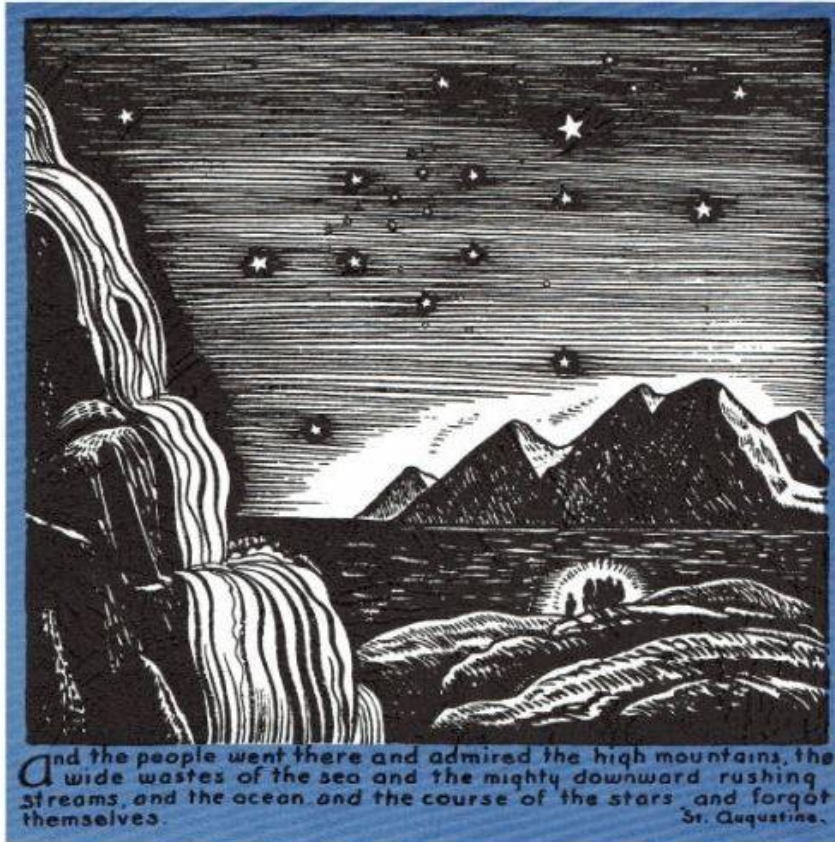
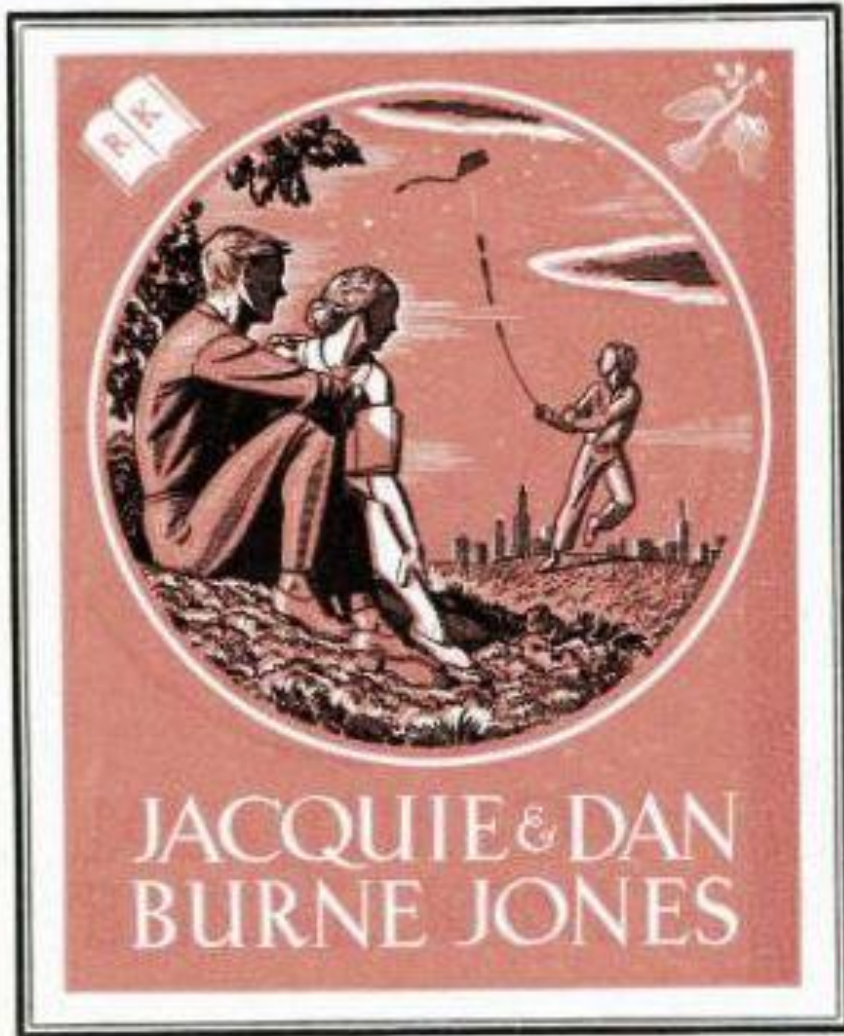


