
The Stormy Petrel of American Art

Having wandered around much of the Western Hemisphere, artist and political activist Rockwell Kent finally learned “how beautiful the world can be” when he reached Greenland.

By Frederick Lewis



West Greenland Fjord, painted by Kent in 1929.

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DURING THE 1930s AND 1940s ROCKWELL KENT (1882-1971) was one of America's most famous personalities. The foremost illustrator of his day, he took on the titans of literature—Shakespeare, Chaucer and Melville—enhancing their timeless tales with his own enduring images. He was also a prolific painter whose work is in the collections of many major museums, including the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Art Institute of Chicago and the Hermitage in Russia.

Kent was a ceaseless wanderer who sought out some of the world's cruelest climates and captured their barren beauty on canvas, a celestial navigator who sailed southward to the Strait of Magellan and north to Greenland, where he survived a stormy wreck. While living in Newfoundland during World War I, his arrogant behavior got him expelled from that then British territory, suspected of being a German spy.

Kent was also at various times a best-selling author, an architect, a labor leader and a political activist who never backed away. When the U.S. government suspected Kent of being a Communist and denied him a passport, he likened it to a domestic duel: "It's very much, you know, like a woman forbidding a man to go outdoors, and he says 'The heck with that, I will go out.' She says 'I can stop that by stealing your pants.' They've stolen my pants in taking my passport and I want my pants back."

Rockwell Kent did get his pants back. To this day, his landmark legal victory allows all U.S. citizens the right to travel regardless of their political affiliation.

Kent's presence on the American scene was once so ubiquitous, his creative output so prodigious, that *The New Yorker* once quipped, "That day will mark a precedent, which brings no news of Rockwell Kent."

Of the many locales that Kent explored and briefly called home, Greenland was the one place that remained in his heart, mind and imagination until the end of his days. His first of three journeys there was by happenstance. At a housewarming party at Asgaard, Kent's Adirondack farm, so named for his love of ancient Norse legend, businessman Arthur Allen mentioned that his son was planning a three-month cruise to Greenland. "God," said Kent, "may I go with him?"

Arthur Allen, Jr., known as Sam, had read of Kent's exploits in Tierra del Fuego (Kent had tried to sail around Cape Horn in a converted lifeboat!) and wrote, "I should like to cruise with Rockwell Kent next summer, more than anything else." Sam Allen was a 22-year-old student of naval architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. *Direction*, his 33-foot, 13-ton cutter was being rebuilt and outfitted for sailing in northern waters.

Kent wearing a traditional Greenlandic anorak and playing his flute at Asgaard, his Adirondack farm in New York State, ca. 1933.



Though they lacked a common tongue, Kent conveyed his plight through pantomime.



With building supplies from Denmark, Kent constructed a one-room house on a hill above Illorsuit's long, sandy beach.



Kent's greatest gift to the people of Illorsuit was a dance hall that he built with their help during his final trip to Greenland in 1934-35.

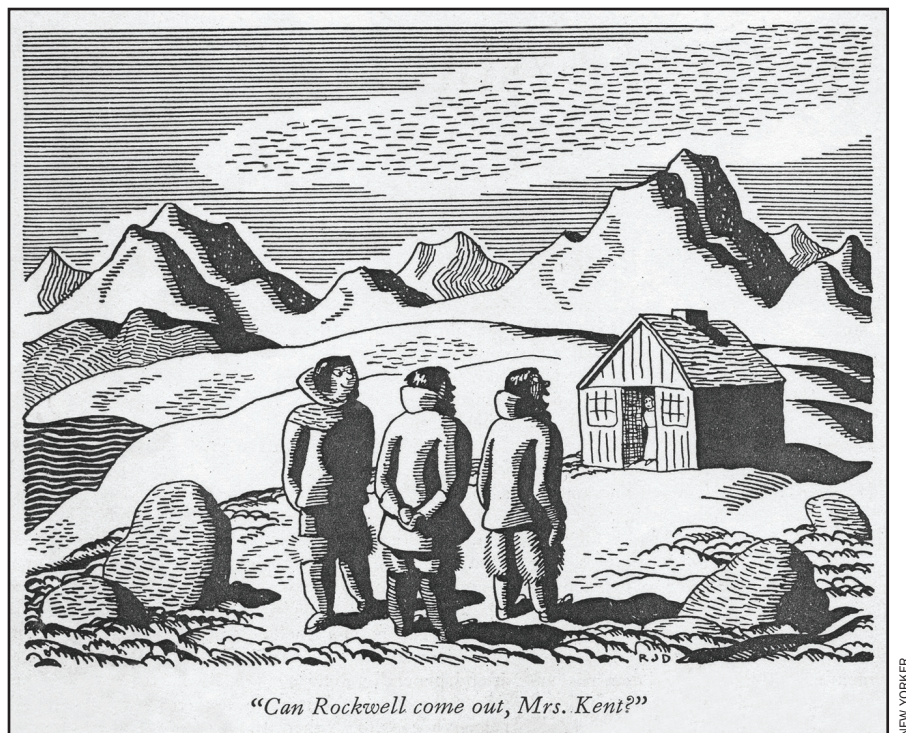
Opposite Page: Kent's housekeeper and mistress, Salamina, and Rockwell Kent, ca. 1935.



