

Rockwell Kent: An Appreciation

Winona Minnesota

This is an exciting grass roots event, very much in the spirit of Rockwell Kent, and I'd like to particularly thank and congratulate Taff Roberts, who's the dynamo who has made all this happen. I think it's wonderful to bring so many perspectives to bear on Rockwell Kent, those of Beth Christenson, who's a scholar of music; Emilio DeGrazia, who's a novelist and writer; and Richard West, distinguished art historian and museum director, who actually knew Rockwell Kent, and who resurrected Kent's critical standing at a low point in his career when he staged the last exhibition of Kent's work in his lifetime. I think this variety of perspectives in itself provides a tribute to the many-sided nature of Rockwell Kent. My role here is principally that of a "True Believer," one of that sort of underground cult of admirers of Rockwell Kent, a group that includes the painter Jamie Wyeth, who would like to see him restored to his place as one of the great figures of American art—and of course Kent was also a notable writer, seaman, house-builder, and traveler, and adventurer, political agitator and political gadfly, in the best traditions of American culture.

Truman Capote and Harper Lee

It's always intriguing to think about what makes a location become an artistic center—what chemistry is necessary to make a particular location a gathering place for genius. In 1934, for example, the literary capital of America was probably the little town of Monroeville, Alabama, where two eight-or nine year-old misfit children, Truman Capote and Harper Lee, were tapping out stories about true crime and their eccentric neighbors on an old Underwood manual typewriter, a hand-me-down from Harper's father, a courtroom lawyer, whose court-

romantics they found more entertaining than television. It seems so highly improbable that two of the greatest American writers of the 20th century would grow up next door in a small town in Alabama—but there you are!

Rockwell Kent and Carl Ruggles

In 1912, as you know, there was a similarly improbable artistic center here in Winona, Minnesota, when the painter Rockwell Kent and the composer Carl Ruggles, in one of those memorably dramatic meetings, like Livingston's meeting with Stanley, where Kent had staged an exhibition of his work. They met in the rotunda of the public library. Ruggles was standing there alone when Ken walked in the door, and to the artist's everlasting gratification Ruggles walked straight towards him, reached out his hand, and declared to Kent: "You are a great painter."

Moby Dick

Carl Ruggles was right, although it took nearly another decade for Kent to receive the fame he deserved. In 1920, however, his book *Wilderness*, describing the year he spent roughing it in Alaska, became a national success, and by the 1930s you could hardly open a magazine without coming upon a drawing by Rockwell Kent, or an article about him, or a cartoon commenting on his ubiquitous art and his fascinating romantic relationships with Eskimo girls in the far north. When his illustrated edition of *Moby Dick* was released, the publishers forgot to put Herman Melville's name on the title page, since Rockwell Kent has so perfectly captured its spirit in his illustrations that he seemed like the real author.

Benton drawing of Carl Ruggles

Carl Ruggles seems to have had a talent for cheering up neglected artists. In 1933, for example, when the painter Thomas Hart Benton was going through an emotional slump, after completing his Indiana mural, and found that his former Leftist friends in New York were giving him the cold shoulder, he paid a visit to Carl Ruggles, at his place in Arlington, Vermont, assuming that a walk through the autumn woods would recharge his empty spirits. He got recharged all right, but it wasn't the autumn scenery that did it: it was Carl Ruggles, whom he later described as "one of my favorite masters of 'cussing'—an art in which Benton also excelled—who was then in the process of composing what's probably his musical masterpiece, *Sun Treader*, and was pounding out impressively dissonant chords on the piano. Benton promptly started making sketches.

Benton Portrait of Carl Ruggles.

The result, completed later in New York, was a portrait which Benton later described as "one of the best portrait compositions I ever made," showing Carl glowering at the keyboard of a piano that seems about to take flight. What's fascinating to me is how Benton somehow found a visual analogue for the character of Ruggles's great composition *Sun Treader*, with its dissonant, grainy texture, its inharmonious seconds and sevenths, which Ruggles further dramatized with his unusual orchestration of the piece, in which he set six horns in unison against an orchestra. One can almost hear the sounds as one looks at Benton's painting. More deeply, I think Benton captured some deeper essence of what Ruggles was doing, a sort of soul quality of his music which is at once rough, crude, homespun and even in a certain way anti-artistic, and at the same time profoundly romantic. *Sun Treader*, of course, gets its title from Robert Browning's 1833 elegy to Percy Bysshe Shelley, perhaps the most romantic of English poets, which contains the

