

Article and translation by Dmitry Kiselev



Rockwell Kent shows Andrey Chegodaev his painting “Kayaks. Greenland” (1933), now owned by the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts. Moscow, c.1960. Courtesy of Wilford Ross

In one of his letters to the Soviet journalist Nikita Bolotnikov, written in February 1970, Rockwell Kent named Andrey Chegodaev an “old good friend” and “stepfather” of the Russian edition of Kent’s autobiography. For decades, **Andrey Chegodaev** (1905-1994) remained a leading Soviet and Russian art historian, critic, museum curator and collector. Holding the doctorship in arts, he was widely recognized as an expert on modern Russian and Western paintings and, especially, graphics.

Chegodaev belonged to the noblemen of ancient Mongolian origin - lineal descendants of Chagatai, the second son of Chinggis Khan. Chegodaev’s ancestors settled in the Grand Duchy of Moscow in the early 16th cent. His father, Prince Dmitrii Chegodaev (1875-1967), was a prominent Russian

chemist, revolutionary and an activist of Lenin’s Bolshevik Party. Andrey Chegodaev was born in Saratov (Volga Region) and educated in the Department of Art Theory and Art History of the Moscow State University. He lived a long turbulent life, having witnessed the 1917 Revolution, Civil War, growth of the Stalin’s dictatorship, Second World War, the Khrushchev’s Thaw and other historic events of the 20th century. His father was expelled from the Bolsheviks Communist Party but went headlong into science and survived the Great Purge of the 1930s. So did his son Andrey, who became involved in the museum curatorship and exhibition activities already in his student years.

Worked in the Moscow Leo Tolstoy Museum and Pushkin State Art Museum, from where he was recruited as the art editor by the Publishing House of Children Literature. After a very brief engagement in the Battle of Moscow in the autumn of 1941, Chegodaev was evacuated to Uzbekistan and lived there with his wife and daughter until 1944. In the mid-1950s, he entered the most successful period of life. Until his last years, Chegodaev lived in the Soviet capital, heading the Western Art Sector in the Art Theory Institute of Soviet Academy of Sciences (1957-1994) and holding a professor’s position in the Moscow Surikov Art Institute. Throughout his long career, Chegodaev published over 30 books and 300 articles on classic and modern art history. Both his wife Natalia (1907-1977) and daughter Maria (1931-1977) devoted themselves to art and art history, sharing with Andrey his intellectual interests.

In the post-war world, Chegodaev became a sort of “ambassador of the Soviet art and science in the West”. The cultural authorities of Soviet Russia made this choice in his favor for many reasons: for Chegodaev’s fluent English and French, for his clear competency in arts; for his reputation of an “apolitical scientist” and – not least! – for his noble origin. From 1945 and up to the early 1980s, Chegodaev was allowed to attend the events of European and American cultural life; spent long time traveling and enjoyed friendship with Marc Chagall, Renato Guttuso, Federico Fellini and other icons of the creative world.

But in the Soviet career of Rockwell Kent, he played a special role. As an art critic, Chegodaev curated major exhibitions of Kent’s works in Moscow since 1957. As an editor, he supervised the Russian editions of illustrated book “The Art and Graphics by Rockwell Kent” (Moscow, Academy of Arts Press, 1962, 1963) and autobiography “It’s Me O Lord!”. For each edition Chegodaev selected Kent’s artworks and wrote preface.



A.Chegodaev, 1960s. From his book of memoirs (Moscow, 2011)

Andrey Chegodaev and Rockwell Kent knew each other very well. In 2011, the Moscow-based publishing house Zakharov released Chegodaev’s memoirs “My Life and People I Have Known”. Unhappily, those who expected to find in this book a detailed story of their relationship were bitterly disappointed. It appeared that Chegodaev himself limited his life history to its first 40 years, from his birth in Saratov and to the end of Second World War. Maria Chegodaeva suggested that her father “deliberately avoided keeping memories from the time of stifling stagnation that overwhelmed the Soviet world”. More likely, he did not dare to write about his Western contacts and experiences because of the KGB supervision of his travels.

