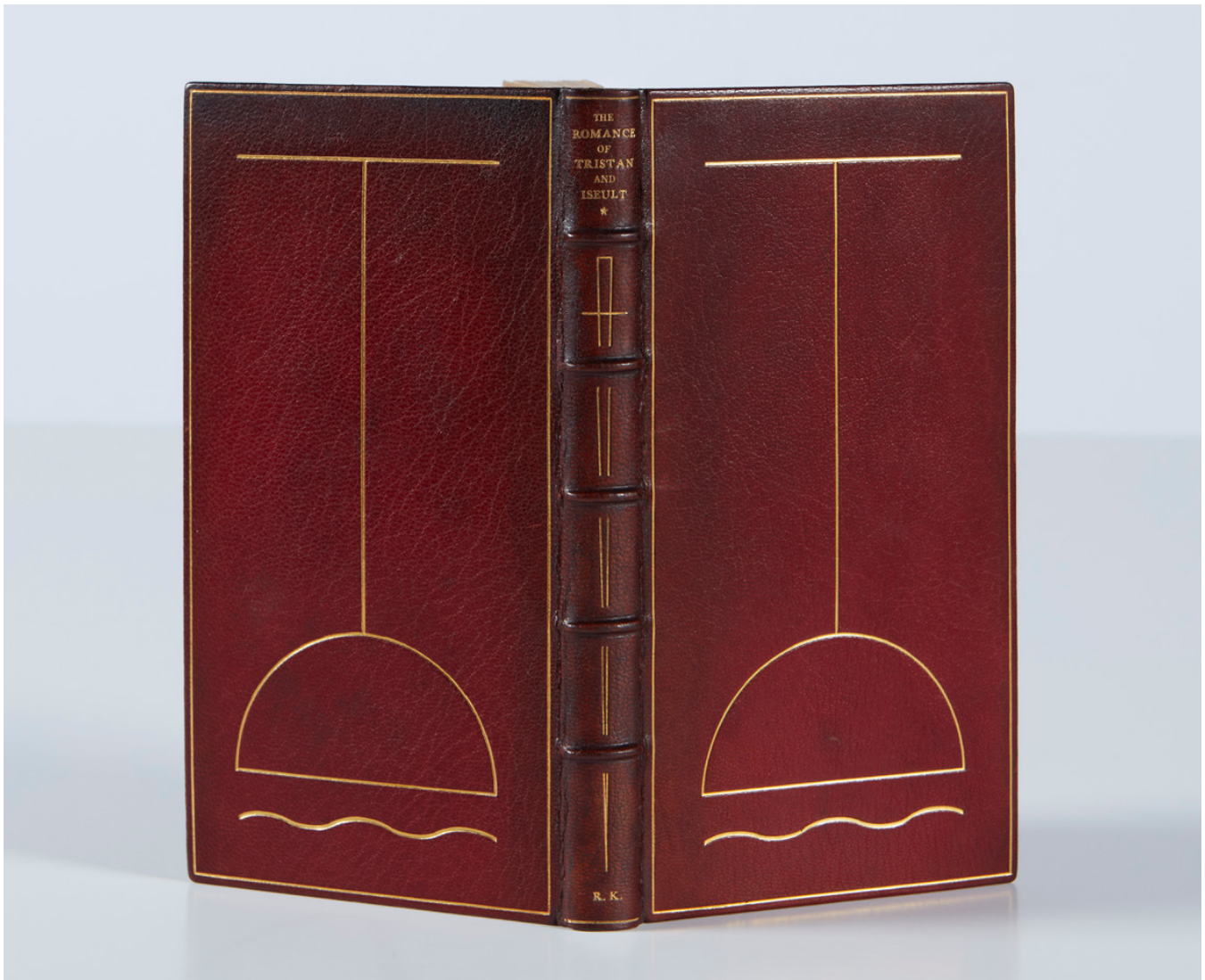


# A Unique Rockwell Kent Designed Binding, and the *Rockwell Kent Review* Article It Prompted

This unique binding design is by Rockwell Kent, used on the text-block of Thomas Bird Mosher's edition of *The Romance of Tristan and Iseult* (Mosher, 1922). Kent's own title-page was inserted in place of Mosher's, and the whole was bound by Donnelley of Chicago to Kent's specifications. The editor of the *Rockwell Kent Review* notes, "...Kent designed the special binding for his wife's personal copy of *Tristan and Iseult*, a simple graphic that would be repurposed to greater glory and mystery, as resolved here by Phil Bishop."—p. [1]