line: “Sun-treader, life and light be thine forever.” It’s a fascinating line which somehow makes concrete the desire we all feel at time to throw off the mortal coil and become pure energy and spirit. Interestingly, it’s also a line which, if we close our eyes, and try to dream up an image of what the words represent, leads us to conjure an image which, I think, it bound to be very similar to the wonderful floating sky figures of Rockwell Kent, which in some strange way bridge the distance between the hard, concrete world in which we live, and the boundless, metaphysical world of our aspirations.

Rockwell Kent Portrait of Ruggles

Interestingly, Rockwell Kent also made a portrait of Carl Ruggles, which like that of Benton bridges the seemingly inharmonious divide between the humorous and the romantic. In Kent’s case it wasn’t a painting but a pen-and-ink drawing, which he produced as a humorous illustration for the magazine Vanity Fair, under the pseudonym “Hogarth, Jr.”

Kent and Benton Images of Ruggles

It’s interesting to compare Kent’s portrait with that of Benton, and I think they’re both marvelous.

Rockwell Kent Portrait of Ruggles

Kent’s accompanying text I think makes clear his artistic intentions. He titled the drawing “The Great-of-Soul” and published beside it a caption declaring that his subject was “Great genius encased in narrow physical accommodations...” As if to symbolize his ambitions, his clothes, hat, cigar, etc., are all to beg for him. So are his ideas. Perhaps he will

grow up to them some day.” It’s an assessment that’s at once flattering and cruel, for in fact, Ruggles always had difficulty achieving his grand artistic intentions.

Cover of Men and Angels

While living in Winona, for example, Ruggles abandoned his job as the conductor of the symphony to work on what was to be a grand opera titled “The Sunken Bell.” After five years of fruitless struggle and inability to produce he moved to New York, leaving his wife and child behind him, so that he could work without interruption and distraction. During this period he subsisted on an allowance from his wife, culled from her meager earnings; but he still wasn’t able to finish the piece. Around 1920 he seems to have abandoned the project; or, if I understand correctly, he allowed it to mutate, since as I understand it his symphonic suite *Men and Angels*, of which *Suntreader* was a part, was salvaged from this project. In 1921, Rockwell Kent, perhaps in an effort to spur him on, produced a cover for the publication of this intended composition; but as we know, Ruggles was still working on *Suntreader* in 1934 when Benton painted his portrait, and it only received its American premiere in 1966, in a two-day festival devoted to Ruggles at Bowdoin College. In fact, *Suntreader*,” which is sixteen minutes long, was Ruggles’s longest piece of music: more than ten years of living and hard work, or slightly over five million minutes, to produce sixteen minutes of music, or 328,500 minutes of life and work for each minute of final composition—228 days a minute.

Kent Portrait of Ruggles

What’s fascinating I think is how Kent somehow expresses all this in his pen-and-ink caricature. In it, Ruggles’s features are grotesque, with his bald head, ridiculous ring of hair, projecting nose, sunken chin, and strangely protruding upper lip. Yet at the same time, he

exudes an air of cosmic grandeur, as the caption suggests, which I think is slyly evoked at once by his swaggering stance, by the way in which the curves lines of his outline echo the swirling clouds in the background, and by the way in which a sort of aura of white surrounds his figure, like a nimbus or halo. Indeed, the very presence of the clouds with their magnificent rhythm suggests that something miraculous is taking place, and in Kent's music cover for *Men and Angels*, all this is expressed without satire: we see the sun rising—and while one could argue, I'm convinced that it's rising rather than setting—over a mountain landscape with dramatic clouds. It's a sort of pure emblem of heroic hope and of a new dawn.

Carl Ruggles and Ahab

Carl Ruggles believed that Kent's drawing of him served as a model for one of his most famous images: his wonderful rendering of Ahab for his 1930 edition of *Moby Dick*. Kent himself pooh-poohed this claim, but perhaps it contains an element of truth. If we set these images side by side we can see that they are variations on a similar theme. If nothing else, Carl Ruggles provided a model for the notion that genius has an element of madness, and that a face with almost grotesque features can provide the embodiment of fierce ideals. In his pen-and-ink sketch of Ruggles, Kent explored this theme in a humorous vein. In his rendering of Ahab he explored it with a tragic, slightly mad intensity.