Completing the crew was Sam's friend, Lucien Cary, also just 22. On June 17, 1929, four days before Kent's 47th birthday, *Direction* set sail from Nova Scotia. Their goal was Godthab, the oldest Danish settlement in Greenland. Now known as Nuuk, it is Greenland's capital. During the 9-day, 600-mile voyage, dense fog crippled Kent's ability to navigate, but when the veil lifted the voyagers got their first glimpse of Greenland. Seeking shelter for the night, they sailed into a small fjord and dropped anchor. But as they slept, a fierce williwaw struck, and what seemed to be a protective corridor became a raging wind tunnel.

THE INTREPID TRIO ESCAPED, BUT COULD NOT SAVE *Direction* from being battered and broken on the rocks. Kent rescued his 35mm camera and filmed the ship as she foundered. Though more than twice the age of his shipmates, it was Kent who packed a 50-pound rucksack and set off in search of help. For two days Kent hiked the hinterlands. The treacherous terrain kept forcing him farther and farther inland, but at last he regained the ocean. "Suddenly," Kent wrote, "a whole new world of land and sea rises to meet me as I cross the ridge. Greenland! Oh god, how beautiful the world can be."

Kent was ecstatic when he caught sight of a Greenlander in his kayak, lazily fishing for cod. Though they lacked a common tongue, Kent conveyed his



Kent's amorous adventures are illustrated by this drawing of three Eskimo women.

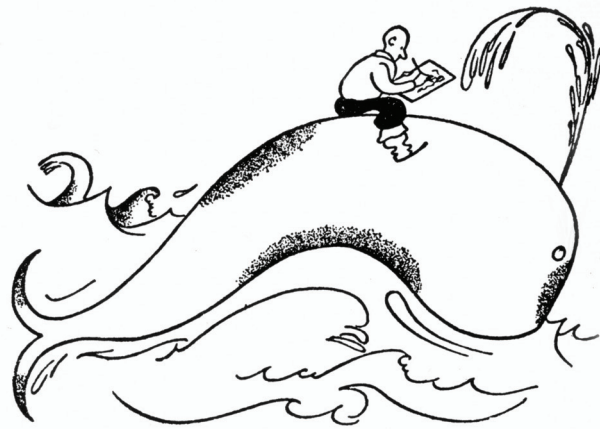


Kent and his second wife, Frances, in Greenland, in 1932.

plight through pantomime and was taken to Narsaq, the nearest settlement. The entire male population of Narsaq seemed to descend upon the fjord, where Allen and Cary were still routing through the wreckage. *Direction* was re-floated and towed to Godthab for repairs. She had suffered severe wounds but was otherwise still sound.

With plans to return the following summer and sail *Direction* to Europe, Allen and Cary departed. Kent, overcome by Greenland's beauty, charmed by the gentle Greenlanders' self-sufficient, communal culture, opted to stay for the summer. "We may come here to spend a year," he told his second wife, Frances, making arrangements to rendezvous with her in Denmark.

Occasionally, Kent accompanied a Danish doctor on her rounds, visiting some of the smaller settlements outside Godthab. Frequently he would go off by himself to capture the spectacular scenery on canvas or burlap. That summer, Kent completed nearly 40 new works. In September, he left Greenland on a steamer bound for Copenhagen. Among the other passengers were Knud Rasmussen, the renowned Arctic explorer who documented Eskimo life and lore, and Peter Freuchen, the burly giant who accompanied Rasmussen on many expeditions and was an accomplished author and anthropologist in his own right. Kent's encounter with this legendary pair rekindled his love for the Icelandic sagas he had read as a youth and deepened his desire to return to Greenland.



In Memoriam—Herman Melville

PERHAPS 1930's outstanding literary event
Was Random House's discovery of that American
classic, *Moby Kent*.

When Random House heralded Kent's illustrations on the front cover of the 1930 trade edition of *Moby Dick*, but omitted Herman Melville's name, humorist Ogden Nash took note.