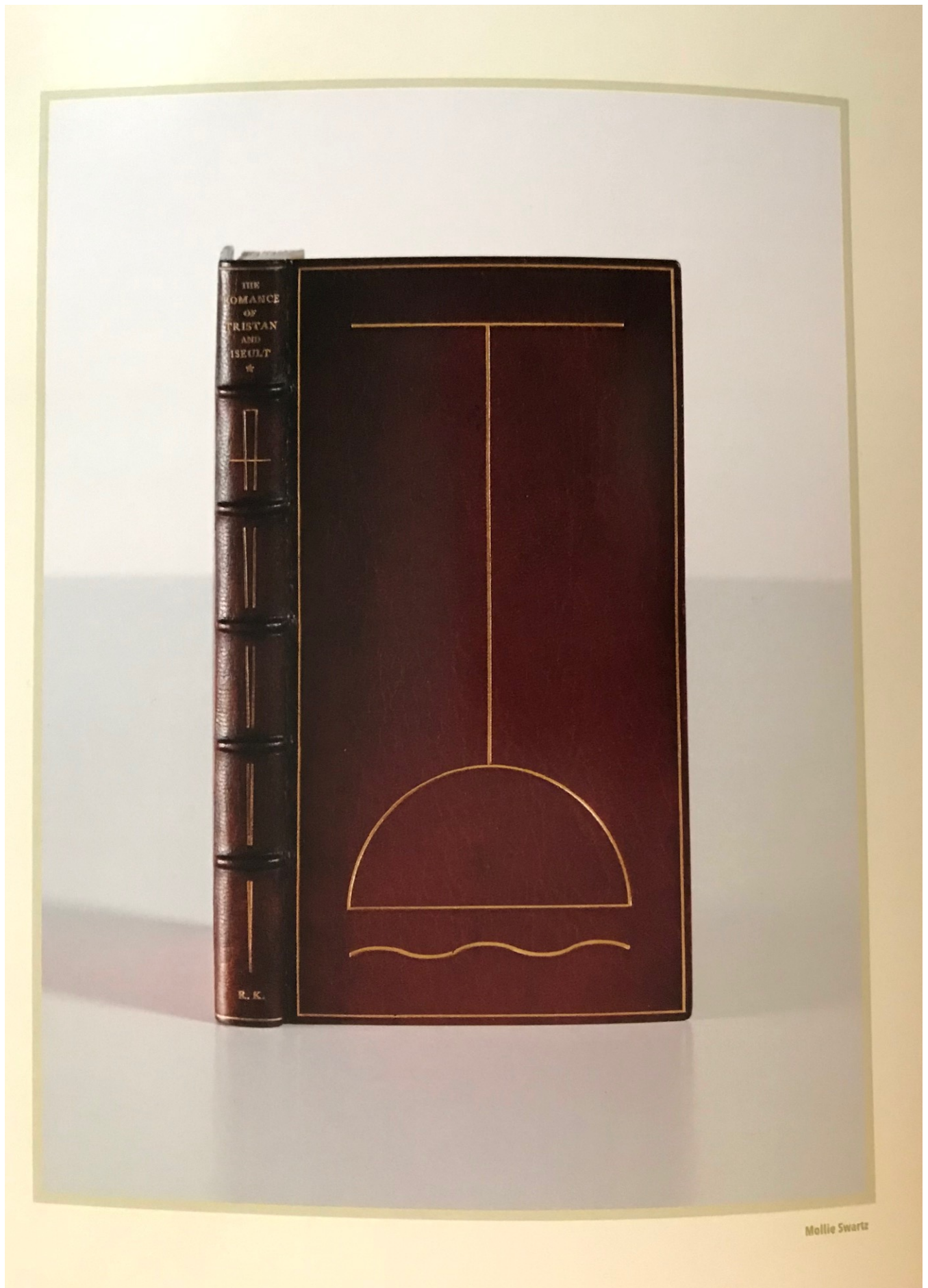
Thanks to the editor for permission to show my article that was just published in the *ROCKWELL KENT REVIEW*. Vol. XLVI. Plattsburgh, NY: Plattsburgh State Art Museum/SUNY-Plattsburgh, 2020-2021, frontispiece and pp.11-14.



