

# THE KENT COLLECTOR

a tri-annual journal published by the Plattsburgh State Art Museum

State University of New York

FALL/WINTER 2005

Vol. XXXI, No. 3



# The Farnsworth Museum Opens the Files on Rockwell Kent

by Henry Morlock

*The New York Times* on the morning of November 17, 1960 included a story describing Rockwell Kent's gift to the Soviet Union of 80 paintings and over 800 drawings, engravings, and manuscripts. Kent said to reporters that he gave the collection in gratitude to the bravery of the Russians in the battle of Stalingrad in WW II. When the reporters asked if he had offered it to an American museum first. Kent replied:

"My answer is that seven years ago I did. Feeling a warm attachment to the people of the Maine Coast with whom I had spent some of the best years of my youth, I offered the entire collection to the highly endowed Farnsworth Museum in Rockland, Me.

"It was accepted eagerly, the director assuring me that a special wing would be added to the museum to house the collection.

"It happened, however, that I was then summoned before the notorious McCarthy committee in Washington in the course of its investigation of the politics of authors whose works were in American libraries officially established overseas. Holding the committee's question as to my political beliefs to be impertinent, I refused to answer them.

"The Farnsworth Museum promptly rejected my gift."<sup>1</sup>

The *Times* article and a similar one in the *New York Herald Tribune* closed with a statement that the Farnsworth's director, Wendell Hadlock, could not be reached for comment. That was unfortunate. As it turned



Moscow Opening of gift to USSR, Nov. 19, 1960.  
l. to r. Sally Kent; Rockwell Kent; interpreter; B. Joganson, Pres. USSR Academy of Arts; unknown man. Photo by E. Evzerikhin, Fotokhronika TASS.

out a reporter for the *Boston Herald* had tracked Hadlock down the night before and asked if it were true that Kent had offered his paintings to the Farnsworth and that he had been turned down.<sup>2</sup> According to his notes, Hadlock replied to the reporter "... to the best of my knowledge no concrete offer of the paintings was made to the Farnsworth Museum and that acceptance or rejection of such a collection would be made by the Trustees of this institution." The next evening, Hadlock repeated his response to a reporter from the *Portland Press Herald*, but by then many people had learned of Kent's gift without Hadlock's disclaimer, and the museum was blamed for dropping the ball. "To this day it is widely accepted by

scholars and the general public that the Farnsworth Museum turned down a large collection of Kent's work because he had been called to testify before the McCarthy hearings in 1953", wrote Victoria Woodhull, Associate Director/Chief of Programs of the Farnsworth Museum in the program accompanying the recent exhibition at the Farnsworth.<sup>3</sup>

Despite these and other comments by Kent, the museum withheld specific comments on the supposed gift until last Fall, when it put on display its archive of correspondence, notes, and clippings involving Kent, Wendell Hadlock, and the Board of Trustees and Friends of the museum with regard to the proposed gift, the planned exhibition of Kent's work in 1954, and the ensuing sequelae.

Among the items displayed were Hadlock's notes of the critical, and only, meeting he had with Kent on June 2, 1953. This meeting had been arranged to consider an exhibi-

tion of Kent paintings, and it was at this meeting that Kent remembers having offered his personal collection to the Farnsworth. But, Hadlock's notes, while they mention Kent having brought up the subject of the disposal of his personal collection, do not indicate that Kent clearly made an offer of them to the museum. Hadlock wrote in his diary: "Kent spoke of a museum to be built to disp. [display] only his works, locality not as yet chosen."<sup>4</sup> A little more does occur to Hadlock in response to the reporters' questions in November 1960.

"As I recall, Kent in speaking of a museum to be built, mentioned that he had a friend who would finance such a venture and

possibly leave an endowment for its maintenance and up-keep. From the way in which Kent brought in the mention of a museum I was under the impression that no final selection had been made and, as we were not in a financial position to build additional buildings or wings to the Farnsworth Museum, I did not pursue the subject other than to mention that at an appropriate time I would be pleased to introduce him to the trustees".

As we know from his biography, Kent had an entirely different recall of what transpired at the June 2, 1953, meeting. In *It's Me O Lord*,<sup>5</sup> Kent wrote:

"I then told the Director, Mr. Hadlock, of the great 'Kent Collection,' and that I planned to some day give it in its entirety-seventy-five or more paintings, hundreds of drawings and prints, all my manuscripts and whatever incunabula I had - to a public museum that would house it properly. It took the Director but a moment's thought to bid for it. The Farnsworth Gallery, richly endowed, would welcome it. They'd build a special wing....So all my work would go to Maine! It was to me a dream, half realized, come true."

Whose word do we take for what was actually said? Perhaps Hadlock did not hear everything Kent said; perhaps Kent did not hear everything Hadlock said. But, it does seem likely that Hadlock would have described the offer in his notes as well as brought it up at the meeting of the Board of Trustees and Friends of August 8, 1953, where he introduced the idea of a Kent show in 1954. Thus, the minutes of that meeting should mention that Kent's offer was discussed and rejected if Kent were correct. However, it doesn't appear in them<sup>6</sup>. According to the minutes, all that was decided at that August meeting was to "put off" the Kent show. It is informative to take a look at those minutes and the correspondence following them. They show how volatile the situation rapidly became.