When he landed in Copenhagen, Frances greeted Kent at the dock. She had brought his research materials for his latest project in progress. Lakeside Press of Chicago had hired Kent to illustrate a limited edition of *Moby Dick*. While in Denmark, Rockwell and Frances stayed with their new friend, Knud Rasmussen, whose home in Hundested sat high upon a bluff overlooking the sea. It was here, in an attic apartment, that Kent completed more than half of his 280 drawings for Melville's magnum opus. Lakeside's deluxe edition, designed entirely by Kent, was lauded as a landmark in 20th-century illustration. Kent's integration of image and text was so stunning that Random House credited Kent on the cover of the trade edition but forgot to include Melville's name. Humorist Ogden Nash took particular note of the oversight: "Perhaps 1930's outstanding literary event was Random House's discovery of that American classic, *Moby Kent*."

Before leaving Denmark, Kent began work on his next commission, 25 full-page illustrations for Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Next came *N x E*, Kent's own account of his ill-fated cruise to Greenland. Critics called *N x E* "one of the finest books of adventure written in our time."

In July of 1931, Rockwell Kent returned to Greenland. His adventurous summer, he wrote, "had filled me with a longing to spend a winter there, to see and experience the far north at its spectacular worst; to know the people

and share their way of life."

Upon the advice of Peter Freuchen, Kent decided to settle on Ubekendt Island, in the village of Illorsuit, 225 miles above the Arctic Circle, at the mouth of Ummannaq Fjord. Illorsuit was then a settlement of fewer than 200 sturdy souls. Today there are less than 90 inhabitants. This was where Kent would spend what he called the happiest and certainly the most productive year of his life.

"For Kent, Greenland represented paradise," says Constance Martin, a fellow at the Arctic Institute of North America at the University of Calgary and curator in 2000-2001 of a well-received retrospective called *Distant Shores: The Odyssey of Rockwell Kent*. "Kent was philosophically a socialist, and the Greenland community was, to him, a utopian model of that kind of life—absolute equality. It's like Gauguin going to the South Pacific. Their way of life was just what he wanted."

With building supplies delivered from Denmark, Kent constructed a one-room house on a hill above the beach. As he looked out over the settlement from his window, he wrote: "Illorsuit is like a stage upon which the epic drama of the lives of the people deploys unendingly. There, seen in sunlight and shadow, rain and snow, wind and calm, the people come out of their houses and perform their parts."

Rockwell Kent's efforts to find his own role in this daily pageant were



Early November: North Greenland, 1932.

In 1960 Kent donated 800 drawings and 80 paintings to the Soviet Union.

aided by the arrival of Salamina, a young widow who became his housekeeper, and soon, his concubine. Salamina was a watchful mistress, but her attempts to curtail Kent's tomcat tendencies were futile. In Greenland, what Kent called his "cursed libido" was much less of a liability. "What we stigmatize as fornication and adultery is, with them, a natural pastime, spiced by being slightly wicked."

In mid-November, the sun disappeared over the distant peaks for its two-month southern sojourn, leaving behind a world of shadow and twilight. Forced to work indoors by the lack of light, Kent labored over scores of sketches for lithographs on stone and created many of his most accomplished watercolors.

Having purchased his own dogs and sledge, Kent honed his driving skills during the long darkness. When the sun reappeared, Rockwell was ready to return to al fresco oil painting and roam over the frozen, snow-covered sea. In his written account of his utopian year in Illorsuit, he reflected: "The beauty of those northern winter days is more remote and passionless, more nearly absolute than any other beauty I know. Blue sky, white world, and the golden light of the sun to turn the whiteness to the sun-illuminated blue."

Throughout the winter Rockwell wrote numerous letters to his wife imploring her to join him. He finally prevailed and Frances arrived on the first spring steamer from Copenhagen. Salamina, supplanted by Frances, accepted her demotion gracefully and moved in with neighbors. Frances was cheerfully tolerant of Salamina, but was becoming frequently dismayed by her husband's promiscuity, a behavior he rarely tried to conceal.

ROCKWELL WAS REVERED BY THE SWEET-TEMPERED Greenlanders whom he called, "the most friendly, loving, kind, and filthy-dirty people in the world." He taught them carpentry skills, celebrated their birthdays and lent them money he knew they would never repay. His greatest gift to the people of Illorsuit was a dance hall that he built with their help. Kent's 50th birthday occurred during the construction. The dance floor, which had not yet been installed, served as a platform where the party was held.

The party was interrupted by the appearance of a seaplane circling the fjord. A motion picture crew had come from Germany to shoot an adventure film called *S.O.S. Eisberg*. Illorsuit's long, sandy beach would serve as a base for their stunt planes.