Picture of the full binding in the Bishop Collection.

Photo by Molly Swartz

The article appears below:



Mollie Swartz

Frontispiece to the *Rockwell Kent Review* article.

# Rockwell Kent's Unique 'Tristan and Iseult'

Philip R. Bishop



BOOK COLLECTORS and researchers sometimes encounter something so unusual and provocative as to instantly generate a thrill of excitement. Mine took place on May 4, 2012, with a phone call offering a book with a unique Rockwell Kent-designed binding—something I had been seeking for over twenty years. The book? A Mosher Press edition of *Tristan and Iseult*, its binding and title page having supplanted the Mosher originals. That the binding exists and is now in my collection is in and of itself reward enough. What I didn't realize then, however, is the greater significance of the Kentian cover design.

This tale of discovery properly starts with a curious entry in the "Special Rockwell Kent Number" of the *American Book Collector* from 1964:

*Tristan and Iseult*, 1923. Small octavo, the Mosher edition of 1922, title p. and binding removed, new title p. with wood engraving by Kent, printed at the Lakeside Press under the supervision of Wm. A. Kittredge, and bound there in full maroon niger with binding design by Kent stamped in gold. Given as a gift to Frances Lee Kent.<sup>1</sup>

"Mosher edition of 1922" refers to the third edition of *The Romance of Tristan and Iseult*, published that year by Thomas Bird Mosher, the famed Portland, Maine, purveyor of belles lettres. For greater accuracy, the binding was by the Donnelley Bindery at R.R. Donnelley & Sons, the parent company of Lakeside Press, in Chicago. The *American Book Collector* entry could be construed such that the whole project was completed in 1923. I would learn that, in fact, only the wood engraving had been created that year,<sup>2</sup>

that the rebinding occurred several years later.

In 1925, the personal life of Rockwell Kent was in upheaval after his numerous extramarital affairs. As matters came to a head, Kent divorced his wife of eighteen years and months later, at a Sunday luncheon on Long Island, became enamored of a "twenty-six-year-old, blue-eyed divorcee who had recently come to New York from her native Virginia... Her sophistication, calm beauty and intelligence captured [his] heart at first meeting."<sup>3</sup> This was Frances Lee, and they married in April 1926. In one of her love letters, she wrote: "[T]he only life for me is that of the 'help-meet' of an industrious artist."<sup>4</sup> Kent, describing their marriage in *This Is My Own*, wrote: "Frances, who was my secretary as well as our business executive, accountant, housekeeper, cook-at-times, mender of socks, knitter of everything, interior decorator and landscape gardener, began her secretarial duties as we lingered over our morning coffee."<sup>5</sup> That December, the Lakeside Press commissioned Kent to illustrate *Moby-Dick*, under the attentive direction of William A. Kittredge. One thousand sets of the three-volume limited edition featuring more than 270 illustrations would eventually be published.

The intimate details surrounding Kent's creating a new cover and title page for *Tristan and Iseult* as a gift for his young wife are unknown. We do know, however, that Frances was aware of the project and had somehow inspired or even instigated it. The book that was taken apart and rebound was her personal copy, bearing the "Frances Lee" armorial bookplate. That Kent was enthralled with *Tristan and Iseult* as early as 1925 is clearly evidenced by his mention of the medieval romance numerous times in his later writings.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, he even promoted the story as a motion picture to his Hollywood friends in 1927.<sup>7</sup>

After two years of prodding Kent to produce the *Moby-Dick* illustrations, and with more than a hundred of them yet to be drawn, William Kittredge visited the Kents at Asgaard Farm in mid-January 1929.<sup>8</sup> It was most likely then that Kent proposed rebinding Frances's copy of *Tristan and Iseult*, a favor Kittredge would have been willing to provide, if only to speed the completion of *Moby-Dick*. The earliest record of the Tristan project appears in a Feb. 7, 1929, letter to Kent from Kittredge, discussing it along with some *Moby-Dick* business:

