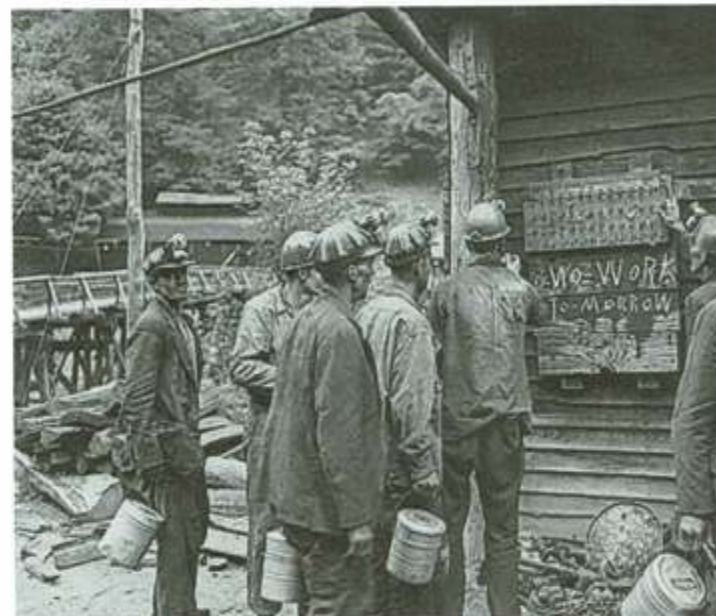
Why the series was abandoned is not clarified in the correspondence between Kent and Gerard, and as stated earlier, Kent made nothing but the most cursory comment about the whole project in his autobiography. But something had happened between March 27, the date of the go-ahead letter for the last painting, and April 12, Kent's notification of the cancellation of the series. An event occurred that, according to *Newsweek*, "put the nation in a position where it found itself gripped by the most fantastic economic plague in its history."³⁶

The Strike

American industry had witnessed a number of strikes in the 1940s, but none that threatened the stability of the nation as would the coal strike of 1946. At midnight on Sunday, March 31, John L. Lewis announced the walkout of his 400,000 soft-coal miners:

*We are not calling a strike. We are notifying the miners of the termination of their agreement with the operators ... the miners do not work without a contract. They will not trespass on the property of the coal company. That would be a violation of the law... The mineworkers will remain at home with their families ... until the operators accord them decent and fair treatment.*³⁷

Although Lewis denied that the action constituted a strike, it was seen as such by the media, the public, the coal operators, and the U.S. government. It resulted in a domino effect on the rest of the nation's industries. The railroads, which relied on coal for fuel, could not run; the steel mills, which relied on the railroads for deliveries of coal, had to cut production to a minimum; the auto industry, as well as other manufacturers who relied on a steady supply of steel, slowed to a crawl.



"No Work Tomorrow" as the strike by 400,000 coal miners begins.

Subsequently, strikes broke out in each of these industries. Newspapers and magazines were filled with bleak images of the effects of the strike, along with depictions of President Truman that suggested he was out of touch with the needs of American workers.

Six weeks into the strike, with public acceptance at a straining point, Lewis ordered his miners back to work and called for a two-week truce in which to negotiate further. He described the truce as: "The contribution of the United Mine Workers of America to our nation's economy, which is being imperiled by the stupidity and selfish greed of the coal operators and associated financial interests and by demagogues who have tried to lash the public mind into a state of hysteria rather than grant justice and fair treatment to the men who mine the nation's coal."³⁸ On May 10, the day of his announcement, Lewis went to the White House for a conference with President Truman and Charles O'Neill, spokesman for the bituminous coal operators. The President gave Lewis and O'Neill five days to reach an accord. No agreement was reached and after five days the government took over the mines.

The strike was broken. It was estimated to have cost the country two billion dollars in lost production. After fifty-nine days and the eventual seizure of the mines, the nation's economy had been brought close to collapse, and Truman's hopes for re-election in 1948 looked bleak. Lewis, on the other hand, was a winner: his miners received an 18.5-cent-an-hour wage increase; a 45-hour week instead of the previous 54-hour week; and a welfare fund for sickness, disability, death and retirement benefits.

