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American artist and writer Rockwell Kent, whose realistic landscape paintings are imbued with romantic symbolism, once called Armenia “the Land of Wonders”. Several of his artworks, praising the beauty of the world and life, are owned by the National Gallery of Armenia. Among them you can find notable views of Greenland and the Maine coast. On his Armenian trip in the middle of the last century, Kent’s sensitivity to the world did not leave the artist unmoved. “Armenia is a land of wonders. If I am asked where on our planet you can find more miracles, I would name, first of all, Armenia. You can't help but be amazed that in such a small corner of the world you can find such monuments and people who can become an adornment and pride of the whole world. May the Armenian land, the cradle of talents, the cradle of great achievements, be glorified three times," Rockwell Kent expressed his feelings about the Armenia he saw.

In October [2020], our Armenian museum in Moscow received a letter from Sergey Vershinin, whose uncle Boris Senkin accompanied Rockwell and Sally Kent as interpreter and guide on their journey to Armenia, approximately in 1960. Recently, Sergey found some private photos, taken on that journey, in his uncle’s albums.

“This journey preceded the opening of second exhibition of Kent’s art in the USSR in 1960. Maybe even earlier. It is known that Kent paid his first visit to Armenia in 1958. In those days, the artist enjoyed enormous popularity in Soviet Union and left warm reviews of Armenia in his publications”.

With Sergei’s permission, we are glad to publish a series of photos from the Armenian journey of Rockwell Kent and his wife Sally”.

On all photos, Boris Senkin is the youngest of all, sometimes wearing glasses.

“Land of Wonders”: American artist Rockwell Kent and his journey to Armenia



In this photo, the Kents, Boris and others are in the ruins of Zvartnots Cathedral – a UNESCO World Heritage Site near Yerevan, Armenian capital. The cathedral was built as part of the new residence of Catholicos – head of Armenian church. In the 10th cent., the cathedral was destroyed by an earthquake. Discovered by archaeologists in 1901, restored in Soviet times.



Here they are standing in the basement of Garni Temple. It is the only existing example of Hellenistic architecture in Armenia – a small pagan temple of the Greek order, built in 1st cent.CE as a part of summer residence of Armenian kings. The temple was destroyed by an earthquake in 1679 and fully restored in 1960-1976. When Kent was there, the building was still in ruins, but he enjoyed the views – they are truly spectacular.

The man in the black beret is Armenian artist Ara Sarkisyan (1902-1969), who was born in Istanbul, studied art in Vienna and came to Armenia in 1924. From the 1930s and till his passing, Sarkisyan was one of the most recognized artists in Armenia.

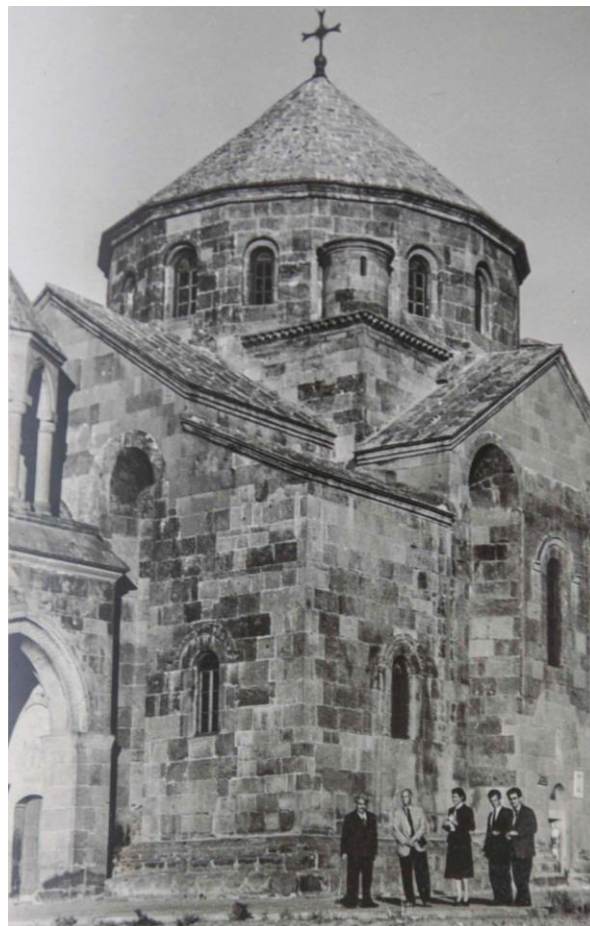


The Kents visit Martiros Saryan, the most prominent Armenian artist of 20th cent.