*Before putting the title page into your book—"Tristan and Iseult", I am sending two proofs showing suggested arrangements for this page. Shall we print the woodcut in black, or would you prefer to have it printed in blue or red? If you will give me a sample of color, I will match it. This is YOUR BOOK. Therefore, I wish you would modify the title page in any way that seems agreeable to you. Perhaps you would like it better with a frame or border. The way I have set it is the way I feel it. Your woodcut is enough decoration, I think. I would like to know whether you wish the woodcut printed in black or color. In printing the title, I will try to match the paper of the text.*<sup>9</sup>

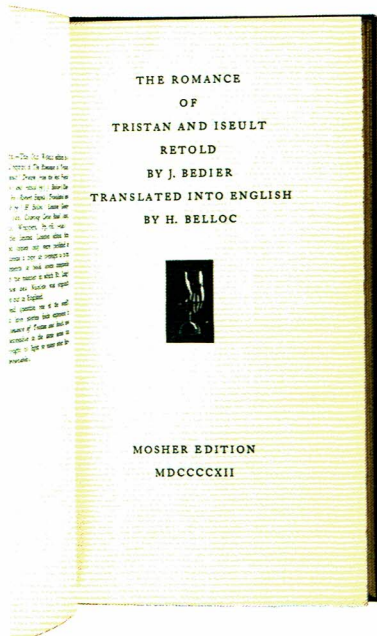
Kent was apparently satisfied with the typesetting and ink, and all was concluded in late April when the redressed and retitled book was delivered to Frances at Asgaard. In the accompanying letter, Kittredge wrote to her:

*I am sure you must have thought I never was going to return your book—"The Romance of Tristan & Iseult". I wanted to have the book bound with extreme care according to Mr. Kent's suggestion, and so it took longer than I had expected. However, the binding is at last finished, and I am sending it to you with this letter. I hope you will accept this binding with my compliments and devotion. It was a great pleasure to do the book and I hope you and Mr. Kent will like the result.*<sup>10</sup>

Three days later, Kent received the maple block from Kittredge's assistant with a note: "Mr. Kittredge has asked me to return to you the little wood cut which you made for the title page of 'Tristan'. Quite tragically, in the printing, a corner chipped off the block. However, it was possible to repair this in the proof with a little India ink."<sup>11</sup>

Set in the traditional typeset Kent favored, the new title page repeats the original text, acknowledging the book's publisher with MOSHER EDITION.<sup>12</sup> The most significant difference lies in Kent's wood engraving, which he substituted for the Mosher Press publisher's mark. Measuring a bit less than one inch high and a half-inch wide, it shows two hands holding an inverted, emptied goblet. They represent the hands of two people.<sup>13</sup>

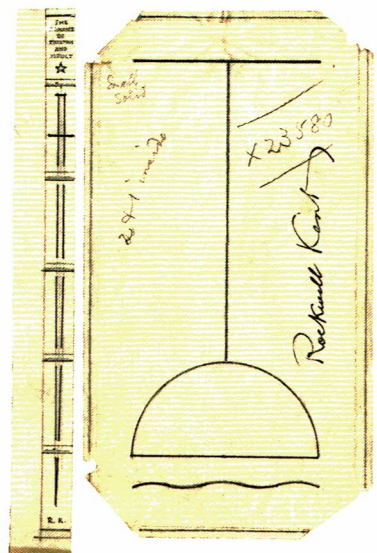
In order to grasp the meaning of the image, one must turn to Joseph Bédier's 12th-century chivalric tale of the knight Tristan and his Iseult the Fair. In brief: Tristan has won the hand of Iseult for marriage to King Mark and is to escort her on the voyage to her betrothed in Cornwall. Iseult's mother brews a love potion to accompany her daughter. In confidence, she tells Iseult's lady-in-waiting to carefully guard the potion until the wedding, then "pour this essenced wine into a cup" and offer it to Iseult and King Mark, taking care "that they alone shall taste this brew. For this is its power: they that drink of it together love each other with every single sense and with their every thought, forever, in life and in death."<sup>14</sup> After the ship's storm-weary sailors drop anchor for a reprieve, Tristan and Iseult become thirsty, and a simple serving maid, altogether unaware of the admonition given to Iseult's lady-in-waiting, brings them the forbidden brew and pours them a drink to share: "Now she found them not wine—but Passion and Joy most sharp, and Anguish without end, and Death."<sup>15</sup> They finish the brew, as signified by the inverted gob-



Mollie Swartz

Above, the replacement title page for *Tristan and Iseult* with Kent's wood engraving of an inverted goblet. (Philip R. Bishop Collection)