The coincidence of the cancellation of the Bituminous Coal Series with the onset of the strike raises a number of questions concerning the purpose of the advertisements. One would imagine that the coal operators and their public relations department, the B.C.I., were well aware of the upcoming expiration date of the miners' contracts. Would not a series of advertisements intended to increase public awareness of the significance of coal place the operators, as the providers of coal, in a positive light? It should be noted here that each of the ads incorporated into the text two key phrases that carry the implication of more than just an attempt to market a product; the first, "Out of every dollar of Bituminous Coal Sales, at the mines, on the average the miners receive over 60 cents in wages—the mine owners receive about 2 cents profit," and the second, "Coal is the very foundation of our civilization. That's why anything that affects coal mining also affects you—whether you actually burn coal or not!" These statements had clearly attempted to convince the public that the miners were receiving a fair wage and, thus, had no reason to interrupt mining operations.

Furthermore, since the ads were created by a prominent American artist, who was also a known advocate of worker rights, the impression would also be given that the operators had everyone's best interests at heart.³⁹ Kent's correspondence



Rockwell Kent, *Endless Energy for Limitless Living*, 1945. (Dayton Art Institute)

does not reveal his views on the 1946 coal strike. In this instance, though, it would appear as if he ended up on the wrong side of the picket line, a position that would most likely cause him displeasure. Perhaps his "progressive irritation at the imposition of what by advertising men are termed 'ideas,'"⁴⁰ was more of an irritation that his art and reputation were being used to promote management, rather than the laborers.

The Bituminous Coal series can be seen as one industry's attempt at marketing its product by stressing the connections between that product, in this instance the lowly lump of coal, and the finer things in life that it plays a part in providing. But while the original intent of the series may have been aimed toward marketing and labor relations, it now serves as something more. The images that make up this series reveal an overall picture, if somewhat selective, of how Americans saw themselves in the 1940s, and of what they considered important. Although appearances change and every style will eventually appear dated, certain things in life—education, health, employment, home and family—will always remain important.

NOTES

Items from the Rockwell Kent Papers in the Archives of American Art of the Smithsonian Institution are cited as RKP.

1. Rockwell Kent, *It's Me O Lord*, (New York: Dodd & Mead, 1955, 564).

2. David Traxel, *An American Saga: The Life and Times of Rockwell Kent*, New York: Harper and Row, 1980, 182. Kent's dislike for advertising work is further evidenced by statements such as: "as one who takes but little pride in advertising work," and: "despite all efforts at forgetting ... I did quite a number of advertising drawings." (*Rockwell Kent, It's Me O Lord: The Autobiography of Rockwell Kent* [New York: Dodd and Mead, 1955], 436 and 448).

3. Walter Abell, "Industry and Painting," *Magazine of Art* 39 (March 1946): 82-93, 114-118, and "Art and Labor," *Magazine of Art* 39 (October 1946): 231-239, 254-263. For a discussion of Rockwell Kent's labor-related art activities, see Frances Pohl, "Rockwell Kent and the Vermont Marble Workers' Strike," *Archives of American Art Journal*, vol. 29, no. 3, July 1989, 50-60.

4. Abell, *op. cit.*, 82.

5. Gerard had originally written "not distinguishable." Kent's reply was, "I have the layouts ... your crude attempt at a letter, and your secretary's enlightening revision of it. Actually I had noticed the words 'not distinguishable' and smiled at the thought that, literally, that would mean a kind of cellophane pants. A psychologist might interpret the choice of that word as an expression of sexual inhibition or something of that sort!" (RKP, Kent to Gerard, March 8, 1945, reel 5161, frame 681, 5).

6. RKP, Gerard to Kent, 6 March 1945, reel 5161, frame 681, 3.

7. RKP, Kent to Gerard, 6 March 1945, reel 5161, frame 681, 5-6.

8. RKP, Gerard to Kent, 6 March 1945, reel 5161, frame 681, 4.

9. *Ibid.*, 3.

