

Journalist Vladimir Abarinov and Boston-based art critic Rada Landar talk in the Radio Liberty studio, broadcast on 24 April 2022. (Transcribed and annotated by Dmitry Kiselev)

In our days, when the cultural world falls apart and artists again have to make uneasy choices, it would not be pointless to talk about an American artist that turned towards the Soviet totalitarianism in search of international recognition. Generously rewarded by the Soviet government, he nevertheless remained an attractive figure for rebellious youngsters. Only in the recent years his art found stable interest [*in Russia*].

In February 1953, two weeks before Josef Stalin’s death, American artist Rockwell Kent visited the Soviet embassy in Washington, D.C. He came there not as a painter or graphic artist, but as the representative of the International Workers Order – a combination of trade union, educational institution and credit organization. A year later, the Brotherhood’s activity was stopped by the New York State authorities, which considered it as “subversive”. Kent was not a newcomer to the embassy: Soviet diplomats maintained permanent contact with him. Kent told how bad was the situation around the Order and then asked for an opportunity to exhibit his art in the USSR. For this reason, he gave his vis-à-vis photos of his works. The embassy sent them to the All-Union Society for the Cultural Relations with Foreign Nations, whose competence in those days included such matters. In June 1953 (i.e. three months after Stalin’s death), the renowned artist Alexander Gerasimov – then the President of Soviet Academy of Arts and recipient of four Stalin Prizes – presided at a meeting in the Fine Arts Section of the

Society, which collectively decided to postpone Kent’s exhibition. Three years later, the Soviets remembered about Kent and found out that the artist was still interested in presenting his works to the Soviet spectators. By that time, he already became the President of the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship. And this was the starting point [*of Kent’s Soviet career*].

Vladimir: Today I invited art critic Rada Landar to talk about Rockwell Kent and his belated recognition in the USSR. Rada, do you like Rockwell Kent? Is he a good artist?

Rada: Beyond all doubts, he is. Very strong and prolific painter. This lack of recognition and success at home, in America, is also explainable. There were natural and absolutely understandable reasons for this. Two factors contributed – the political situation in the world and in the USA, and Rockwell Kent himself. His character was always in opposition to American society’s values. As I can understand, he was a very honest and sincere person, but always stood out of the line. Some people take him as an artist, not bad at all, but engaged by the Soviets, biased and already for this reason not very attractive. Others believe that Kent was an idealist and romantic, who showed Soviets beauty of America. Through his art he showed them American North, astonishing mountainous landscapes and islands. I talked to a friend of mine, a philologist in Harvard, who immigrated from Russia. And she told me about her parents, who in the old times collected Soviet-published albums of Kent and loved his art for this discovery – that America is a magnificent country, where common people work on boats, on ships, do mining, sit in pubs and listen to jazz music. So, there are completely different views of Kent.

Vladimir: At some point, Kent showed America to Americans as well – I mean unknown, remote America, American Arctic. The Arctic nature is mesmerizing. And, by the way, Kent was popular in America. His works were exhibited in galleries, his illustrations of “Moby Dick” became classic of American graphic art.

Rada: Totally agree. The Moby Dick’s prints, his illustrations of Shakespeare, Chaucer – all of them are great. He was born in 1882, so by the early 1920s he was still a young man. And it was in the 1920s when American media started singing his praises, welcomed his art, talked about prayers that come to mind while seeing his cosmic Northern landscapes. His career, I think, broke up in the 1930s. Society changed and started looking at the same things from different angles. It was less tolerant of leftish political ideas. Americans started taking this “free wind”, all these trade unions, socialist and Marxist groups of workers very cautiously. Throughout his life, Kent was a person of very modest income, who took democratic positions. He was a working man, not just an artist. His family could not share his socialist ideas, his vegetarianism, his “leftishness”. His respected and nice bourgeois friends were telling him: “The socialism is good in theory, but in real life it does not work.” But Rockwell Kent remained a devoted socialist for the rest of his life. And this had to end somehow – that’s why he eventually became a communist.

In the 1930s, from an average American’s point of view, Kent started acting in a strange way. For example, he started a lawsuit, at his own cost, against a railway company, which did not fulfil its promises given to people of a certain area in the State of New York. He decided to pursue justice and won. Immediately after he set off on a voyage, exactly like he traveled in his young years – to the Atlantic coast, to Tierra del Fuego and other romantic places. He left home for a long time. In the meantime, the company submitted the appellation, and the court sent him a notice. Kent did not show up in court and lost the case automatically. As a result, in the public eyes and even in the eyes of his friends, he became a kind of Don Quixote fighting windmills pointlessly. He was a loser, and people do not like losers.