Kent and Benton Portraits of Ruggles

I'll leave the resurrection of Carl Ruggles to someone who knows American music better than I do. Though speaking personally, I think his work is very, very good, and it's interesting that there's at least one living conductor, Michael Tilson Thomas, conductor of the San

Francisco Symphony Orchestra, who seems to have devoted considerable effort to playing his work and bringing about a sort of Ruggles Revival.

Photograph of Kent; drawing of Ken Playing the Flute

Instead let me focus on Rockwell Kent and his significance. I'd like to think of us here as plotters of revolution, to bring about a revival in the appreciation of the work of Rockwell Kent. Let me say a few words about his larger place in American art. Here of course I'm showing a photograph of Kent next to his own drawing of himself, playing his father's flute, looking strangely waif-like for such a dynamic figure.

Rockwell Kent Plate

Rockwell Kent, of course, is a hard artist to fit into the history of American art. While he was a remarkable painter, that only seems a small part of his artistic genius. For the compulsive collector his output is fascinating, since it seems that there's no form of object that he didn't try his hand to. At various times he was an architect, an architectural renderer, a book illustrator, and advertising man, a carpenter, well-digger, teamster, longshoreman, a boat-builder, a book designer, writer, lecturer, landscape painter, figure painter, mural painter, and house painter, cartoonist, adventurer, world traveler, social activist, political candidate, and lecturer. He built boats, and houses and furniture and you could outfit an entire house with things that he imprinted with his designs: plates,

Rockwell Kent Fabric

Fabrics...

Rockwell Kent Milk bottle

Milk bottles...

Political Tracts

And advertisements for cars and shipping lines, champagne buckets, and of course lots of political posters and political tracts. As Lawrence Stallings once wrote: “Rockwell Kent was created partly to give the world arresting art, partly to write brilliantly on an adventurous life, but chiefly to demonstrate that nature did not, after Leonardo da Vinci, forget to make a man who could do everything superbly.”

Kent Cartoon

What’s fascinating to me is that in an age which mostly saw artists who were specialists, who focused intently on a small area, Rockwell Kent ranged over every possible medium of art-making, and yet developed a style that’s easily recognizable in each of them. Indeed, his style was so recognizable that it became the subject of cartoons: for example one showing two eager landscape painter, who find to their distress that the scene their looking at has been transformed into a pen-and-ink drawing, with Kent’s distinctive mode of neatly rendered parallel lines of hatching, and who exclaim: “Oh Hell! Rockwell Kent’s been here!”

Moby Dick

Rockwell Kent’s style by the 1930s seems so distinct, so individual, so complete an expression of Kent’s own quite forceful personality, that it’s hard to make out the ingredients from which it was formed. But in fact, Kent drew from some of the major artistic movements of

his time, and then transformed them into a personal and individual style. In a somewhat simplified way, I'd like to trace this process. In essence I'd like to propose that he brought together three traditions: that of the socially-minded realism of Robert Henri; that of the idealized allegory and love of nature of Abbott Thayer; and that of the skilled architectural draftsman, trained to delineate the world with accuracy and precision. It's these three influences that provided the raw material for Kent's achievement.

Robert Henri

Perhaps the greatest of these influence, the one most central to Kent's artistic purposes, was that of Robert Henri, lead of the Ashcan School, who espoused a tough-minded school of realism, that confronted the social issues of the day head on. Robert Henri was himself quite a good painter, but he was even more influential as a the teacher of others: as a teacher, who established a mode of modern art that offered an alternative to the model offered by Alfred Stieglitz, and had an influence that ran through the entire 20th century, and perhaps in its aftershocks still influences us today. Henri is best known as the figure who staged the famous exhibition "The Eight," held at the Macbeth Gallery in 1908, which was the first succès de scandale of 20th century American art. Denounced by many in the press, and praised by others, it showed that controversy could generate excitement and lead to sales. It provided a new model for success in the field of art, and set the stage for even more radical forms of modern art shortly afterwards.