From their side, the daughter and grandsons of Andrey Chegodaev added some letters and personal notes, bringing some light to a few moments of his interesting life. In the entire book, the name of Rockwell Kent is mentioned only one time and more than briefly.

The archive of the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow keeps more than 1000 personal documents and other items, related to Andrey Chegodaev in 1928-1973 (collection 39). Hopefully, more information about his long-living friendship with Rockwell Kent can be obtained from this source.

The text below is the translation of the preface, written by Andrey Chegodaev in 1965 and included into the Russian edition of Kent’s autobiography, released by the Art Publishing House in Moscow in 1965.

ROCKWELL KENT AND HIS AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Rockwell Kent completed and published his autobiography in 1955. Then he was seventy-three years old - behind him was a long, glorious life, full of extraordinary and fascinating stories, all permeated with stormy, indomitable energy and the will to live; creative and active, far from any kind of resignation and passive contemplation. While reading this book, you are amazed how much this wonderful man has done in his life - a tireless wanderer and worker,

who brings all the flame of his temperament to any business that has to be done. And now, when he is already eighty-three years old, he remains the same. With a sort of disappointment, he once wrote to me that the doctors forbade him to get up every day at six o'clock in the morning, allowing him to get up only at seven! A day is never enough for him to accomplish all the things he has planned. It is not a coincidence that poet and literary historian Louis Untermeyer, his friend and neighbor in the Adirondack Mountains, once wrote: “Rockwell Kent is probably the most versatile person living in this world. But once I wrote these words and remembered all the activities of Kent, I found my maxim sounding, perhaps, too weak. Kent as a person is complex and multifaceted; sometimes (contrary to physical evidence) I suspect that he is not a person at all, but some kind of Organization – let us call it Rockwell Kent's United Enterprises! I know him as a painter, pamphleteer, poet (alone with himself), statesman (not very successful!), propagandist, lecturer, explorer of unknown countries, architect (he remodeled my house in the Adirondack Mountains), driller, farmer, Danish cows breeder, book illustrator, type designer, xylograph (“wood engraver” - for the uninitiated!), friend and general motivator. Much has been written about all these abilities of him, even by giving them legendary proportions. After his death — and perhaps even before it happens — I expect a book called *The Myth of Rockwell Kent*”.¹

Untermeyer has not yet listed much: after all, Kent was also a sailor, navigator, cook, carpenter, fisherman, publicist, political speaker, poster artist, cartoonist, lithographer, ceramist, medalist, muralist etc. In his home in the heart of Adirondack Mountains, he plays the role of a bartender, although jokingly, and at the same time he knows how to inspire broad and powerful social movements as a well-known peace activist, as the president of the National American Committee for American-Soviet Friendship. For him, there are no important or unimportant matters: whatever he does, he does it with the greatest passion, giving his whole soul.

But the most spectacular quality of Kent, in the eyes of Untermeyer, was not mentioned until the very end: “But there is one role for which he was not yet praised enough and even insufficiently appreciated - this is his role as a writer. I don't know anyone who could express himself on paper so richly, so simply and so openly as Rockwell Kent. His books possess those qualities of complete sincerity, generous figurativeness, and spiritual directness that befit great art. They are like letters to the reader; they are what correspondence between

¹ Louis Untermeyer, Kent—the Writer.—«Demcourier», Volume VI, No 10, October, 1937 (New Haven, U. S. A.)