American  Society of  
BOOKPLATE COLLECTORS AND DESIGNERS



B I C E N T E N N I A L  
YEAR BOOK  
1976



# ROCKWELL KENT: HIS BOOKPLATE DESIGNS

*by*

*Dan Burne Jones\**

In the judgment of many adherents to the cause, the bookplate designs of the noted American artist and writer Rockwell Kent of a certainty can be placed among the top ten on any listing compiled of American bookplate designers. To qualify an evaluation of this one aspect of Kent's varied endeavors in the arts—that of the designing of bookplates—one need but look to their inspirational qualities, the seemingly inexhaustible variety of ideas they express, the appropriateness of the medium chosen best adapted to their execution, and to the truly artistic achievement they attain.

Bookplates are often considered miniature works of art, and the bookplate designs of Rockwell Kent support that conviction. A study of them taken as a whole will bear out the facts of their excellent compositional elements thoughtfully arranged into unified designs, and the finished quality and character of the completed work—done in mediums and styles best suited to their execution—demonstrate their exceptional achievement and lead one to consider them the miniature works of art that the great majority of them seem to be. These factors, plus their inspirational content and the resulting beauty of the designs taken as a whole, tend to verify almost any contention that can be made for

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them, for it is these very factors which raise and place them into the category so boldly proffered of them as miniature works of art.

When we speak of their content, we speak of the elements and objects that constitute their finished design. They may have architectural qualities inherent in their design, for Kent studied architecture under Prof. William R. Ware at Columbia University. Here, in his third year he had become so proficient as an architectural designer and renderer that he was employed by the architectural firm of Ewing & Chappell, Architects. And it was also this fine old professor who encouraged him to continue his summer studies at painting. This architectonic feeling for the arrangement and balance found in the design of many of his bookplates and, it may be added, the decorative motifs and sculptural qualities resulted, in part, from his training and actual practice as a working architect. In many of the journals of architecture at the time, his drawings and renderings were reproduced. It was a practice he was never to desert for in 1969 when lightning struck and burned his home, he designed and had a new one built on the foundations of the older structure. There is little in the background and training of Kent's art that is not based on the actual practice of the elements found in it.

After his architectural training and experience, Kent studied painting under William Merritt Chase at his Shinnecock School on Long Island, N. Y. Chase's edict of going to nature to discover her secrets of light and shade, and the study of trees, rocks, flowers and figures in a landscape, led Kent further to perfect these elements as we see them in certain of his bookplates. The people in his bookplates are perfectly and beautifully drawn and may, in some respects, have been as a direct result from his great interest in the life and painting classes taken under Robert Henri at the New York School of Art. Kent in his autobiography has said that "as Chase taught us to use our eyes, and Henri to enlist our hearts, now Kenneth Hayes Miller called on us to use our heads." The subtle beauty of the images and objects found in Kent's bookplates were further refined in his work from his study and working with another great master, Abbott H. Thayer. Thayer was doing his famous work on "Concealing Coloration in the Animal Kingdom" at the time. It is a book of great interest, and Kent is given credit in it for his work on one plate with Thayer and his son, though it is thought by some that Kent

may have assisted on some of the others.