Vladimir: In his autobiography, Kent declares himself a committed atheist, who discovered the essence of being with the help through the works of Charles Darwin and Karl Marx. However, he took the opening phrase of a well-known spiritual, “It’s me, oh Lord!”, as the title of his book. The book itself includes some ambiguous statements, such as:

“Often in writing, often in speech, I use the name of God. Yet it is neither as a “believer” that I use it, nor in vain: God had become to me the symbol of the life force of our world and universe; a name for the immense unknown. Imponderable, yet immanent in man, in beasts and birds and bugs, in trees and flowers and toadstools, in the earth, sun, moon and stars. It — I choose the impersonal pronoun as alone consistent with my faith — It was to me a force as un-moral as such manifestations of itself as storms or earthquakes, and for that very reason greatly to be feared. It was as un-moral and impersonal and splendid as its sunset’s light on land and sea — and for that reason to be revered. I feared and revered God. In fear and reverence I painted.” [It’s Me, O Lord!, by Rockwell Kent. NY: Dodd, Mead, 1955, p.138]

But let us talk about his creative manner, his artistic school and his place in the world of American art.

Rada. In fact, Rockwell Kent received an excellent training in arts. He has not been to anywhere in Europe [*the lady likely means that he hasn’t been trained in any recognized centre of European art – D.K.*], but compensated for this lack of European experience by voyaging in less-known regions. Apart from paintings, he created a great variety of sketches, ex-libris prints – all of them for income, for he had a big family that needed his support. For money also, he wrote a number of travelogs, describing his own adventures. In those days, traveling was perceived in a different way. The Kent’s books are full of small details, situations, scrupulous “explorations” of one certain island or place - nothing in common with our modern flickering impressions.

Those days’ readers enjoyed how the author exploited a certain piece of land – Fox Island in Alaska, for example. In his travelogs, Kent tells in detail how to live a week on a handful of cents, or how to build a log cabin by hand. This is a long-time New England tradition, which comes up to Ralf Emerson and Henry Thoreau. This is the tradition of character education – an intention to tell people how to stay close to the stars and how to feel yourself an outstanding being while living on a tiny income. This indeed can be a fascinating story.

Kent believed that shovel and pickaxe go first: a man should first build a house, make a living, dig a well – and then he can take a brush in his hand or create anything else.

[In his autobiography], he tells in detail about all his paternal and maternal ancestors, about Anglo Saxons; about one his grandfathers, who refused to accept US citizenship as he felt himself an Englishman. For this reason, the gentleman wore a silk top hat and put Queen Victoria’s portrait in his bedroom. Rockwell Kent is the man, whose long life started in the 19th century with its special connection to symbolism and impressionism, with its debates between realists and early abstractionists. On the one hand. On other hand, he was a man, who survived two world wars, passed through that unpleasant period of McCarthyism, which affected his own life. And throughout his whole life, he pursued the values of American pioneers with their “natural socialism” and industriousness. He pursued a pure idea of turning a state into a cooperative society, where everyone helps everyone. By the way, in 1904, the Republicans send a coach to bring young Rockwell Kent to polling station. He sent them a note: “I beg your pardon, but I would rather have a walk and vote for the Socialists”.

Vladimir. Perhaps Kent came to the Soviet Embassy because of the situation: he saw clouds gathering over his head. McCarthyism

affected his life seriously, but this was only part of the problem – his time in art has passed and it is hard to say what was more important, his political views or the fact that society considered him an anachronism.

Rada. With his artistic attitudes, Kent could not be a symbol, an emblem of the post-war American art in the time of intense rivalry of capitalist and socialist systems. Realistic style, naturalism in the halo of heroic pathos and official pathetic, were jeopardized both by Stalinism and Nazism, and for this reason they were widely associated with totalitarian systems. The new forms were in high demand. As they used to say in those days, “no one can paint recognizable birds after Auschwitz”. (The original aphorism belongs to German philosopher Theodor W. Adorno: “Only a Barbarian can write poems after Auschwitz”). This renunciation of realistic art was reflected already by Pablo Picasso’s famous “Guernica”. The artwork was to show all horrors of the Spanish Civil War, the bombing of Basque Country’s capital in 1937 by Luftwaffe’s “Condor” voluntary corps. In three hours, the city was completely destroyed and 6000 people lost their lives. And “Guernica” was rejected by all the Picasso’s anti-Fascist friends, who blamed the artist of turning the people’s tragedy into a caricature.