Here are the relevant portions of the minutes of that meeting as displayed at this past Fall's exhibition:

"Rockwell Kent should be put off for a while. Hard-hearted banker from Boston says 'No.' Does he merit it as of today? So

controversial right now that it should be put off for a while. We should definitely (sic) stay out of the fight. Too much controversy if his stuff is shown. Mr. Lowell will be glad to see him if he will call on him. Will take care of any trouble he may cause.

"Majority opinion that we did not think this was the show we wanted for next year. More interested in current than retrospective shows at present."

Although the minutes do not reveal it explicitly, the indication that "majority opinion" wanted to put off the show indicates there was some dissension.

Hadlock, as requested by the Board, informed Kent of the decision.<sup>7</sup>

"At the Annual Meeting of the Trustees and Friends of the William A. Farnsworth Library and Art Museum, held in this Museum on Saturday, August 8<sup>th</sup>, all exhibitions for the coming year were discussed. Members of the committee felt that local artists who have not had exhibitions in the Museum should be given consideration as well as an opportunity to exhibit their paintings in the immediate future. The trustees and various friends of the Museum presented the names of artists to be considered."

"Because local pressure demands consideration of artists in this area the members of the committee desired to give them recognition within the year. Therefore I must ask that an exhibit of your work be postponed to a future date when less pressure is being brought to bear in presenting local artists."

Sincerely yours,  
Wendell S. Hadlock

Unfortunately, in this letter Hadlock showed no sympathy for Kent's possible feelings of rejection or concern about his interpretation of the statements. Perhaps things would have worked out differently if Hadlock had been more supportive and thoughtful in his explanation of why the exhibit was being called off. Kent was disappointed and probably considerably surprised to hear this from Hadlock because up to this point things seemed to have been going well. At the meeting on June 2, according to Hadlock's notes, Kent invited

Hadlock and his wife to Asgaard to help in the selection of paintings for his show, and Kent offered to bring the paintings over to Maine in his truck. Further, in the letters going back and forth immediately after the meeting, there are additional statements consistent with an assumption that the exhibit was going to occur. There were no statements accompanying these to the effect that the exhibition at that point had only tentative status.

Kent did not respond until October because, he wrote, he was traveling and busy with his autobiography which "prevented my seeing your letter of Aug. 11<sup>th</sup>". His anger appears clearly in the following excerpts of his reply<sup>8</sup>:

"I am wondering if the Trustees and Friends of the William A. Farnsworth Library and Art Museum were fully aware, when they decided not to hold a show of my work next summer, of how completely - orally, in writing, and to the press - you, as their agent had committed the Museum to the holding of the show; and that, in instructing you to cancel that show, they invited whatever action against them such a crass breach of contract may justify....

"Of course, as you must be well aware, the reason given for the cancellation of my show is nothing short of grotesque, in view of its being generally conceded that it was I - a Maine resident, winter and summer for many, many years - who established Monhegan as an important art community....

In *It's Me O Lord*,<sup>9</sup> pp 613-614, Kent went on to accuse the board of selling out to McCarthyism, arguing he was not deceived by the notion of local pressure. Further, he took issue with Hadlock as to whether the agreement in June of '53 was in fact tentative. Kent recognized that it was a "gentleman's agreement," but he stated that that was enough.

After Hadlock received Kent's reply, he composed a letter to Ralph Ferguson, Assistant Vice-President of the Boston Safe Deposit and Trust Company in which he indicated that he had pointed out at the Board meeting of August 11 that an oral commitment had been made. He proposed that, in

order to avoid trouble, an exhibition be held the next May<sup>10</sup>. Hadlock also wrote to Kent, insisting that he mentioned to Kent in the June meeting that "all proposed exhibits will be discussed and approval or rejection of each exhibit acted upon" by the Board at their meeting in August. He firmly rejected Kent's assertion that he had committed the Museum to an exhibition.

As a conciliatory gesture, Hadlock sent off a short note to Kent indicating the Museum might consider contributing to the costs of the frames that Kent had said he had already ordered for the exhibition<sup>11</sup>. But Kent fired back<sup>12</sup> that he wanted the names of the Trustees and that he would only accept compensation that he was entitled to. Finally, the Artists Equity Association weighed in with a letter in support of Kent<sup>13</sup>, and this was endorsed soon after by a letter from the New England Chapter of the Artists Equity Association<sup>14</sup>.