smart and inspired people should be, but what it rarely is. Correspondence is what these books are all about: in them, light flashes towards each other, an unexpectedly outstretched hand, a reverent greeting, accomplished communication. All his books are letters, bright and detailed, beautifully illustrated messages - appeals to his contemporaries. They have no deliberate gravity, no false carelessness, no elegant style of letters addressed to distant descendants, although these descendants (that capricious part of the human race) will undoubtedly read them. They contain the freshness and spontaneity of the concept, and the immediacy of their impact. As numerous as Kent's experiments, articles and books were, I prefer to think of them, the notes. Notes for a yet unfinished autobiography. From the “Voyaging South of the Strait of Magellan” to “N by E”; from the first brochure on architecture, published under a pen name of “Salamina”, his writings steadily become more interesting and significant. One day, the gaps in these personal stories will be filled, and then a complete saga will be born of the artist and the writer, the wanderer and the house builder, the critic and the creator - of the Perfect Man. One day, a chronological arrangement of The Collected Works of Rockwell Kent will show how broad and yet how simple, how edifying and yet honest and frank; how unpretentious and yet how profound his autobiography can be. I hope to live long enough to see it”.²

Everything said by Untermeyer is fair, and anyone who reads this book and others, already published in Russian, can be convinced of this: “N by E” and “Salamina”, or not yet translated as “Wilderness”, “Voyaging Southward of the Strait of Magellan” or “This is My Own”. All of Kent’s books are taken entirely from life, there is nothing artificial in them, but the main thing is that their unvarnished truth is told not by a dispassionate witness, but by an ardently and deeply interested participant in all the ordinary and extraordinary events, described in these books. The artistic power and expressiveness of Kent's books is born from his insatiable greed for life, from his high clarity of spirit and equally high simplicity. From his contempt for any literary effects and decorations and from his ability to talk sparingly and with restraint about colorful and vibrant things, about strong feelings and wise reflections, about the most sublime romance and the most unprepossessing prose. What epic calm and even humor he brings to the story of a very difficult and dramatic voyage of three in a small schooner to Greenland - through fog and reefs, storms and ice, to the shipwreck off the Greenlandic coast, followed by long search for a living soul in the deserted coastal tundra! Kent never had a passion for adventure in itself: his romance always contains the desire to “explore the

² Louis Untermeyer, *ibid.*

distant horizons of the world,” as Homer’s Ulysses dreamed of it. Wanderings and spiritual aspirations of Odysseus are not outdated even in the twentieth century – not not only for Kent, but also for Thor Heyerdahl, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry and Ernest Hemingway.

In his long autobiography “It’s Me, O Lord”, Kent did not include any detailed account of his journeys, described in other books: to Alaska with his little son (“Wilderness”), to Tierra del Fuego (“Voyaging Southward of the Strait of Magellan”), to Greenland (“N by E” and “Salamina”). He did not include also whatever he has already told about the life in America in the 1930s (“This Is My Own”). He put first his parents, his childhood and youth, his life among fishermen of Monhegan Island etc.; he had enough memories even for such an extensive book as “It Is Me, O Lord!” And although it is filled with events, facts and the names of countless people, it still briefly and vaguely talks about those significant and important episodes of Kent’s biography, already described in his previously published books. In fact, behind these hints there are stories of distant wanderings, amazing in their emotional intensity and stormy romance, stories about spiritual growth and the bright revelation of a heroic and purposeful character. Kent's intellectual and moral character becomes even richer and more significant when he supplements the autobiography with other books and builds, as Untermeyer wrote, “the saga of the perfect man.”

Kent named his autobiography after the first words of an Afro-American spiritual: “It’s me, it’s me, it’s me, O Lord, standing and thirsting for prayer...”. The book really sounds like a confession: Kent talks openly and honestly about his dreams and his mistakes, about aspirations, illusions and delusions; without embellishing anything and hiding nothing. He treats himself quite ruthlessly, often mockingly and ironically; others - with great interest, respect and admiration (he met many such people on his way) or with equally direct and open antipathy. He is invariably fair, since Kent perfectly knows and is able to show the distance separating, for example, Franklin Roosevelt from John Rockefeller Sr., a meeting with whom is one of the many masterful descriptions, scattered throughout the book. The book “It’s Me, O Lord” is a precious source for understanding the history of spiritual development not only of Kent himself, but of all Americans over more than half a century, from the 1890s to the mid-1950s - the history of socio-political and the artistic life of the United States of America in very recent decades.