Of course, in this situation Kent found himself hobbled by his own realistic manner. The Department of State presented contemporary American art as a free art: “in our land, artists are people of free will, they choose by themselves to be abstractionists or realists, while the state does not put any pressure”. In this respect, the real formal art, like abstract impressionism, represented by Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock, became an American propaganda fetish. [*in connection with Pollock and Rothko, I am more familiar with the term “abstract expressionism” - Mitya*] Kent could compete neither with them, nor even with Grant Wood. The latter showed rural Midwest and some national motives, well known by American commoners and art critics. Nothing to say about Edward Hopper, who was an

absolute icon of art, working within paradigm of men’s loneliness, appreciated by the post-war Western world. But from the point of Soviet ideological standards, Kent’s art was still relevant. Of course, he was allowed to say much more than his Soviet colleagues. And that’s how his fantastic Soviet career started.

Vladimir. In 1953-1957, Kent’s life was particularly troublesome. He was interrogated by the House Un-American Activities Committee and, like many others, rejected questions regarding his membership in the Communist Party. This position was taken as his “confession”. Museums started taking his exhibited works away. In 1955, the Department of State revoked Kent’s passport and denied his right to travel. [*in fact, that happened in 1950 - Mitya*] The artist sued the Government and won, making his case a helpful precedent for other victims of McCarthyism. In the meantime, Kruschev’s Thaw began in the USSR. America and Soviet Russia agreed to start “exchanges in cultural, technical and educational fields” – the so-called Lacy-Zarubin Agreement. However, Kent’s exhibition was not organized under this agreement: the initiative came from the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, which took over the organization and covered all the expenses. Why? To reserve the right to choose the works for exhibition. The show was timed to Kent’s 75th birthday. First, the exhibition opened its doors in the Pushkin State Art Museum in Moscow, then in the Hermitage Museum in Leningrad, then in Odessa, Riga and Kiyv. About half a million people showed great enthusiasm – they were not even discouraged by long queues. It would seem, what was so sensational was in those paintings?

How do you think, Rada?

Rada. Why did Kent become so popular in the USSR? A strong realist with an intriguing fleur of symbolic romantacism – in those days, it was like a big gulp of freedom, something phenomenal. It was trendy, stylish, new. At the same time, even his faint symbolism looked like a “socialist formalism” and Soviet state functionaries could close their eyes on many things for this. Landscape paintings

by Kent appeared in the Soviet Union and were printed in thousands of copies much earlier than those of Martiros Saryan, who stood very close to Kent. Earlier than even landscapes by Nicholas Roerich. The socialist artist from America was allowed to do things not allowed to his Soviet colleagues. Kent won such a publicity in Soviet Russia that severe style of its art in the times of Thaw is unimaginable without Kent's popularity.

Vladimir. This is not the first time we use these words “severe style” in our talk here. This was unofficial name for a trend in Soviet realistic art, whose creations looked indeed very similar to Kent's works. The trend emerged before his advent to the USSR, but Kent's exhibition somehow made it legitimate. Georgy Nissky, Viktor Popkov, Tair Salakhov – these artists also painted hard-working people, men of men's trades, acting in severe environment. In those-days Russia, an interest in Rockwell Kent was of the same sort as love of Hemingway's books, love of mountaineering, love of the Northern romanticism or amateur songwriting. In the Moscow Engineering Physics Institute, whose students in that time were famous for various talents and creativity, a gang of audacious amateur musician appeared under the name “Rockwell Kent” – the club that played a serious role in history of Russian rock music. [*Specializing in nuclear technologies, the institute belonged to the Soviet scientific elite and lived in a very liberal atmosphere long after the end of Khrushchev's Thaw in mid-1960s. The Rockwell Kent Students Social Club remained active until 1982 and organized first legal concerts of some iconic Russian rock bands - Mitya*].