10. RKP, Kent to Gerard, 1 June 1945, reel 5161, frame 681, 45.

11. RKP, Gerard to Kent, 10 July 1945, reel 5161, frame 681, 49.

12. RKP, Gerard to Kent, 8 Aug. 1945, reel 5161, frame 681, 53.

13. RKP, Kent to Gerard, 20 Aug. 1945, reel 5161, frame 681, 55.

14. RKP, Gerard to Kent, 24 Oct. 1945, reel 5161, frame 681, 82.

15. RKP, Kent to Gerard, 31 Oct. 1945, reel 5161, frame 681, 83, 86.

16. RKP, Gerard to Kent, 18 Jan. 1946, reel 5161, frame 681, 112.

17. RKP, Kent to Gerard, 1 Feb. 1946, reel 5161, frame 681, 114.

18. RKP, Gerard to Kent, 18 Jan. 1946, reel 5161, frame 681, 112.

19. RKP, Gerard to Kent, 21 Feb. 1946, reel 5161, frame 681, 117.

20. RKP, Gerard to Kent, 18 Jan. 1946, reel 5161, frame 681, 113.

21. RKP, Kent to Gerard, 17 Feb. 1946, reel 5161, frame 681, 116.

22. RKP, Kent to Gerard, 22 Feb. 1946, reel 5161, frame 681, 115.

23. RKP, Gerard to Kent, 21 Feb. 1946, reel 5161, frame 681, 117.

24. RKP, Kent to Gerard, 23 Feb. 1946, reel 5161, frame 681, 119.

25. RKP, Gerard to Kent, 25 Feb. 1946, reel 5161, frame 681, 120.

26. RKP, Kent to Gerard, 27 Feb. 1946, reel 5161, frame 681, 121.

27. RKP, Kent to Gerard, 28 Feb. 1946, reel 5161, frame 681, 122.

28. RKP, Gerard to Kent, 4 March 1946, reel 5161, frame 681, 124.

29. RKP, Kent to Gerard, 9 March 1946, reel 5161, frame 681, 129.

Gerard would subsequently respond: "I got so bemused by bridges that I forgot to mention that no one here is disturbed because you do not wish to put your signature on the painting. This should be a source of gratification to you since it should now be apparent that we are buying your skill rather than your name. I am authorized to say that your name will never be mentioned in connection with this particular painting in so far as publication is concerned. I have no control, of course, over what sort of name-plate may be put on the frame by the ultimate recipient of the painting." One certainly wonders if this unsigned work, cause of so much debate and dispute, has survived.

30. RKP, Untitled document, 19 March 1946, reel 5161, frame 681, 132. Included with Gerard's March 20 letter to Kent, in which he describes this document as "a detailed memorandum to me from the account representative explaining his point of view on the picture. In addition to his comments I should like to comment that the light probably should not directly illuminate any one building, since that might lead to a misinterpretation of the headline. People might think that the lighted building was the place 'where industry gets it go-ahead'."

31. RKP, Kent to Gerard, 26 March 1946, reel 5161, frame 681, 134.

32. RKP, Untitled document, 27 March 1946 reel 5161, frame 681, 145. In his accompanying letter (p. 144), Gerard mentions the advertisement campaign for the following year, "a 'life-report' on

the coal miner; his life, his hopes, his fears, etc. This will be entirely photographic..." It is not known whether the series was run, as it falls outside the scope of this project, but it is interesting that the work of the artist/illustrator was being abandoned in favor of the photographer.

33. RKP, Gerard to Kent, 12 April 1946 reel 5161, frame 681, 139.

34. RKP, Kent to Gerard, 11 April 1946, reel 5161, frame 681, 137.

35. RKP, Benton & Bowles to Rockwell Kent statements, 11 April 1946, reel 5161, frame 681, 135; 3 June 1946, reel 5161, frame 681, 140.

36. *Newsweek*, Vol. XXVII no. 20, 20 May 1946, 27.

37. John L. Lewis as quoted in *Newsweek*, vol. XXVII no. 14, 8 April 1946, 19-20.

38. John L. Lewis as quoted in *Newsweek*, vol. XXVII no. 20, 20 May 1946, 28.

39. Kent's statement issued in 1940 in support of the Typographical Workers at Lakeside Press in Chicago provides a good example of his beliefs concerning workers' rights, as well as echoes those same sentiments as expressed by John L. Lewis: "I am a worker, in the sense that I earn my living by the work I do. Whatever might be the nature of that work I would want security, good pay, and reasonable leisure for the enjoyment of life. If these things are worth having, they are worth fighting for. And if they are to be won by fighting, plain, common, ordinary decent self-respect would compel me to get out and fight for them, and not let others do the fighting for me. I have worked at lots of trades in the course of my life. If they were organized I joined. If they were not organized I worked to organize them, for I want a good life for myself, for my fellow workers, for the people of America." Kent, *It's Me O Lord*, 565-566.

40. Traxel, *op. cit.*, 182