Some members of the cast and crew drank heavily and engaged in quarrels and fistfights that shocked the gentle Greenlanders. The leading lady was said to have had so many male visitors to her tent, the Greenlanders nicknamed



A slight variation of this photo of Kent, Salamina and an Illorsuit neighbor was used in a 1934 General Electric ad that read: "Rockwell Kent with the Eskimos in Greenland hears the tango played in distant Argentina."

her "The Mattress." The actress was Leni Riefensthal, who had already had her first meeting with Hitler and would soon become infamous as the Fuehrer's filmmaker.

When September came, it was time for Kent and Frances to leave Illorsuit. As the people gathered on the wharf to say goodbye, they began to sing a hymn. "It was the last touch of beauty to make our sadness complete," he wrote. "A crowd followed on the shore as we sailed off. They climbed the harbor hill, waving flags and handkerchiefs and firing guns. Farewell, Illorsuit, as though to life."

Upon his return, Kent, having lost a \$50,000 nest egg in the stock market, set out on a 44-city speaking tour. His presentations on art and adventure kept him away from Frances for most of the next six months. Kent wanted desperately to return to the land of icebergs and Eskimos he had been praising at luncheons and in lecture halls. In 1934, after several sponsorship schemes failed, he mortgaged Asgaard, his Adirondack refuge, to finance the trip.

The residents of Illorsuit rejoiced at Rockwell's return. Salamina was restored to her exalted status as housekeeper and companion. Accompanying Kent was his 14-year-old son, Gordon, the youngest of five children from his first marriage. While Kent labored in seclusion over a book about his previous trip to Greenland, Gordon was apprenticed to some of the local hunters. "Gordon's coming here," Kent wrote, "has been a great success. He has become a man in self-dependence and resolution. He works all the time,



HERMITAGE MUSEUM, ST. PETERSBURG, RUSSIA

Greenland Tryst, 1932-33.



L'VIV NATIONAL ART GALLERY, UKRAINE

West Greenland, 1929.



HERMITAGE MUSEUM, ST. PETERSBURG, RUSSIA

Seal Hunter, North Greenland, painted by Kent in 1935-37.



PRIVATE COLLECTION

Greenland Winter, 1934-35.



The Artist in Greenland, 1960.

hunting seal, just like the native hunters.”

Though Gordon roamed far beyond the fjord, Kent stayed close to the settlement, often working 12 hours a day on his illustrated manuscript. For five months his letters to Frances had gone unanswered. When word finally came, Kent was thunderstruck. Frances preferred Arizona over the Arctic. She was wintering in Tucson and informed her husband that she would not be joining him as agreed. Bitterly, Kent concluded that his plan to spend another year in Greenland was no longer practical. He and Gordon left on the first spring steamer bound for Denmark, never to return.

October of 1935 brought the publication of *Salamina*, Kent’s book about

his time in Illorsuit in 1931-32. *Salamina* was widely praised and reviewed. Dedicated to Frances, but named for his mistress, *Salamina* also contained candid descriptions of Kent’s encounters with other native women. Such racy revelations prompted a number of cartoons in national publications. *The New Yorker* acknowledged Kent’s amorous adventures with a drawing of three Eskimo women wanting to know, “Can Rockwell come out, Mrs. Kent?”

Such very public disclosures did nothing to help Kent’s marriage, which ended in 1940. That same year, he married Shirley Johnstone, 32 years his junior.

Kent continued to lead an extraordinary life, immersing himself in a myriad of liberal causes. He would become president of the International Workers Order, go head to head with Senator Joseph McCarthy and win the Lenin Peace Prize.

Once known as the stormy petrel of American art, Rockwell Kent became far better known for his politics than his palette. He would continue to paint for many years, but these works accumulated in his studio, unseen, unsold. In 1960 Kent donated 800 drawings and 80 paintings to the Soviet Union, hoping that his gesture would “help a little toward world peace.” Of the 80 paintings gifted to the Soviets, nearly half were depictions of Greenland.

That same year, Kent went to his studio and made a copy of a canvas he had painted in the 1930s, of a turquoise-tinged berg trapped in the Arctic sea ice. He wrote to a friend that this new version was virtually undetectable from the original, except for one addition.

Kent, age 78, painted his younger, vigorous self in the foreground working on a large canvas attached to the stanchions of his sledge, his dogs resting close by. Now in the collection of the Baltimore Museum of Art, *The Artist In Greenland* was perhaps Kent’s way of returning, just for a few moments, to his beloved true north.

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