

The Cinderellas of Rockwell Kent

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Rockwell Kent (1882-1971) was arguably the greatest American artist of the 20th Century and certainly one of the most important. His reputation was significantly diminished by his politics and he is just now returning to his proper place. He was undoubtedly 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.

First, a couple of definitions. A Cinderella is a label that looks like a stamp but isn't. It has no postal value. Paraphilately, a term I coined, pertains to those items that hover around the edges of classical philately, such as Cinderellas, as well as other ephemera that informs the philatelic story but is not philatelic in and of itself.

Kent worked in small format for many years coincident with his paintings and large prints. Upon his return from Alaska in 1917 he revived an ancient art, 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. (Figure 1a & b [cropped]) 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, Hildegard Hirsch, who was helping him with his reverse painting work.



Figure 1a



Figure 1b

At about the same time, he created a special label for their exclusive use depicting a man (Kent) embracing a deer (Hirsch, in German, is deer). I know of only two copies of this label. (Figure 2)



Figure 2

A number of years ago I came across a heavy card with three Kent designs affixed. (Figure 3) Each is a known image. It is Jake Wien's opinion that they are line cuts made from pen and ink drawings. I've noted the deer embraced by a man above. The line cut is at Figure 4. A second label is for Florence King's bookplate illustrated in Don Roberts' book on the Kent bookplates. (Figure 5) The third was used on the cover of the obscure 1917 Modern School Magazine, edited by his friend Carl Zigrosser. (Figure 6)



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 3

The Deer label was definitely gummed and intended to be used as a true label. The other two were not intended for that purpose and fall out of the paraphilatic category and into that of his other small format graphic ephemeral work

The next true label I am aware of is the famous 1932 Greenland semi-official airmail stamp. (Figure 7) Dr. Fanck led an expedition to Greenland to make a film for Deutsche Universal Pictures called "S.O.S. Iceberg." WWI 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.



Figure 7

He and Udet met and, it is said, during an evening of drink hit upon the idea of making a 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 supposedly making the impression with a spoon. The quantity made is still a point of continuing debate. Only 8 or so are known on cover. I've never seen one off cover. On his return to New York, he made another, more refined, block of the same design. 400 were printed by Pynson Press and maybe 100 were signed. (Figure 8)



Figure 8

There is other ephemera that helps flesh out the Greenland story. In the mid-1930s, Bulgaria Cigarette Makers of Dresden issued a long series of cards; #240 was of Udet. (Figure 9) The film company issued a large poster stamp to promote the film. (Figure 10) It is known in greenish grey and brownish grey, in German, French and English (the first is scarce; latter two rare). I know of only a single cover with one tied by a cancellation. (Figure 11)



Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11

Lately, a reproduction has appeared: black on greenish or cream paper, gummed. It is clearly not meant to fool anyone. (Figure 12)



Figure 12

However, on eBay, I have seen obvious forgeries offered twice. I bought one for archival purposes. (Figure 13) Without looking any further, the inclusion of the portion of a second stamp to the left is evidence enough. The stamps were originally produced one at a time.



Figure 13

By the mid 1930's, Kent had become a left wing protester and produced a rather scarce label for the 1935 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." (Figure 14) 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. When does a label become a poster stamp? Basically, it has to do with the integrity of the design, something truly out of the ordinary and meant to catch one's eye.



Figure 14

Perhaps Kent's most well known paraphilatelic creation was the 1939 Christmas seal. (Figure 15, imperforate proof) 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*, December 2005. Kent signed 100 imperforate sheets between the central slogan seals, each numbered on the back. The signed block is from sheet #70. (Figure 16)



Figure 15



Figure 16

As with all Christmas seals, there is a lot of associated ephemera, too much to show here. But the promotional poster he made is quite rare so I'll make an exception. This design with the full angel is known to me in three formats: as a postcard; as an 11" x 16" cardboard maquette and as a 19" x 25.5" poster. The first two are scarce; the latter rare. (Figure 17) There are differences in the coloration among the three.