"Thayer," he wrote "vastly enlarged my fields of interest, he gave me true standards for evaluation of the arts and of life; while at the same time a precision and clarity of expression which sharpened my appreciation of both."

From the varied background of his training and experience, from his travels to Alaska, South America, Europe, and Greenland, Kent brought a vast knowledge of art forms to his art from his being exposed to new vistas of the arts and crafts of peoples of different cultural heritages. Many of their cultural traditions in the arts and crafts found their way into the finished excellence of his bookplates. And always a searcher for beauty in all forms in the objects of nature, in human and animal forms, in the elements of applied design, all of these factors contributed to raising them to such a standard of excellence that the designing of bookplates became a respected art form in his hands. It was not that the great artists of both the past and the present had not worked in this particular art form, for many of them had and still do, but in Kent's work—in addition to all the knowledge he had garnered and could apply—he was to take full advantage of the photomechanical process of reproduction whereby bookplates could be placed in the hands of many instead of the solvent few. This restriction was lifted to its greatest degree—as we shall see later—by Kent's lending his talents to designing commercial bookplates. This provided a democratic avenue of approach and a means of reaching great masses of people in all walks of life. Then too, he was fortunate in his choice of printers—two of the finest of their day—as Elmer Adler of Pynson Printers, and Abe Colish of the Abe Colish Press, printed most of the bookplates designed for his private clients; and Manuel Greenwald of the Greenland Press, and Ernest Morgan of the Antioch Bookplate Company printed those done commercially. One might add at this point, too, that the same standard of excellence in printing was demanded in the contracts Kent requested of all these printers, private and commercial alike.

Kent was no dabbler in bookplate designing for he took it as a serious psychological application of the designer to fit the desires and respect of their eventual owners. In a letter dated 7 December 1966 written to Audrey Arellanes—then, and still an avid collector of book-

plates—he wrote:

"Although I have designed a great many bookplates it has not been because of my having had any particular interest in bookplates in general but merely because, after having made a very few, I began receiving orders for them and found the designing of them to be one way of earning money so that I could afford the luxury of painting pictures. So I am too little informed about bookplates by others to be of much, if any help to you at this time.

"If any articles have appeared about my own bookplates I either haven't known of them or have forgotten them. But I have made several animal bookplates, some of them, like Hart and Loewe, being based upon the client's name; and one, a giraffe, on what appeared to be his pride in being exceptionally tall. I only have a limited collection bookplates of my own design, but will look them through and, if I find any that would be appropriate for your exhibition will send them to you with this letter—for I feel myself indebted to you for the reproduction of Austin Dobson's bookplate and his charmingly learned poem; and even more because I guess you to be a friend of Earl Gibson."

It is known by his associates and those around him during the creation of a bookplate design that Kent would mull over the design for a number of days before he selected the medium and method in which it was to be executed and, after many pages of preliminary drawings had been made, only then started working on the finished drawing and inking in the image and the lettering. The hand-lettering or type style selected, the colored or decorative line border, and the completed size were all taken into consideration as part and parcel of the completed bookplate design. As an example of Kent's particular approach to designing a bookplate, an appreciation can be made from the "O. D. D." (Olga Drexel Dahlgren) design from a series of worksheets now in the Spector Collection of Rockwellkentiana in Jackson Heights, N. Y. Unfortunately, only one preliminary sketch remains. There are, however, three photostatic reproductions in different sizes of the original pen-and-ink drawing and, most unusual in this instance, all three sizes were used. Some bookplates are drawn, engraved, or etched to size. Often, when photomechanically etched plates are used, the design or image may be drawn twice the size and reduced in the process to the size desired. If, however, the