Philadelphia Press and Shinn Drawing of a Fire

The key members of The Eight—John Sloan, George Luks, William Glackens and Everett Shinn—were all former newspaper illustrators from Philadelphia, who, when they turned to painting, focused their attention on the grit and squalor of the urban scene. If one had to sum up Henri’s approach in a phrase it was the idea that an art should be vital and alive and should confront the real world: that in fact subjects that most people dismissed as ugly were often the most exciting from an artist’s standpoint.

George Bellows painting

What’s not generally appreciated is that Henri’s influence also shaped the outlook of a slightly younger generation of artists, all slightly too young to participate in the exhibition of the Eight: George Bellows, Edward Hopper, and Rockwell Kent. One might think of this group as “The Three,” and while they produced work that’s expressive of quite different personalities, I think it’s also interesting to think about the qualities they shared. Of these three, George Bellows had an approach so close to that of The Eight that his work blends right in with theirs. He painted very similar subjects but did so with an extra sense of muscular vigor, and he achieved fame very early. He was the youngest painter ever elected to the National Academy of Design, and when he was still in his twenties had his paintings purchased by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and other noted institutions—as much an honor then as it would be today.

Edward Hopper, Hills, South Truro, 1930.

Hopper and Kent had to struggle a little longer. For years Hopper could find no buyers for his work. He had to support himself as an illustrator, work he loathed, and it was only in the 1920s that he achieved enough commercial success with his etching and watercolors to paint full time. In 1929 the writer Lloyd Goodrich noted that Hopper's "House by the Railroad" announced a new presence in American art—a new stark vision of solitude and loneliness. From that point on, his approach never wavered. He became the painter of a certain sort of slightly uneasy, solitary mood, creating images as unsettling and as distinctly identifiable as the films of Alfred Hitchcock.

Kent, Monhegan Scene

Then there's Rockwell Kent. In some ways he falls between Bellows and Hopper. Unlike Hopper he was able to sell some of his early paintings to prominent collectors such as Henry Clay Frick. But he didn't achieve the dazzling success of George Bellows, and when he did emerge as a nationally known figure it was not so much through his work as a painter but through his work as a writer, illustrator, and adventurer. His book on Alaska provided, with its visionary Blake-like illustrations, provided his first really spectacular success; and it was his expedition to Greenland, written up in *Salamina*, that established his national reputation both as an illustrator, and as an adventurer. Notably, this Greenland adventure roughly coincided with what is probably his greatest series of illustrations, those for Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*.

Bellows, Hopper and Kent Paintings

But what I'd like to suggest, in short, is that Bellows, Hopper and Kent do present a vision that has some common aspects. All three had what one might call a Realist vision—one that grappled with the toughness of real life. And all three had an extraordinary gift for expressing that vision with powerful, simplified, monumental forms. All three had a vision of life which is filled with a sort of existential intensity, at once heroic and tragic. To my mind, all three stand out as artists of similar stature, but it's surely Kent, who enjoyed the most popular fame in his lifetime, whose reputation is least secure today, who seems the most difficult to summarize and fully grasp. If one sees Kent as a sort of blood brother of Bellows and Hopper I think it illuminates key qualities of his work, and at the same time brings out the fact that he stands apart from the two others, in a realm of his own.

Abbott Thayer and Angel

There are various aspects of this difference but surely one is that while Bellows and Henri were primarily influenced by Robert Henri, Kent also had another teacher who influenced him equally as much, the eccentric naturalist and painter of the American Renaissance, Abbott Thayer. Through Thayer he absorbed a view of life that was more transcendental, more romantic, and more in tune with the mystical forces of nature. Abbott Thayer had a sort of double-life as the painter of ideal figure subjects, in the mode of the American Renaissance, particularly idealized women who often have wings to indicate their exalted spiritual character; and as a naturalist, who was obsessed with birds, and through his study of birds invented the modern science of camouflage.

Camouflage Plate

Here's one of Thayer's painting of how the plumage of a bird provides protective coloration that makes it merge with its surroundings.

Copperhead Snake

Indeed, Rockwell Kent worked on some of the plates for Thayer's famous book on camouflage, published in 1909. Here's a portrait of a copperhead snake and how it is almost invisible in a setting of fallen leaves.

Copperhead Snake

And the book has a stencil that folds over this illustration to reveal the Copperhead separated from its setting.