Below, Kent's scale drawings for the spine and covers of the rebound volume, showing the binder's markups. (Scott R. Ferris Collection)



Scott R. Ferris

let. Hilaire Belloc's translation returns several times to that fateful moment while the story plays out according to Tristan's and Iseult's cemented love and deep friendship<sup>16</sup> to its tragic end:

*"Drunk, and still so am I," said he [Tristan], "but of such a draught that never can the influence fade. Queen Iseult, do you mind you of that hot and open day on the high seas? We thirsted and we drank together from the same cup, and since that day have I been drunk with an awful wine."*<sup>17</sup>

Tristan even recalls it on his death bed:

*"Tell her to remember our past time, and our great sorrows, and all the joy there was in our loyal and tender love. And tell her to remember that draught we drank together on the high seas. For we drank our death together..."*<sup>18</sup>

We are now in a position to fully appreciate Kent's design for the book's cover. The slim, six-panel spine features the vertical image of a sword, an essential instrument of knighthood that plays an inescapable role in the story line. Its tip points to Kent's initials below. The inverted goblet of the title page reappears on both the front and back leather-covered boards—but as a bold, geometric image with a line, suggesting wine, below. The unison of the mutually reflective designs is the essence of "that draught we drank together on the high seas," while its deeper meaning would have been clear only to Rockwell and Frances Kent.

**I**N AUGUST 1930, printing of the limited-edition of *Moby-Dick* got underway. The Lakeside Press prospectus would note that "...the binding in full cloth, is designed by Mr. Kent."<sup>19</sup> The edition was fully subscribed in no time at all; the binding, however, was yet to be designed. Finally, in mid-September, Kent sent Kittredge the image and titling that would be stamped in silver foil on the black cloth.<sup>20</sup> When the books were bound one month later, what should appear on the front cover of each of the three volumes but the inverted goblet, revised with four wavy lines below it. Kent had repurposed the simple design from a year and a half earlier, from a book that very few people had seen—or might ever see.

The suitability of the inverted goblet to *Moby-Dick* lies in Melville's words, when, in Chapter 36, Captain Ahab challenges his crew to hunt and kill the great white whale, and they ceremoniously drink grog from a common pewter pitcher. Then, toward this pivotal chapter's feverish end, Ahab fills three hollow harpoon blades, "long, barbed steel goblets" illustrated by Kent, with the brew, making them "murderous chalices" and sealing a pact with the *Pequod*'s harpooners. He commands them to, "Bestow them, ye who are now made parties to this indissoluble league."<sup>21</sup> And as in the Tristan story, the shared drink administered at sea will put Ahab and his crew on an inexorable life-and-death trajectory.

The cover of the Lakewood Press *Moby-Dick* may also have served to acknowledge Frances and the role she played in its creation. Kittredge wrote to Kent: "I do not think there ever would

have been a 'Moby Dick' without her."<sup>22</sup>

In the years that followed, collectors would assume the enigmatic design relates to whaling, perhaps owing to its similarity to the image of a diving whale on the book's spine. When in 1945 Lucy Eugenia Osborne, Custodian of the Chapin Library at Williams College, questioned the artist about it, Kent responded:

*My design on the cover of the three-volume edition of MOBY DICK resembles the cross and circle of the medieval printers but is in fact, or to my mind, a conventionalization of an emptied goblet—the cup of life, if you like. Below it is a conventionalization of the ocean. If there is any relationship between this symbolism and the story of MOBY DICK, it is to be felt rather than explained.*<sup>23</sup>

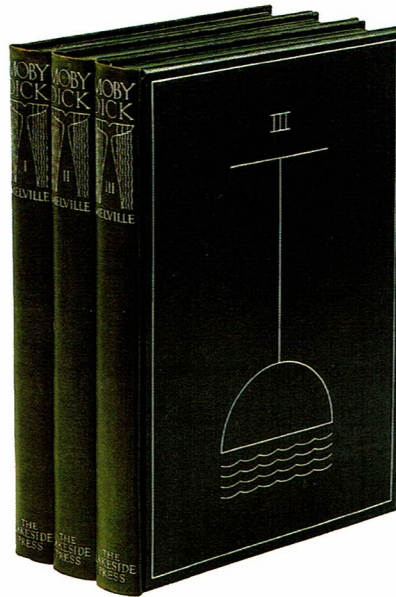
**K**ENT'S WIDER SENSE of a relationship "felt rather than explained" extended into the realm of his closest friends and colleagues, to whom he sometimes presented specially bound copies of his books. *N by E*, the illustrated account of his shipwrecked sailing to Greenland, had been published almost simultaneously with