design is reduced too much, the fine lines may sometime be lost. It is evident that Kent used two methods in solving this problem: by taking advantage of the photo or photostatic process, he could see in advance and choose the size of the completed bookplate print before the more expensive photomechanical process was employed in producing the plates. Kent also, after a plate was made, would use a burin to open up the space between some of the fine lines resulting from that reduction. This particular bookplate design has many of the qualities in it which are representative of the artist's best work. A figure sitting on a dock in the brilliant sunshine pauses in the reading of a book to gaze across the sea, wistfully projecting adventure to some far off land. The pyramidal form into which the figure fits is echoed in the distant form of the mountain peak, and the horizontal and vertical lines of the chest or beam, the wharf planks and the mast of a ship form a structural balance in the whole design. The unit of the mast forms in the lower right balance the initials of the lettering in the upper left while the angular lines formed by the figure are balanced by the cross-bars of the mast. All the elements of the composition are balanced into a total unity which is not without a feeling of beauty in natural and architectural form. Everything is in its proper space, even to the beautiful hand-lettered initials of its owner. It is a miniature work of art, but all the elements used in a major work of art are implicit in its presentation, even to the gray type line borders by which it is framed.

Some of the earlier bookplate designs represent Kent's first work in wood engraving. They were done from blocks and tools given him by his personal friend of long standing, Carl Zigrosser, with whom he later wrote and compiled the book, "Rockwellkentiana." In 1918, when Kent went on a painting trip to Alaska, accompanied by his young son, Carl insisted that he take this gift of tools and blocks along with him and experiment cutting end-grain blocks. And years later, Kent cut initials into these small engravings and presented them to his family and friends as gifts to mark their books. Most of these wood engraved bookplate designs are to be found in his first volume of bookplates, "The Bookplates and Marks of Rockwell Kent," a book which was in itself an excellent example of the fine art of printing since it was done by Elmer Adler of Pynson Printers. All of the wood engraved bookplates are

reprinted in the author's book, "The Prints of Rockwell Kent: A Catalogue Raisonné," published by the University of Chicago Press in 1975.

The pen-and-ink drawings—and the earlier wood engravings—vary from the strong blacks of the figures in bright relief against backgrounds with shafts of sunlight to the delicate line drawings with figures and objects done in light shaded lines, much in the manner of his famous *Candide* series of illustrations. Many of the designs have flat color areas with the names in reverse type to add to the chiaroscuro pattern, others have decorative border frames. In many the human figure represents the predominant motif, while in others birds, animals, and flowers play an important part. But mostly, the human figure represents the predominating element of the composition. The drawing in them is exacting, but graced with gesture and beauty, with strength or pensiveness, with human poise or dignity. In most instances they are drawn from life, from his own activities, and from family and friends who posed for him. Having felt and lived the gestures, the poses, the tensions, the quiet reverie, the joy of ecstatic discovery—since he had lived them all and experienced them all—he was able to draw them with feeling and with perfection. There is nothing accidental in Kent's bookplate drawings; everything is beautiful and precise, and falls into place with compositional exactitude. They have a mystic strain drawn from deep intuition experienced from viewing vast expanses in great quiet, philosophic interpretations which, with the aid of symbols, seemingly reach towards cosmic significances. Man is here in his universe with the starry heavens and the stones of the mountain peaks for his throne. His is a deliberate and poetic form of design, the total of which, though often small as displayed in a bookplate, represents those forms and symbols abstracted from the particular into their universal aspects.

There is no doubt that Kent tried to meet the suggested design of his client, but he was first and foremost an artist concerned with the idea and the medium through which he crystallized his thoughts in composing the elements constituting the design at hand. He was no different from any other artist concerned with the integrity and demands of his craft, seeking solutions to the problems of design and composition which confront any practitioner or craftsman practicing his art.