Snake and Snake in Its Setting

Kent Landscape and Thayer Landscape

There was a manly aspect of Thayer's complex character that left a lingering mark on Rockwell Kent: his passion for nature, his idealism, his ruggedness and love of outdoor living. Notably, Thayer lived in a truly rugged rural setting, in a rambling complex in Dublin, New Hampshire, which was unheated, and where the windows were left open even in winter, and where Thayer and his associates slept outdoors even in winter, in outdoor sleeping platforms and

often woke up in the morning covered by drifts of snow. Surely it was this experience that trained Kent in the survival qualities that in later years made him at home in places like Alaska, Greenland, and Tierra del Fuego, not to speak of his own home, Asgard, in the heart of the Adirondacks, where his idea of fun was to go scale some nearby mountain peak in the middle of a blizzard. One side of Thayer was a nature painter, and his obsessive paintings of Mount Monadnock provide a sort of prototype for the mountainous landscapes that Kent celebrated in his many book illustrations, as well as his remarkable landscape of Greenland. Here what you're looking at is one of Kent's early paintings of Dublin Pond next to a Thayer landscape of Mount Monadnock, and you can see how similar they are in their approach.

Thayer, the Stevenson Memorial.

But interestingly, the ideal side of Thayer's vision also affected him. In some strange way, Thayer's paintings of women with wings, even when they're portraits of the family cook, are strangely impressive and convincing.

Kent flying figure; Thayer painting

In the same way there's something about Kent's allegorical flying figures which convince us as well, which seem like the natural accompaniment of the vast infinite space and grand landscapes that he loved.

Kent Advertisement as Architectural Draftsman

Here we come to one of the aspects of Rockwell Kent's career that has been least studied, but that I think had a profound influence on his work: his career as an architectural draftsman. Early in his career, in 1900, Kent briefly attended architecture school at Columbia, but left in the middle of his fourth year, just before graduating, to study painting with Robert Henri and William Meritt Chase. While he clearly had considerable design talent, the one thing that he truly enjoyed about architecture was the process of making renderings. Indeed, the scale and ambition of his work in this vein got him in a rather typical fight of the sort that characterized Kent's career. During the summer vacation, students at Columbia were assigned to make a dozen architectural sketches. Kent produced twelve very large paintings in oil. They were so large that he could afford to ship only one to the school. Despite a letter from an architect specifying that he had done all twelve, a member of the faculty insisted on seeing all twelve, and in the course of the ensuing dispute Kent narrowly escaped dismissal.

Throughout the early part of his career when he was out of money he regularly supported himself as an architectural draftsman, working mostly for his friends Charles Ewing and George Chapell, but also sometime taking on commissions for other firms. Indeed, he was clearly recognized as one of the virtuoso architectural draftsman of the time, someone to be called on when a truly dazzling presentation drawing was required. For example, when John Russell Pope was producing grand schemes for the Jefferson Memorial in Washington D.C., he employed Rockwell Kent to make a series of simply enormous presentation drawings.

Tom Thumtack

Interestingly also, it was Kent's work as an architectural draftsman that led to his first major project as an illustrator. In 1914 one of the architects at Ewing and Chappel, Frederick

Squires, wrote a little book titled *Architectonics: The Tales of Tom Thumbtack, Architect*, for which Kent produced eight-five drawings and some decorative initials.

Vanity Fair Illustration

Around this time also, George Chappell began writing humorous poems which he submitted to his friend, Frank Crowninshield, who began publishing them occasionally in *Vanity Fair*. Not long after the Tom thumbtack book was published, Kent made a drawing for one of these poems, and Crowninshield liked it. Afraid that being known as the author of humorous drawings would detract from his reputation as a serious painter, Kent signed the piece under the pseudonym, “Hogarth, Jr.”

Kent Architectural Drawing

Clearly Kent’s exceptional gifts as an architectural draftsman had a great deal to do with his training as a painter. Unlike most architects, he had a feeling for the way massive forms look when set outdoors in natural light, with fluctuations of light and shade. At the same time, I think the practice of architectural rendering profoundly affected his approach as a painter. Architectural rendering is an extremely conceptual process, almost like going through the steps of a proof in Euclid’s geometry. You start with a plan; you then mark where you’d like to view the building from on the plan; and then you geometrically work out the perspective of the building with mathematical accuracy as it looks from that particular point. Light and shade also have a mathematical aspect. You mark on the plan the direction of the light and then can map out the fall of light and shade with mathematical exactitude. While rendering requires mathematical exactitude and precision, each step of the process has an artistic aspect. For example, the choice

of viewpoint fundamentally affects the dramatic character of the final drawing. Choose the wrong spot—too near or too far—and the building will look insignificant.