*Moby-Dick*, and he ordered a personal edition of a hundred copies with an added page "to be distributed among my friends and the people in Greenland to whom I am under obligations."<sup>24</sup> Ninety of these were bound in linen, while as many as ten of the remainder would later be bound in black leather with the goblet-over-the-waters design re-created in gold on the front cover. Shortly after the two books were in print, Kent took advantage of his excellent relations with the Donnelley company and placed an order for an additional five leather-bound books. In a Dec. 11 note to Alfred de Sauty, head of Donnelley's bindery operation, Kittredge's assistant wrote:

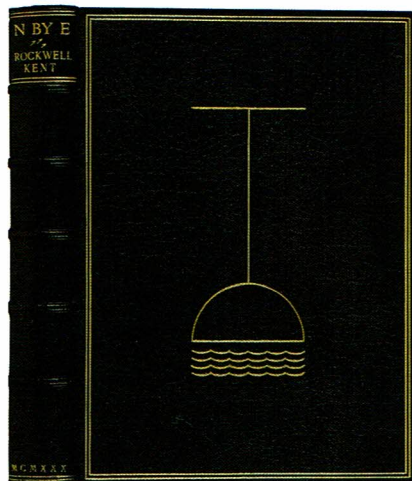
*Rockwell Kent requested four copies of the trade edition "Moby Dick" bound in black leather, stamped with the same design as used on the limited edition. RK preferred, if possible, to have these on better paper, but I do not see how that can be done on account of the edition having been printed... I wonder if you would write to Rockwell Kent at Ausable Forks and ask him whether you are to bind up four copies of the "Moby Dick"*

*trade edition in black leather as it now stands —perhaps with rough gilt on three sides— full black leather— with the design of the limited edition stamped in gold on the front cover.*<sup>25</sup>

On the same date Kittredge telegraphed Kent with word that the linen-bound copies of *N by E* were being shipped "...except the leather copies which de Sauty is doing and will send later."<sup>26</sup> A few weeks later, Kent wrote to de Sauty: "I received the five specially bound copies of *N by E* and *Moby Dick*. I am simply delighted with them and want to thank you for the special trouble that you must have taken to get these copies to me so quickly."<sup>27</sup> One of the five leather-bound books was apparently *N by E* requested by Edward K. Warren, vice president and treasurer of Brewer & Warren, the book's publisher.<sup>28</sup> The inverted goblet fills its front cover. The re-

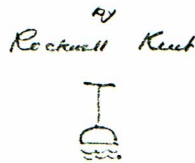


The celebrated Lakeside Press edition of *Moby-Dick*, 1930.

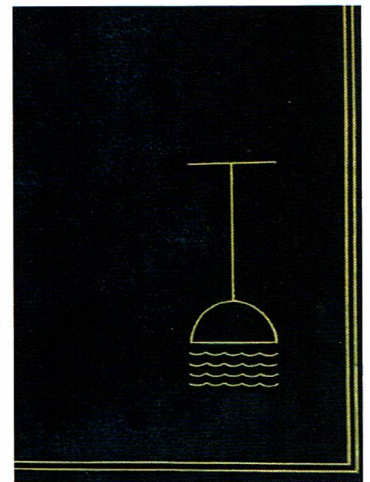


Left, the cover *N by E*, custom bound in leather for of Edward K. Warren by the Lakeside Bindery. Only as many as eleven are thought to have been produced.

Right, a detail of the leather-bound trade edition of *Moby-Dick*, 1931. (One of four copies.) The goblet image is scaled down and positioned in the lower right corner.