It was never considered by Kent but that bookplate designing was





THE BOOK OF



*And the people went there and admired the high mountains,  
the wide wastes of the sea and the mighty downward rushing  
streams and the ocean and the course of the stars and forgot  
themselves - St. Augustine*

CHARLES &  
ROSAMOND  
DENBY

not to be included in his work as an artist. Like the artists of the Renaissance, the patron came to make use of the abilities of the artist; and the artist was called upon to design altars, murals, tombs, tunics, wall hangings, buildings, portraits, landscapes, and decorations. They were artists, and they applied their abilities in art to the products they produced. In the Summer 1936 issue of *THE PROFESSIONAL ART QUARTERLY* there is an article by Kent titled, "There Is No Such Thing as Commercial Art," in which he states: "Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as commercial art. If it is one, it cannot be the other. A man is either an artist, or he isn't one." This brings to mind the remark often found in the writings about Kent—because of his multi-faceted abilities—as being "a Renaissance Man." It meant that he was equally proficient in working in many of the various branches of the arts, but as an *artist!* He had worked at architecture in designing, rendering, and building houses; he was a printmaker of wide acclaim; he was an illustrator of many of the classics, some of which are still in print; he worked at doing illustrations for advertising for which he won prizes; and he designed draperies and ceramics. In his article in *CRAFT HORIZONS* for May 1943, "Art With A Little a," Kent gives in his own words a resume of some of his early training and experience which was the basis for the excellence found in many of his bookplate designs:

"When I was a little boy, I liked to draw pictures. As I drew them on the page there developed an interest of making the page look pretty. So I would make a border of leaves, and flowers and birds flying around and put stars in the sky.

"But I didn't just like to draw pictures. I liked to whittle. From using a pocket knife, I got to using a saw, a plane, and chisels. I began making things out of wood. I did eventually become a carpenter; and I might have been an architect but that I preferred doing other things. An aunt of mine painted on china, so, of course, I painted on china too. I drew pictures that, in this industrial age, are to be printed on china by others.

"I have done a lot of other things: wood engraving and lithographs; and I've written books . . .

"Always I have painted or drawn, or designed china, or built houses because I liked to make things with my hands. Liking to make them, liking the work of making them, led to always trying to make them as well as I possibly could."

In examining any piece of work and in any branch of the arts in which it was produced, one can say without compunction that everything that Kent had done fulfilled his wishes and ambition, for without exception they demonstrate virtuosity and excellence. And along this same line of thinking, one of the finest pieces of writing concerning the bookplate comes to mind. It is to be found as the introduction to his first volume on bookplates, mentioned above. Kent's penetrating analysis of symbolism in bookplates—and in much of his art for that matter—is a masterly presentation of objectivity in the application of ideas as pertains to designing them. In the book, his "By Way of Preface: On Symbols" is here reproduced in its entirety that none of the nuances of its meaning be lost:

"Admitting, to begin with, all that may be said for bookplates as an ingenious way to forestall the borrower's carelessness or thief's intention, and against bookplates as of no use whatever toward that end; for them as a proud and pretty way of marking books, and against them as so great a nuisance that few people ever paste them in; admitting that the trouble of them nowadays outweighs their questionable usefulness, we still may venture to pronounce with no uncertainty that bookplates, labels, letterheads, seals, pennants and whatever be made to bear, proclaim and blazon to the world or to one's self a motto, crest or personal device, may influence and determine the course of civilization and the destiny of nations and of man. It is upon the romantic belief that heroes do make history, and that the conduct of ourselves and those we know does touch the problem of our happiness, that we depend our argument. And against the protest of one's right to that belief we urge its usefulness.

"All men conduct themselves in life exactly, or as nearly as they may, as they most want to; yet in determination of those wants they are so subtly led, cajoled and played upon by the seductive whisperings of manner and custom, that, with the most splendid intentions in the world, they emerge, for the most part, merely civilized. Of all the means of the persuasive forces of tradition, none is so fairly a refinement of idea—and by refinement pointed to its purpose, none so insidiously potent for the domination and enslavement of the mind—as that abstraction of a thought, the symbol. And with the symbol we are here concerned.