Figure 17

The official first day of issue was December 1. Various philatelic first day covers were made, this one signed by Kent. (Figure 18)



Figure 18

However, finding a commercial first day usage is rather more difficult. (Figure 19, below)



Figure 19

Seals were sent abroad for use which arrived well before the official first day. The earliest known usage is from the Philippines on November 16. The cover was sent by sea “Via Suez” to Switzerland, a most unusual destination, censored en route in Palestine. (Figures 21a [front] & b [back])



Figure 20a



Figure 20b

The most remarkable usage of this Christmas seal I have seen is on a cover to Tonga with a seal on the front and two more one the back, tied by two of the myriad Tin Can Mail cancels. It left Riverside, CT on Dec. 2, arriving Jan. 10 at Nuku'alofa, Tonga then sent on to Niuafoou where it was received on Jan. 12. (Figures 21a [front] & b [back])



Figure 21a



Figure 21b

One of my areas of interest is the plagiarism of designs. I have found two from Kent's work. In 1937, a Japanese TB seal (Figure 22) reached back for its design to the one used by Zigrosser's *The Modern School* magazine, shown above in Figure 6. In 1950, the Italians used a derivative of his design for their 1939 TB seal. (Figure 23) There must be more.



Figure 22



Figure 23

I am currently working on reorganizing and rewriting Doug's collection of the 1939 seal. In due course, I will write about it.

His continuing interest in social justice resulted in a 1940 label for the Council against Intolerance in America, depicting a monumental figure protecting the huddled masses from the flames of discrimination. (Figure 24) The cover in Figure 25 is most interesting, being an original Union Civil War patriotic envelope used in 1940 with a single 13¢ stamp paying the first class special delivery rate. Use of the label on the Civil War patriotic is particularly appropriate. Other artists made labels for this organization well into the 1950s.



Figure 24



Figure 25

He created two labels for the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU). In 1943 he made a fund-raising label for the defense of three men, Harry R. Bridges, J.R. Robertson and Henry Schmidt, all officers of the Union. The "Right Hand" refers to the importance of these key members. (Figure 26) It is shown in Figure 27 affixed to an ILWU dues book. Later, in 1947, he made a design for the Political Action Fund of the ILWU in three denominations, 25¢ green, 50¢ blue and \$1 red. (Figures 28a, b & c)



Figure 26



Figure 27



Figure 28a



Figure 28b



Figure 28c

In 1952, as a manifestation of his involvement in the Peace movement of the times, he made a ceramic dove in an edition of 72 (Figure 29) to the bottom of which was applied a padded rubber cancel device for use on envelopes. (Figures 30a & b)



Figure 29



Figure 30a



Figure 30b

Two items show the use of this device, one to Russia in 1961 (Figure 31) and one on a postcard to him from Russia, date illegible. (Figure 32). The latter is unavailable in color and resides in the Archives of American Art in Washington, D.C.



Figure 31

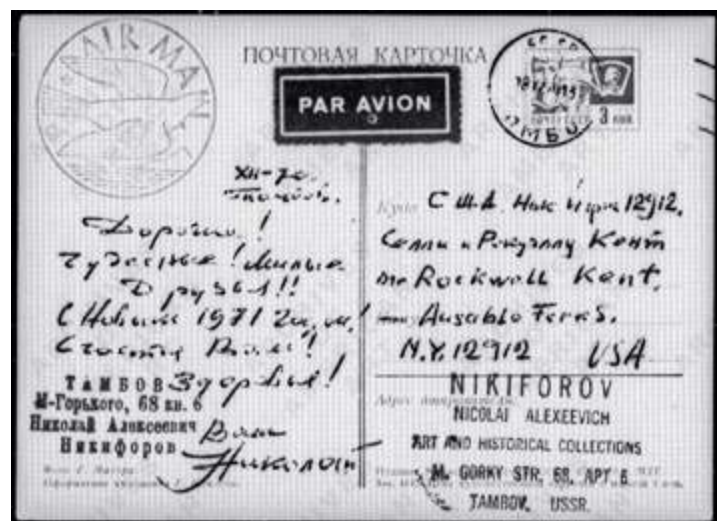


Figure 32

The device is also known in Cyrillic. (Figure 33) It is most likely a plagiarism as the design shows definite alterations. It was used between 1968 and 1971 (Figure 34) It, too, is in Washington.



Figure 33



Figure 34

In the early 1960's he prepared a label for his personal use. "On Earth, Peace" is the title of one of his famous earlier prints although the image is entirely different. The dove is a frequent motif of Kent's, especially in his anti-war artwork. Figure 35 shows the label cropped from the cover in Figure 36. His address line is on the reverse. (Figure 37) He used this label until his death in 1971 and his wife, Sally, used it well into the 1990's.



Figure 35



Figure 36



Figure 37

I appreciate the help rendered to me by Will Ross, Jake Wien and Tom Minor in preparing this article.

I would appreciate hearing from those of you who might know of other labels designed by Rockwell Kent.