While these letters illuminate what was going on between Kent, Hadlock, and the Trustees of the Farnsworth in 1953, they do not give us an explanation for Kent's accusation that the Farnsworth turned down an offer of his personal collection? For that we need to understand what the cancellation of the exhibition meant to Kent. Of course, we cannot be sure of what he was thinking, but it seems likely that he was ready to give the collection to the Farnsworth if the Museum would mount an exhibition of his work. This implicit offer could have been in Kent's mind as he talked to Hadlock. Unfortunately, when the show was cancelled an implicit linking of the show with the gift in Kent's mind could have meant rejection of the gift too. Consistent with this line of thinking, Richard West in a 1986 Kent Collector article,<sup>15</sup> answered, when asked if he thought the paintings that went to the Soviet Union would have gone to the Farnsworth if the show had occurred: "That was what Kent always implied, and I talked to him several times."

"He told me he had always intended to present them with a representative selection of his work, because he had a real affection for Maine, and especially Monhegan"

"His first great paintings came out of Monhegan. With his own hands he built homes there - Jamie Wyeth owns one of them

now. He admired the people, he loved the place. He wanted to do this - give the paintings to the Farnsworth for Maine."

The rejection of the 1953 show was much more devastating to Kent than Hadlock realized. This profound disappointment would explain the anger in his letters to Hadlock, and his brooding over it, up to the time of the announcement of the gift to the Soviet Union seven years later. Is his answer to the reporter's questions then based on a false memory that developed from a strong, but frustrated desire? Or, did Hadlock actually say, or in some way indicate more than it appears in the Farnsworth's documents? At this point we will have to be satisfied with what is in these letters, which are, like many letters, in that they are a wonderfully rich and absorbing, but in the end leave us with many questions unanswered.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Moscow Gets Art of Rockwell Kent, *New York Times*, November 17, 1960

<sup>2</sup> Personal notes of Wendell Hadlock, Nov. 16, 1960

<sup>3</sup> Rockwell Kent and the Farnsworth Museum, notes by Victoria Woodhull to accompany Fall, 2004 exhibition.

<sup>4</sup> Notes from the diary of Wheeler Hadlock, June 2, 1953.

<sup>5</sup> *It's Me O Lord*, by Rockwell Kent, Dodd, Mead, & Co, NY, 1955, p. 594.

<sup>6</sup> Minutes of the Annual Meeting of Directors [Trustees] and Friends of the William A. Farnsworth Library and Art Museum, August 8, 1953. Lowell, apparently, was the banker from Boston.

<sup>7</sup> Letter from Hadlock to Kent, August 11, 1953.

<sup>8</sup> Letter from Rockwell Kent to Wendell Hadlock, October 20, 1953. In this letter Kent also asks for "substantial compensation" for the damages the cancellation will cause his professional reputation.

<sup>9</sup> *It's Me O Lord* by Rockwell Kent, Dodd, Mead & Co, NY, 1955 pp 613-614.

<sup>10</sup> Letter from Wendell Hadlock to Ralph Ferguson Assistant Vice President, Boston Safe Deposit and Trust Company, October 23, 1953.

<sup>11</sup> Letter to Rockwell Kent from Wendell Hadlock, Nov. 5, 1953.

<sup>12</sup> Letter from Rockwell Kent to Wendell Hadlock, Nov. 11, 1953

<sup>13</sup> Letter to Secretary, Board of Trustees, Farnsworth Museum, from Artists Equity

Association, Dec. 15, 1953.

<sup>14</sup> Letter from the New England Chapter of Artists Equity Association to Secretary of the Board of Trustees, Farnsworth Museum, January 18, 1954.

<sup>15</sup> *How 82 Kents went to Russia instead of Rockland* by Eddie Fitzpatrick. Reprinted in the Kent Collector, Spring, 1986.

I am grateful to everyone who provided comments and suggestions on previous drafts of this report. These include Marguerite Eisinger, Frederick Lewis, Robert Rightmire, Will Ross, and Victoria Woodhull.



Henry Morlock is a retired professor of psychology at Plattsburgh State University and he is also a docent and secretary of the organization. His interest in Rockwell Kent developed as a result of giving visiting faculty tours of the Rockwell Kent Gallery and other parts of the museum. Always fascinated by why and how people make the decisions they do, it was natural of him to want to learn about the factors that led Kent to give the Soviet Union his private collection.

The exhibition at the Farnsworth Museum in the Fall of 2004 stimulated him to research the correspondence and records he wrote about here.

## KENT IN PRINT

*Celebrating an Artist's Spiritual Searches and Realist Findings*, Art Review in *The New York Times*, by Grace Glueck, August 26, 2005, on the *Rockwell Kent: The Mythic and the Modern* exhibition at the Portland Museum of Art, curated by Jake Wien. Ms Glueck gives an extensive overview of the exhibition, Kent's life and many of the paintings on display.

*Call of the wild, an exhibit reveals the true nature of painter Rockwell Kent*, *Boston Globe*, by Cate McQuaid, August 26, 2005 on the *Rockwell Kent: The Mythic and the Modern* exhibition at the Portland Museum of Art.

*Rockwell Kent: The Mythic and the Modern, A Major Exhibition at the Portland Museum of Art*, *The Journal of Antiques and Collectibles*, Vol. VI No. 6, August 2005.