Above, Kent signed a copy of the Lakeside Press *Moby-Dick* with the inverted goblet. (Dana Weise, PBA Galleries)



maining four were the Random House trade edition of *Moby-Dick*, with the goblet design reduced in size in the lower-right corner of the cover. Lastly, there is at least one copy of the limited-edition *Moby-Dick* signed by the artist in pencil on the front free endpaper “by Rockwell Kent” over a variation of the goblet.<sup>29</sup>

The goblet design was given birth with *The Romance of Tristan and Iseult* as a gift to Francis Kent—signifying devotion “with every single sense and with their every thought.” In the years that followed, she would prove herself more than worthy as “help-meet” of an industrious artist” in bringing both *Moby-Dick* and *N by E* to print. Kent’s devotion to her also made the goblet, for a time, a mark of friendship. Beyond these instances, no other use of the design has been found.

## NOTES

My thanks to Scott Ferris for photos of the binding drawings and related material from his collection; to Chapin Librarian Wayne G. Hammond, who supplied the Kent-Osborne letter and exhibition information; to Nolan Goodman of Under the Hill Books, Minneapolis, for bringing the leather-bound *N by E* to my attention; and to PBA Galleries, Berkeley, for the Kent signature photo. Items from the Rockwell Kent Papers in the Archives of American Art of the Smithsonian Institution are cited as RKP.

1. *American Book Collector*, Vol. XIV, No. 10 (140th issue), Summer 1964. Kent’s article, titled “Asgaard Press Publications,” included a short checklist of additional publications.

2. Jake Milgram Wien, “Rockwell Kent in Hollywood,” *Kent Collector*, Fall 2012, Vol. XXXVIII, No. 3, 19. N. 48 states, “In 1923, Kent created a diminutive wood engraving, an impression of which was later bound into an existing copy of *The Romance of Tristan and Iseult* (trans. H. Belloc [Portland, ME: Mosher, 1922]; see Kent and Zigrosser, *Rockwellkentiana*, 54-55, where the print is identified and first catalogued).” The entry in *Rockwellkentiana* (NY, 1933): “TRISTAN AND ISEULT. Wood engraving on maple, 15/16 x 9/16, 1923 / Two hands holding an inverted wine glass. / One proof printed for title page of a specially bound copy of *Tristan and Iseult*, translated by Belloc, in the Mosher edition.”

3. David Traxel, *An American Saga: The Life and Times of Rockwell Kent*, Harper and Row, New York, 1980, 151.

4. RKP, Frances Kent to Rockwell Kent, Sept. 1930, reel 5199, frame 797.

5. Rockwell Kent, *This Is My Own*, Duell, Sloan and Pearce, New York, 1940, 135.

6. Rockwell Kent, *It’s Me O Lord*, Dodd, Mead and Company, New York, 1955, 186, 188, 390, 392. He also mentions Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde* and a 155-page manuscript of the Gottfried von Strassburg version he received as a present from an unidentified young lady.

7. Jake Milgram Wien, op. cit., 11.

8. Don Roberts, “Moby-Dick Chronicle: The Making of a Masterpiece,” *Rockwell Kent Review*, Summer 2013, Vol. XXXIX, No. 2, 15.

9. RKP, William Kittredge to R. Kent, 7 Feb. 1929, reel 5174, frame 1155.

10. RKP, Kittredge to F. Kent, 22 April 1929, reel 5174, frame 1177.

11. RKP, Mary Sahula to R. Kent, 25 April 1929, reel 5174, frame 1179.

12. The date on Kent’s new title page is MDCCCCXII (1912), an overlooked error. The proper date is MDCCCCXXII (1922).

13. A 1928 watercolor in *It Is Now Eleven O’clock*, a handmade book by Kent for Olga Drexel Dahlgren (Rockwell Kent Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University), helps clarify the hands as being those of two people.

14. Joseph Bédier, *The Romance of Tristan and Iseult*, translated by Hilaire Belloc, Mosher Press, Portland, ME, 1922, 35.

15. *Ibid.*, 36.

16. In reading the story, one is struck by the pervasive use of the word *friend*, which appears 67 times. Of those, 26 are what *Tristan and Iseult* call one another. Kent’s goblet design can be viewed as correlative with strong friendship.

17. Bédier, 119.

18. *Ibid.*, 126.

19. “Four American Books,” a prospectus with order form, the Lakeside Press, 1930. The first of the four books presented is *Moby-Dick* (others being Poe’s *Tales*, Dana’s *Two Years before the Mast* and Thoreau’s *Walden*). No correspondence between Kent and Lakeside Press regarding the cover design has been found.