"What was the idol but the symbol of a deity? How well the Christians knew that to destroy it was to kill the faith! What was the crescent to the faithful and the cross to true believers? The arms and crests of chivalry to those who wore them? How many a device of heraldry has transmitted its emblazoned thought through successive generations of its bearers—to mould and make what men have called at last that family character? All that those symbols were, in more believing times, the personal and chosen symbol now may be to those who want to fix some thought or principle upon themselves, to make it theirs, to live toward it, for it, by it; to let it be the visual reminder of a faith or aim or of a mood experienced and reinvoked. It may lend imagination to prosaic minds or wake the dreamer; strengthen the weak and urge a personality toward genius. Yet accept with caution; for so unrelenting is the authority of the symbol that, like such potent medicines as need physicians to administer them, the prescribing of a symbol is a true function of the psychiatrist.

"Toward the appreciation of the dangers of ill advised symbol taking I may, with some reluctance, give a tragic example from my own early experience, when, in response to a mother's request for such a bookplate as would make her son the President of the United States, I made him the device shown on page 23; and he became a second story man.'

"It is therefore with much reluctance, in my own practice of bookplate designing, that I have applied the science of psycho symbolism; and in the devices for my children and my friends I have, through incomprehension of the former and, for the latter, unconcern, done little except try by gentle flattery to please. Yet, in the design for Gordon Kent, I have ventured (and I may write it in these pages which he may not read) to determine his becoming a good horseman. That is enough."

Louis Untermeyer, the poet, has written of Kent that he was probably one of the most versatile of men; and Henry Seidel Canby wrote that his art and his writing could be likened to a two-edged sword for, from its double application, we reap a double reward. One cannot help but notice his writing ability in this preface on symbols, his adeptness in the choice of words in the selection, adaptation, and application to their use in the designing of bookplates.

Kent considered himself a working artist, and as a working man he aligned himself to them through joining their trade unions. As a

carpenter he became a member of their union and held his carpenter's card with respect; when he painted murals he joined the painter's union; he painted billboards and made posters to aid the Spanish Republican cause; joined the International Workers Order because it offered health insurance and vacation lodges to its members; and was president of the United American Artists because he wished to aid his fellow artists in any way that it was possible for him to do so. Kent had his enthusiasms and excitements throughout his long life. One of the best aphorisms given by him as a definition for art was that it was "a by-product of one's enthusiasm for life." His wife, Sally Kent, has written of him in the Autumn 1971 *AMERICAN DIALOG* magazine: "He knew himself to be a working man whose work happened to be the expression of a passionate love of life." And Carl Zigrosser wrote in the April 1938 *PRINT COLLECTORS QUARTERLY*: "Rockwell Kent is a positive force. He has put his imprint on many fields of American life, and above all, his achievements in wood engraving and lithography, in illustration and bookmaking, in bookplates, and in advertising design, represent a unique contribution to American Graphic art."

Rockwell Kent was no ordinary designer of bookplates, but rather a productive working artist who brought to his bookplate designs a wide range of variety drawn from an inexhaustible knowledge gained through a long background of training and working practice in the many branches of the arts, in all of which he had attained a high degree of proficiency and excellence garnered from that experience.

His commercial bookplate designs are of no less quality than those drawn for associates and friends. The exactness and beauty of their drawing, the quality of compositional arrangements and forms, and the preciseness of their rendition characterize them as attractive to their purpose and intent.

Two of his original wood engravings—in addition to those already mentioned—were adapted to bookplate use. One was offered by The Literary Guild of America in 1933 to its members. It was the wood engraving, "Starry Night," (J-103); the other "Man At Mast," (J-33)<sup>2</sup> for Ray Baker Harris. The first is approximately 4½ x 3¼ inches, across the top are the words "EX LIBRIS" in reverse type, and at the bottom a mortise in the plate to allow for the imprinting of the owner's

name. The Harris plate is approximately 3 x 2¼ inches with the name in reverse type at the bottom. The Harris plate does not fall strictly under the heading of a commercial bookplate other than that the original wood engraving was used as an advertising illustration for the American Car & Foundry Co.