But, while telling a lot about the most diverse events in the artistic life of America, Kent talks least about his own art. The book contains almost no titles or dates of his works, and when it was necessary to clarify these titles and

dates for the catalogs of his two large exhibitions in the Soviet Union, his autobiography did not provide this information, and Kent had to think about it, remembering (probably not so accurately!) chronology of his own creations. Interested in everything in the world and enthusiastically engaged in a wide variety of works and activities, he did not at all intend to treat his own paintings and graphics with any special respect, by keeping at least the most basic museum records of them. He left this entirely to his devoted friend Daniel “Dan” Burne Jones of Chicago, the owner of a truly remarkable collection of Kent manuscripts, books, photographs, engravings and paintings; and another close friend, Karl Zigrosser, one of the curators of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Owing to these two men it will be possible one day to write a more scientific study of the creative path of Rockwell Kent, one of the greatest American artists of the 20th century. For a better appreciation of his role and place in the history of 20th-century American art, I will provide only some of the most important data.

It fell to Kent’s tutor, Robert Henri, to organize and lead a strong group of realistic artists who, at the beginning of our century, launched a struggle against the “beautifulness” of then dominant academic bourgeois art, which was engaged in the shameless idealization of the not-so-attractive American art reality. Having staged their exhibition in New York in 1908, Robert Henri, along with his pupils and comrades - John French Sloan, George Benjamin Luks, Everett Shinn, William James Glackens, and later also George Bellows - earned the nickname “revolutionary black gang” from the frightened and angry bourgeois newspapers. Or “Ashcan School” (from “ash can”) - so they were labeled by the sublimely respectable spectators, artists and critics, who did not like the truthful portrayal of all the flaws and dark sides of American “prosperity”.

Like Lincoln Steffens, Stephen Crane or Theodore Dreiser, Henri and his “eight” laid a solid foundation for the entire realistic and progressive artistic culture of the United States in the 20th century. A charming man and a subtle, graceful artist, Robert Henri in no way corresponded to the gloomy reputation created by the newspapers as the head of Ashcan school: his bright, life-affirming art, his stern and principled demands on his pupils; his outstanding tutorship played a huge role in the formation and the growth of all the best that American art has produced in our century. I have already had to call him “a faithful follower of the mighty Thomas Eakins” – indeed, Robert Henri consciously relied on the experience of both his favorite Goya and Manet, and the great realistic American artists of the 19th century. But he demanded loyalty from his pupils to his time, urging them to “write life, not art,” and

the best of his students remained faithful to his advice. Among them was Rockwell Kent.

Together with the early deceased George Bellows and the now living 82-year-old Edward Hopper, Kent represents the generation of masters of American realism of the 20th century that follows the generation of Robert Henri. Kent's art of the 1900s-1920s has already firmly and definitely taken its historical place in American art. I just recently had the opportunity to see Kent's beautiful painting “Mount Equinox in Vermont,” exhibited in one of the halls of the wonderful Museum of the Art Institute in Chicago next to paintings by Bellows and Sloan. Their creations looked impressive and serious as the real bearers of high aesthetic values in comparison with the defiantly huge canvases of abstract painters, hanging in the next room. True, Kent's paintings from those years can only very rarely be found in museums in the United States, even more rarely than paintings by Edward Hopper. But I could only see the artworks of the Greenland cycle, painted in 1929-1935, on the walls of Dan Burne Jones's cramped small apartment in Oak Park, on the far outskirts of the vast Chicago! Kent's painting irritates adherents of abstract, surrealist or neo-expressionist art in the United States, and they try to forget it, or at least push it into the distant past. In the Soviet Union, exhibitions of Kent's paintings and graphics traveled all over the country, from Riga to Irkutsk, his works were seen by millions of spectators, and he is well known to everyone, close and dear not only as a person, but also as an artist. Only those like him, artists of the progressive realistic camp, both those close to him in age, and all subsequent, younger generations, rejoice at his fate in America. Such great masters as Edward Hopper or Anton Refregier, Raphael Soyer or Jack Lewin, Andrew Newell Wyeth or Joseph Hirsch would have entire halls dedicated in our museums. In American museums, you can occasionally find one or two of their paintings. There is no need to even talk about younger and less bright artists of the realistic movement, and, at the same time, museums and exhibitions are full of unremarkable and unoriginal creations of complete beginners, who have not even graduated from the art institute, abstract or neo-expressionist painters and sculptors, whose creations, made from rags, nuts or crushed cars, made a spectacle as frightening and sad as the car “cemeteries” that come across along the road, on the outskirts of big American cities.