20. RKP, R. Kent to Kittredge, 15 Sept. 1929, reel 5174, frame 1351.

21. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick or the Whale*, Modern Library, New York, 1982, 240.

22. RKP, Kittredge to R. Kent, 1 July 1930, reel 5174, frame 1306. Kent’s memoir *N by E*, also published in late 1930, was openly dedicated to Francis.

23. The July 7, 1945, letter was exhibited alongside the three-volume book in the exhibition “Herman Melville: A Retrospective of His Works on the 150th Anniversary of Moby-Dick” at the Chapin Library of Rare Books, Williams College, Williamstown, MA, May 7 to Sept. 20, 2001. The entry description was by Wayne G. Hammond, now Chapin Librarian.

24. RKP, R. Kent to Kittredge, 20 Oct. 1930, reel 5174, frame 1386.

25. RKP, Sahula to Alfred de Sauty (copied to Kent), 11 Dec. 1930, reel 5174, frame 1422.

26. RKP, Kittredge to R. Kent, 11 Dec. 1930, reel 5174, frame 1423.

27. R. Kent to de Sauty, 5 Jan. 1931. RKP, reel 5174, frame 1441.

28. RKP, Warren to R. Kent, 17 Nov. 1930, reel 5164, frame 373.

29. This signed copy of the Lakeside Press edition (no. 653, from the library of James “Ted” Watkins) was sold at auction by PBA Galleries, 20 Sept. 2018.

# ROCKWELL KENT REVIEW

VOLUME XLVI / 2020 – 2021



**Founded as the Kent Collector  
by George and Gladys Spector in 1974**

A journal devoted to the life and work of Rockwell Kent (1882–1971 as well as to American Art of the first half of the twentieth century, published annually under the auspices of the Plattsburgh State Art Museum, SUNY Plattsburgh.

Museum Director ..... Tonya Cribb  
Collections Manager ..... Felicia Herzog  
Preparator ..... Walter Early  
Administrative Assistant ..... Edith Ellis

Editor ..... Don Roberts  
Scanning ..... Gary Jones  
Circulation ..... Edith Ellis

**Subscriptions** The price of an annual subscription, including delievery by first-class mail, is \$18.00. Digital copies of back issues of *The Kent Collector* (1974–2012) and *Rockwell Kent Review* (2013–2020) are \$10.00 per copy. To subscribe or order a single copy, please use the contact information below.

**Submissions** We invite proposals for scholarly articles of 3,000 to 9,000 words on the subject of American art of the early twentieth century. New research regarding the life and work of Rockwell Kent is especially welcome. Please contact *Editor, Rockwell Kent Review* at the address below.

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**Cover:** Rockwell Kent, *The Road to Asgaard, Adirondacks*, oil on canvas, 1960. (Hermitage Museum)

**Frontispiece:** The unique binding for Frances Lee Kent's copy of *The Romance of Tristan and Iseult*, designed by Rockwell Kent and executed by Alfred de Sauty, 1928. (Philip R. Bishop Collection)



*We hope you'll find this pandemic-delayed issue worth the wait. The gathering of content began in January 2020, about the time Asgaard Farm was added to the National Register of Historic Places. So, of course, the cover story had to be an appreciation of that place at the heart of Rockwell Kent's life and work. Mary-Nell Bockman's "Finding Kent at Asgaard" not only tells its story but also sets the stage for three other articles,*

*At Asgaard, Kent painted his controversial Post Office murals and masterminded the bitter aftermath, as chronicled by Will Ross. It was there, too, that Kent designed the special binding for his wife's personal copy of *Tristan and Iseult*, a simple graphic that would be repurposed to greater glory and mystery, as resolved here by Phil Bishop. And at Asgaard on a June day in 1968, Richard West viewed the renderings of sets and costumes for a production by the Kirov State Theatre of Ballet and Opera in Leningrad—what may well have been Kent's final commissioned work.*

*As ever, we thank the writers and you, our subscribers, who make this publication possible.*

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WILL ROSS, an authority on Kent's commercial art career and a longtime contributor to this publication, is the founder of the online Rockwell Kent Forum. He lives in Calabasas, CA.

RICHARD V. WEST's five-decade career as a museum director spans the continent from Maine to Washington State. In 1969, he curated "Rockwell Kent: The Early Years" at Bowdoin College, the final exhibition during the artist's lifetime. He lives in Seattle.

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