Kent Architectural Drawing

What's interesting, I think, is that in his architectural renderings, Kent created a sort of hybrid form of realism. Compared to other draftsman, Kent was exceptionally sensitive to the drama that one can create through the play of light. Yet when compared to an actual outdoor painting, Kent's renderings have a sort of simplified, abstracted handling of form that is more monumental, more massive, than what we would experience in real life. Of course this was an interesting moment in architecture. For reasons which are hard to precisely pinpoint, architects were developing a more geometric, more angular, more modern, more cubist style. This shift in geometric approach is noticeable even in the work of architects such as the great American master of the Gothic revival, Ralph Adams Cram, who presented themselves as foes of the modern age and modern art. At some level Kent seems to have absorbed this sensibility, perhaps not only through architecture but also through architectural decoration and sculpture, by figures such as the master of Art Deco, Paul Manship.

Kent Church Tower

I should apologize for the dreadful quality of these illustrations of Kent's architectural renderings, which are scanned for low-quality Xeroxes, but perhaps they at least dimly suggest the dramatic qualities of his work in this vein. This one, which is the least legible, is in some ways the most impressively dramatic. You can see how Kent treats this church tower as a dark, solid mass, and also adopts a very near viewpoint, so that it towers over us.

Here I present what is really a hypothesis, since to demonstrate its truth one would need to go carefully through Kent's architectural renderings and compare them with paintings and illustrations made at the same time. But it seems to me that the increasingly architectural, diagrammatic, machine-age quality of Kent's work has a direct connection with his involvement with architecture.

Cabin in Alaska.

Notably, he also had a good deal of experience with actual building. Reading Rockwell Kent's biography is a slightly exhausting experience. He was always on the move, often engaged in manual labor, seemingly always building a house or a boat, and generally involved in complex relationships with more than one woman at a time. House-building, for example. I don't pretend to make a complete list, but he built a house for himself on Monhegan in 1906. He added a room and a porch to this in 1908 and later also built a house for his mother on the island. In 1910 he moved to Richmond, New Hampshire where he found an abandoned farm with a ruined house which he renovated. In 1912 he worked as a construction superintendent in Winona, Minnesota, where he remodeled a vacated schoolhouse for his family to live in. In 1913 he moved his family to the estate of an aunt and uncle at Chappaqua, where he redesigned and remodeled an old house on the estate. In 1914 he went to Newfoundland where he settled in the fishing village of Brigus, where he repaired a tiny house and added a studio. In 1918 he went with his son Rockwell, just eight years old, to Fox Island in Alaska, where he found a small log cabin built as a shelter for goats and renovated it into a habitable residence. In 1920, with money from the sale of his Alaska drawings, he purchased a dilapidated house near Arlington, Vermont, which he rebuilt and renovated. In 1924-25, after divorcing his first wife, a girlfriend bought a house in the mountains that he set about renovating; in 1926 he made a trip to Ireland where he

found a cottage overlooking Donegal bay which had been used as a fireplace and renovated it into a residence; in 1927 he bought land at Au Sable Forks, where he designed a two story house and supervised the construction. In 1931 he spent the year in Igdlorssuit on the west coast of Greenland where he constructed a house which he shared with an Eskimo woman, Salamina. Finally, in April 1969, his house at Asgard was hit by lightning and burned to the ground, destroying huge quantities of Kent's artwork along with a library of some 10,000 books. Seemingly unphased, the next day Kent set to work in a nearby studio, which had survived, designing a new house, whose construction he then supervised, and which was finished by the end of the next summer.

Kent Drawing of House

Most of these projects were as much construction as architecture, but I think in a profound way they affected the way that Kent thought about line and form. In his work the lines have the same structural solidity as a floorboard or the support of a bookshelf.

Kent Boats from Wilderness

Kent's great illustrations, such as his illustrations for Moby Dick, achieve their curious emotional intensity because they present the world with the clarity and accuracy of an architectural rendering. Take, for example, this drawing of a sperm whale with its tail pointing straight out of the water, at the beginning of a great dive. It looks for all the world like the plans of an architect or boat-builder; you could construct a wooden model from the drawing without much difficulty.