American realist art of the 20th century has produced several generations of strong and original artists apart from Kent's, as individual and recognizable as numerous abstract or neo-expressionist painters and sculptors are indistinguishable from each other. The realistic movement in contemporary

American art is one of the strongest, most widespread and unique in the world. Only truly convinced and principled artists join it; within their ranks, there are no businessmen, no opportunists, no people floating rudderless and without sails with the flow of fashion. Only serious and dedicated artists can withstand the constant pressure of long-established and dominant, deeply reactionary public taste and opinion. Kent is one of them. He passionately loves his country and its people and is concerned about expressing the feelings and thoughts of people - whether it be admiration for the dazzling beauty of the American autumn, unusually bright and intense to the European eye, or indignation against misanthropic views and fascist ideas that, unfortunately, have fanatical adherents - especially in the Southern states. Kent's art is as varied and generous as his life. His painting glorifies the beauty of majestic, epically calm, serenely clear nature, friendly to humans. Paintings of Greenland (excellently presented in museums in Moscow, Leningrad, Kyiv and Yerevan) were the undisputed pinnacle of his pictorial quest. But even now, paintings of no worse quality can come out of his hands, although he has long since moved from the landscapes of distant northern countries to the landscapes of the Adirondack Mountains in upstate New York, or the coast and islands of Maine, where he once lived in his youth.

Kent's graphics are especially wide in their range - that area of his work in which he has no equal in American art of the 20th century. Indeed, after such peaks of American graphics of the 19th century, such as James Whistler's masterly and delicate etchings and watercolors, or Winslow Homer's amazing, sparkling watercolors, Kent's engravings, lithographs and drawings represent the most significant thing that has happened in the last half century American graphic art. Even apologists of abstract art do not dare to challenge his right to pretend to the leading position in the modern American book and easel graphics. Graphics run through Kent's entire life and to the greatest extent express all his political, social, philosophical, moral, aesthetic views. As if in contrast to (or in addition to) the epic calm of his painting, Kent's graphics carry in themselves intense and stormy excitement, romantic anxiety, heroic pathos, the sharpness of satire and polemics - all the complex of restless, searching, convinced spiritual life of the artist. His illustrations for the works by Shakespeare or Whitman, his extensive series of prints for Melville's "Moby-Dick"; his anti-fascist posters and caricatures; his drawings and engravings for all the books he wrote - this is a whole world of bright, strong, sometimes whimsical or mischievous images; the abundance of which would be more than enough for several artists. Most of the graphic works he created during his life, along with eighty paintings, donated by Kent to the Soviet people, have been

“MY OLD GOOD FRIEND”: ROCKWELL KENT AND ANDREY CHEGODAEV

allocated to the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, in Moscow, which also keeps a large collection of books, illustrated by him.

Kent is closely connected with the Soviet country not only by the fact that many of his creations, including many of his best works, are owned by the Soviet people and that his art received national recognition among us. Friendship ties Kent to many major Soviet artists: Sergey Gerasimov, Martiros Saryan, Yuri Pimenov, Georgy Nissky, Dementy Shmarinov, Kukryniksy, Vitaly Goryaev, Andrei Mylnikov, Orest Vereisky and others, but these friendly relations stretch far beyond the world of art, to the farthest ends of the Soviet country. Therefore, Kent’s long autobiography, translated into Russian, will undoubtedly be received not as a discovery of a previously unfamiliar life of someone else, but as a heartfelt message from a longtime friend.

Andrei Chegodaev

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 lives with his family on Cyprus.



Mitya lecturing about Kent on a recent cruise