There is an interesting group of commercial bookplates designed by Kent which present themselves as something in the way of an unsolved mystery. Done for a book club in the form of a four-page brochure, it is well printed and was probably used as a presentation piece by some advertising or printing firm. The two inside pages contain four reproductions of line drawings for bookplates with one of the designs repeated on the front cover and, on the back cover, a small photo portrait of Kent with a thumbnail biography. It is undated, and the only known copy is in the Spector Collection in Jackson Heights, N. Y. The legend on the cover reads:

"A Collection of Bookplates / [cut] / designed by  
ROCKWELL KENT / exclusively for / BOOK CLUB MEMBERS  
/ and available with Your Imprint / see inside."

The Rockwell Kent Legacies state that Mrs. Sally [Kent] Gorton posed for the cover drawing and that the nearest date that could be ascribed to the brochure was the early 1940s. There isn't anyone among a number of Kent collectors contacted who seems to have any knowledge to unravel the mystery. And there isn't anyone who knows if this presentation project failed, what has become of the original drawings, or the whereabouts of the plates used in the printing of this brochure.

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, the Greenland Press issued a series of bookplates designed by Kent. For commercial bookplates they were of an unusually high quality in both the paper used and the printing. The standards set by Kent and met by the printer no doubt contributed to their immediate success. Those sold in packets in the book and stationery stores were printed on a smooth finished ivory or cream paper stock, and were printed in a rich velvety black with orange borders. The Greenland Press catalog—now a rarity—was of dark green cover stock, green plastic spine binding, with a glossy green paste label printed in black on the cover. In it, the bookplates are tipped in, are printed in black with gray border frames, and give style number and a facsimile of

the artist's signature outside the frame, which was also printed in gray. The author's copy shows thirteen designs with a few of the style numbers missing; five of which having been used previously. This commercial line of bookplates emanating from the Greenland Press was published by Manuel Greenwald, who later sold them to Ernest Morgan of the Antioch Bookplate Company at Yellow Springs, Ohio.

The Antioch Bookplate Company published eleven new designs in their series and sold, along with their Kent designs, the remainder of those in stock from the Greenland Press until the latter were exhausted. Of the eleven original designs Kent made for the Antioch series, two were repeats: that of Pauline Lord [p. 17 Vol. II]<sup>3</sup>, which had a variation in the drawing from the original design; and one greatly reduced for Anne Rosenberg [p. 71 Vol. I]<sup>4</sup> bookplate design. The poster, done by Kent, was for an exhibition of his paintings held at the Wildenstein Gallery in New York City, and was done mostly with brush. The drawing for the bookplate was adapted, drawn in pen-and-ink, with the hand-lettering of the name in the bottom portion of the design.

Plato has said that what is honored in a country will be cultivated there. If we honor men of knowledge, sensitivity, and self-mastery, we in turn honor our country through the talents of those who make that contribution. In an introduction to a 1926 catalog for an exhibition of the prints of Wanda Gag, Kent wrote, in part, the following:

"To only those who are not impressed and moved by these pictures—I then would have to speak. I call them beautiful—as if that word, so infinitely expressive, still meant all that could be said of what most stirs the spirit."

What Kent has so poignantly expressed in words about the work of a fellow artist in another branch of the arts, that of lithography and woodcuts, could be written as an epitaph for his own work in the field of bookplate design. In Kent's autobiography, already alluded to, he writes and not without humor, of "our hero", meaning of course, himself. Society's heroes emerge through their own forms of communication and, in this instance, Kent communicates his many messages through the beauty of his bookplate designs. He took home to himself all the beauty he had garnered from his long life and from his travels the world over. And though bookplates represent only one facet of his multi-faceted