Kent Illustration for Moby Dick.

What's interesting is that Kent's drawings are so recognizable, and that in some way they capture the spirit of his age more successfully than those of any other illustrator of the period. At the root of this fact is a rather simple visual trick. Unlike other draftsman, who used an inflected line, like those used by northern Renaissance printmakers such as Durer, Kent boldly used a regular line, often a regular straight line that looks like it was drawn with a ruler.

Edwin Austin Abbey.

It's interesting to compare Kent's approach to the flickering pen-work of illustrators of the 1890s, such as Edwin Austin Abbey or Daniel Vierge, which I'm showing you here.

Kent Illustration of Diving Whale

Kent greatly simplifies the handling of tone, essentially working with just three: white, flat black, and a mid-tone generally created with machine-ruled lines. Generally speaking this mid-tone is relatively flat, and when it does convey a sense of tonal gradation, it's generally one that covers of a vast expanse, such as a sky which is lighter at the horizon and grows deeper as you move upwards. What's interesting to me is how this seemingly rather simple trick creates a rather complex emotional effect. On the one hand, Kent's drawings seem remarkably precise and exact. Unlike the work of 19th-century pen-and-ink draftsman, we never lose the edge of the form in webs of cross-hatching or flickering light. AT the same time, Kent's world seems strangely abstract. We're looking not at real things but at precise diagrams of things, which seem like templates for a craftsman or model-maker.

Illustration for Moby Dick

This presentation of influences, of course, is somewhat simplified. But basically I'm proposing that Kent combined in his work a commitment to realism and social consciousness that he learned from Robert Henri; a love of nature and a love of romantic allegory that he absorbed from Abbott Thayer; and finally, a sense of diagram and design that he absorbed from his training as an architect, and his experience as an architectural renderer. I think there's no doubt that all these influences came together for Kent around 1930, when he produced the works which rank as his masterpieces: his illustrations for *Moby Dick*, 1930, *N by E.* of 1930, and *Salamina* of 1935; and his amazing landscapes of Greenland, which rank with Georgia O'Keeffe's paintings of New Mexico as perhaps the greatest landscape series by any 20th-century American painter.

From Herbert Spencer he had learned that infinity and eternity were essentially unthinkable and unknowable and not to be thought about, and he later declared that this set his "Victorian mind completely and lastingly to rest." Yet curiously, he remained obsessed by the infinite, and this is an endlessly repeated in his work.

Kent Sailing Ship

At a deep level, it seems to me that Rockwell Kent's work touches on an ideal of beauty that is particularly central to American culture and that perhaps goes back in some way to the heritage of the puritans, who distrusted the ostentation of richly decorated Catholic churches and cathedrals, and believed that virtue and beauty are best embodied by a style that is plain, unadorned, and practical. Early in the 19th-century, the sculptor Horatio Greenough wrote about the lightness, beauty and practicality of American wagons and carriages and streamlined sailing ships. More recently, this idea was picked up by the noted historian, Samuel Elliot Morrison,

who proposed that the most beautiful objects of ever produced in America may well have been the fast-sailing clipper ships of the 19th century, whose visual beauty was the natural outgrowth of purely commercial requirements, to get cargo to California with the greatest possible speed.

As Morrison wrote:

These clipper ships of the early 1850's were built of wood in shipyards from Rockland in Maine to Baltimore. These architects, like poets who transmute nature's message into song, obeyed what wind and wave had taught them, to create the noblest of all sailing vessels, and the most beautiful creations of man in America. With no extraneous ornament except a figurehead, a bit of carving and a few lines of gold leaf, their one purpose of speed over the great ocean routes was achieved by perfect balance of spars and sails to the curving lines of the smooth black hull and this harmony of mass, form and color was practiced to the music of dancing waves and of brave winds whistling in the rigging. These were our Gothic cathedrals, our Parthenon but monuments carved from snow. For a few brief years they flashed their splendor around the world, then disappeared with the finality of the wild pigeon."

Kent Illustration for Moby Dick

It seems to me that it's this sort of beauty that Kent's art seeks to capture and celebrate: the beauty of simple, practical things that achieve their beauty through their perfect fitness for use.