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In this photo, the Kents enjoy the view of Mount Ararat from Charents Arch. The place is located on the way from Yerevan to Garni, in the village of Vokhchaberd. The arch was built in 1957 and dedicated to the Armenian poet Egishe Charents (1897-1937), executed in the Stalin’s years.



The Kents and others at Saint Hripsime Church in Echmiadzin – the main centre of Armenian Christianity and the seat of Catholicos of Armenia. “The Armenian Vatican”, I would say. The church was built in 6th cent.CE and remains in very good shape. Another UNESCO World Heritage Site.

“Land of Wonders”: American artist Rockwell Kent and his journey to Armenia



Location cannot be identified.

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The most famous story from the Kent’s Armenian adventures is the one of the ancient ceramic jug from Dilijan. This is a small town of 18000 people in the northeastern mountains of Armenia. It stands at about 1500 m above sea level and is known for its fresh air, views and mineral springs. In the vicinity there are two medieval monasteries, a beautiful lake and a nature reserve. Dilijan is also famous for archaeological sites as old as 1200 BC. In the late 1950-early 1960s, the local art museum was managed by Vanik (Ovanes) Sharambeyan – a notable artist and art collector. He passed away in 1986 but is still remembered for his support of local arts and crafts, preservation of historical heritage and other humanitarian actions. His own house with all cultural objects inside was handed over to the government and became a branch of the local art museum.



The house in Dilijan, where the Kents lived. Photo by Aram Nersesyan, Sputnik Armenia. There is a photo somewhere featuring Kent on the first-floor balcony with the famous jug in hands.

Sometime in 1960, Kent was brought to Dilijan for some prolonged time as he received a treatment in the state balneal resort “Mountains of Armenia”. Vanik Sharambeyan acted as his main host, while the residence of the Kents was in the former state summer house, built in 1929- 1936 for Agasi Khandjan – the Party leader of Armenian Socialist Republic from 1930 to 1936. The latter was allegedly shot by the infamous Lavrenty Beria, who later became the head of Stalin’s police and intelligence forces. The murder of Khandjan occurred right in the Dilijan house upon accusations of growing nationalism and separatism in Armenia. Since then, Khandjan’s “dacha” in Dilijan served as a guest house for top-rank patients of the resort. I am sure Kent was not told the entire story of the house, which is completely abandoned and almost ruined now. When he was about to leave Dilijan, Sharambeyan presented him with a very special gift – a 3000-y.o. ceramic jug, found in excellent condition near the town. In many online sources it is told that Kent considered the jug as his most beloved souvenir from Soviet Russia. It is also said that the jug survived the fire in his house in 1969 and remained with him during the last years of his life. And even in his last will he allegedly expressed an intention to have his ashes buried in this jug, which was done by Sally somewhere in Asgaard Farm. This story has been told many times, as an example, it was told by journalist Sergey Bablumyan in 2017, in an online publication at <http://ru.armeniasputnik.am>.



Beria (second from left), Khandjan in roundish black glasses is next to him

The following are two of the Kent works in the National Gallery of Armenia:



Maine Headland, morning (1955)



Fjord in West Greenland, 1929

About the author

Born in remote Kamchatka Peninsula, Northeast Siberia, Dmitry (Mitya) Kiselev is a polar historian, avid traveler and expedition guide, working for Silversea Cruises. When not travelling to the Arctic, Antarctic or other remote parts of the world, Mitya and his family live on Cyprus.



Mitya lecturing about Kent on a recent cruise