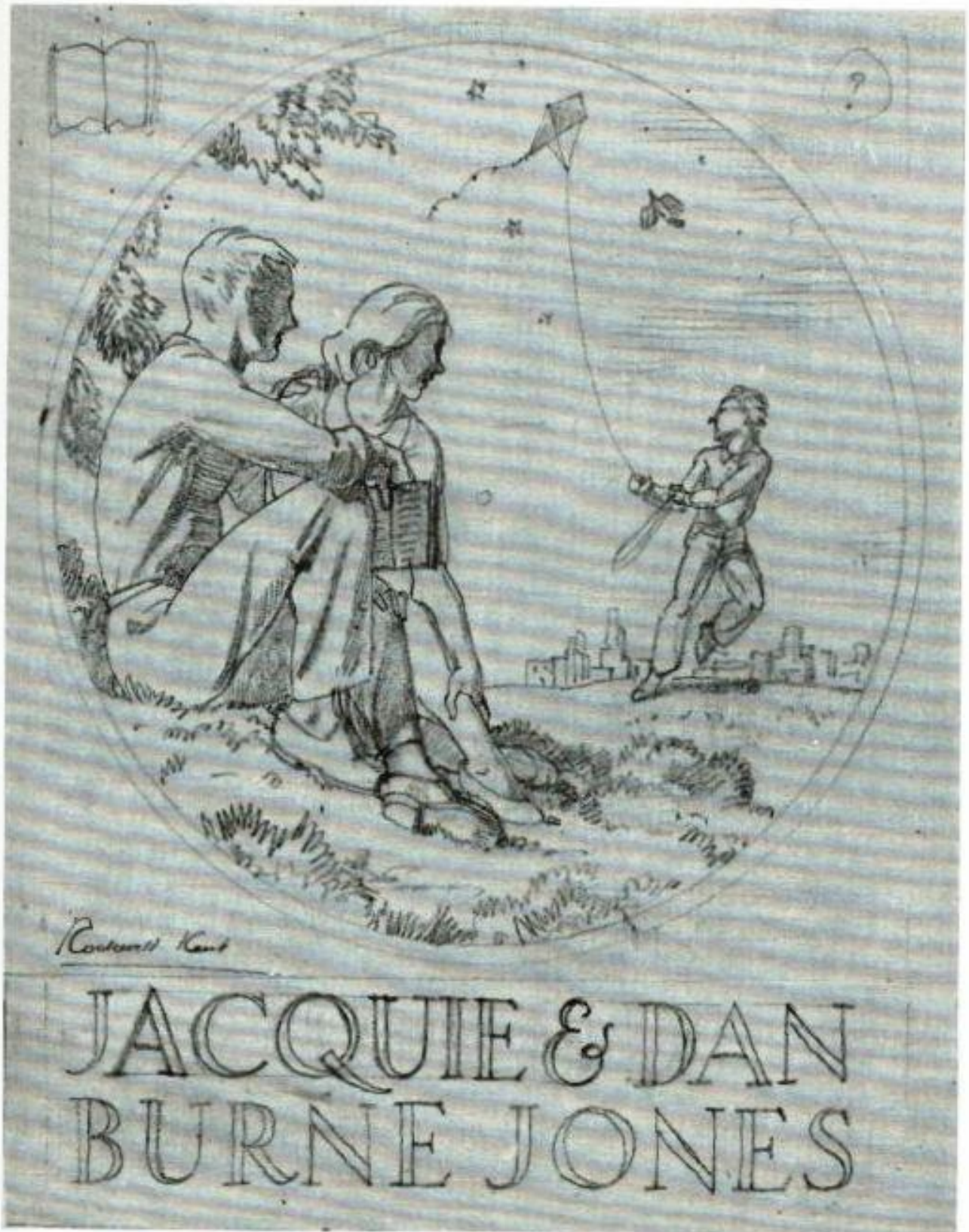


career, his bookplate art was a well qualified and practiced one as his works attest. During this bicentennial year, let this appreciation stand as a tribute to the bookplate designs of Rockwell Kent.

- <sup>1</sup> & <sup>4</sup> *The Bookplates & Marks of Rockwell Kent*, Pynson Printers for Random House, New York, 1929. Device from page 23 reproduced below.
- <sup>2</sup> *The Prints of Rockwell Kent, a Catalogue Raisonne* by Dan Burne Jones, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1975.
- <sup>3</sup> *Later Bookplates & Marks of Rockwell Kent*, Pynson Printers, New York, 1937.
- \* Two bookplates differing in size and/or design.



*Reproduced original size.*



*Illustration shown 94% of actual size.*