Rada. In 1957, the first Rockwell Kent's personal exhibition was organized in Soviet Union, in 1961 he donated an enormous number of his drawings, sketches, paintings, manuscripts, books etc. to the Hermitage Museum and Pushkin State Art Museum in Moscow. In 1962, a Soviet publishing house reprinted Herman Melville's “Moby-Dick”, illustrated by Kent. Also in 1962, the artist became an honorary member of the Soviet Academy of Arts. When Kent passed away in

1971, the Society for American-Soviet Friendship organized a memorial gathering in New York.

Vladimir. Indeed, an impressive career! But what is interesting, right in between two of his art shows, in the summer of 1959, the National American Exhibition was held in the Moscow Sokolniki Park – the “exhibition of achievements of capitalist economy”. The Muscovites were mesmerized by consumer goods, cars and a real model of “American home” with everything inside. But the exhibition has also offered them an excursion to the world of American contemporary art. Its cultural section was a legend, the first and only exhibition in the Soviet times that presented works of American abstractionists – Pollock, Rothko, Rauschenberg, Kooning. Two epochs in the history of world art met each other in one city! However, I have to correct myself: in 1989, Robert Rauschenberg visited Moscow again to open his personal exhibition. I met him that time and even interviewed him. But this became possible owing to Gorbachev’s “perestroika”.

Rada. In 1959, the American art exhibition in Sokolniki was violently criticized by Soviet cultural elite. Poet Evgeny Evtushenko wrote in “Komsomolskaya Pravda” newspaper: “Seeing these abstract works was pretty depressive experience. No harmony, no plasticity. This is not a festival of colours – this is rather their funeral. Pollock and his sensational “drip technique” appeared to be simply boring. You come – and then you leave the exhibition in a bad mood”. Artist Pavel Sokolov-Skalya, a recipient of two Stalin’s State Awards and author of numerous portraits of Soviet leaders, was even angrier:

“The Western imperialism does not like a truthful depiction of its bestial nature in art, literature, music and on stage! And thus, the so-called “abstract art” shows up. It neither depicts, nor expresses anything, but drags a fooled spectator away from the truth. If you, a spectator, is not happy with all these inappropriate things around you – just plunge into the chaos of abstract colours, forms and

sounds. Have a rest or, in other words, stay out of our way, while we, the ruling circles, are doing our dirty business”.

Kent assumed a very similar position:

“These unintelligible creations of abstractionists give us an inevitable and complete expression of cultural degradation. And the support provided to them by gallerists and mass media owners, should be considered as another evidence of their renunciation of humanism, not as a simple tribute to a trend. Abstractionism is an atomic bomb in the world of culture. As for Soviet art, its realism looks very academic, but it is an organic manifestation of socialist culture. This is an accessible art in a good way, as it helps to develop a deep understanding of the world around us and a deep love for this world and people”.

Vladimir. Now, Rada, I need to make something clear, some important details. The Kent’s first exhibition was supposed to be held for 4 months. Eventually, his paintings and drawings travelled all around Soviet Russia for two years. And when they returned, nobody wanted them – all artworks had to be stored in unpacked boxes on his farm. As Kent said about himself, he was “like David Oistrakh playing violin in Sahara Desert”. Finally, he decided to donate 900 of his works to the Soviet Union. He believed that public interest in his art had not gone yet. In the press conference, which followed his decision, the artist said that American audience was prevented from seeing his works by US bureaucracy.

His second exhibition in the USSR was even bigger. In 1967, Kent was given Lenin Peace Prize; all – or almost all – his books were translated and published in Russia. But in the Soviet reviews there is not any deep analysis of his art – only praises and trite clichés. Soviet critics were focused on Kent’s biography, his leftish views and problems, caused by these views. And, of course, in the USSR he was

forever labelled as a realist, while his symbolic and mystic works were declared as “occasional and uncommon mistakes”.

Kent’s return to the American audience took place after his passing, on occasion of the artist’s 100th birthday.



Rada Landar. Art critic and art historian. Born and raised in Moscow (parents are an actress and a museum’s director). Studied history of arts at the Moscow State University. Worked in the Bakhrushin’s State Theater Museum, ran a cultural program on the TV. Now based in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Works as an art critic and guide in Boston.



Vladimir Abarinov. Born and raised in Moscow, specialized in history in the Russian State Institute of History and Archival Studies. Started his career in journalism in the “Literature Gazette”. Has lived in the US since 1999.



Dmitry Kiselev. Born in remote Kamchatka Peninsula, Northeast Siberia, 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 places in the world, Mitya lives with his family on Cyprus