

# InfoNorth

## Rockwell Kent's Distant Shores: The Story of an Exhibition

by Constance Martin

ROCKWELL KENT'S (1882–1971) title for his 617-page autobiography, *It's Me, O Lord* (1955) is from a spiritual:

It's me, it's me, it's me, O Lord,  
Standin' in the need of prayer

It suggests a sense of humility rarely if ever evident in Kent's typically egocentric conduct and grandiloquent published prose.

What is certain is that he was an artist of extraordinary drive, talent, and versatility, who embraced life with exuberance. Painter, printmaker, illustrator, and architect; a designer of books, ceramics, and textiles, and a prolific writer, he was complex and self-contradictory. He loved the wilderness, but enjoyed and moved easily in urban society. Three times married (and sexually promiscuous), he had five legitimate children by his first wife and one by a mistress. He was deeply spiritual, but indifferent to the dogmas of established religions: an anti-authoritarian individualist and a lifelong socialist. Uncowed, but furious, when Senator Joseph McCarthy accused him of being a Communist sympathizer, he conducted his life by his own light.

More perhaps than anything else, he was a modern Ulysses, romantic at times and ruthless at others. His major art was inspired by his extended sojourns in remote, sparsely inhabited, and climatically harsh regions, most of them islands, to which his imagination may well have been drawn by their mythic association with the mystical and the marvelous (Polk, 1991). It seemed to him, too, that their remoteness from the world of cities and commerce would allow him to be as he wished and to discover his own artistic vision. He wrote, with typical grandiloquence,

The wilderness is kindled into life by man's beholding of it; he is its consciousness, his coming is its dawn. Surely the passion of his first discovery carries the warmth and the caress of a sunrise on the chaos of creation. (Kent, 1924:24)

In the summer of 1905, when he was 23, he first went to Monhegan, an isolated island 10 miles off the coast of Maine, which had a summer art colony and a small population of resident fishermen. He was to return for extended



*Moby Dick Rises*, by Rockwell Kent. Chapter 41, *Moby Dick* (1930). Reprinted with permission from R.R. Donnelley & Sons Company, Lakeside Press.

visits many times in his life. From 1914, shortly before the outbreak of World War I, until 1915, he and his wife, Kathleen, with their children, lived on the Island of Newfoundland. Then, in 1918, with his nine-year-old son, he spent eight months on Fox Island, Alaska, 12 miles off the coast from Seward, the nearest mainland town. In 1922, he sailed to the Isla Grande de Tierra del Fuego, hoping to sail from there around Cape Horn. The final stage in his odyssey took him to Greenland, first in 1929, and again in 1931 and 1934–35, where he lived on the tiny island of Igdlorsuit.



*Ahab*, by Rockwell Kent. Frontispiece, *Moby Dick* (1930). Reprinted with permission from R.R. Donnelley & Sons Company, Lakeside Press.

Kent's travels to these far-flung regions, which were in large part journeys of self-discovery, inspired much of his finest work and provided the chronological and geographical structure for the exhibition, *Distant Shores: The Odyssey of Rockwell Kent*. The show was organized by the Norman Rockwell Museum in Massachusetts, with me as a guest curator.

My involvement in *Distant Shores* came about through a series of coincidental connections and surprises. A visit in the summer of 1995 to the museum brought to my mind the stunning power of Norman Rockwell's semi-namesake and fellow illustrator, Rockwell Kent, best known for his illustrations of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, the 19th-century whaling saga set in the polar seas. My thoughts turned to Kent's depiction of icebergs and high seas as an antidote to a hot summer day. This led to a discussion with the museum's director about a possible exhibition of Kent's art. Soon we were both filled with the kind of enthusiasm that happens only when the pieces of a puzzle fit perfectly. Melville's house, where he created the American classic, was only a few miles away. Kent, like his contemporary Norman Rockwell, had lived in the area. He had married

into a local family and painted many paintings of the surrounding country. Once I perceived the extent of Kent's passion for the polar regions, I asked to be the curator.

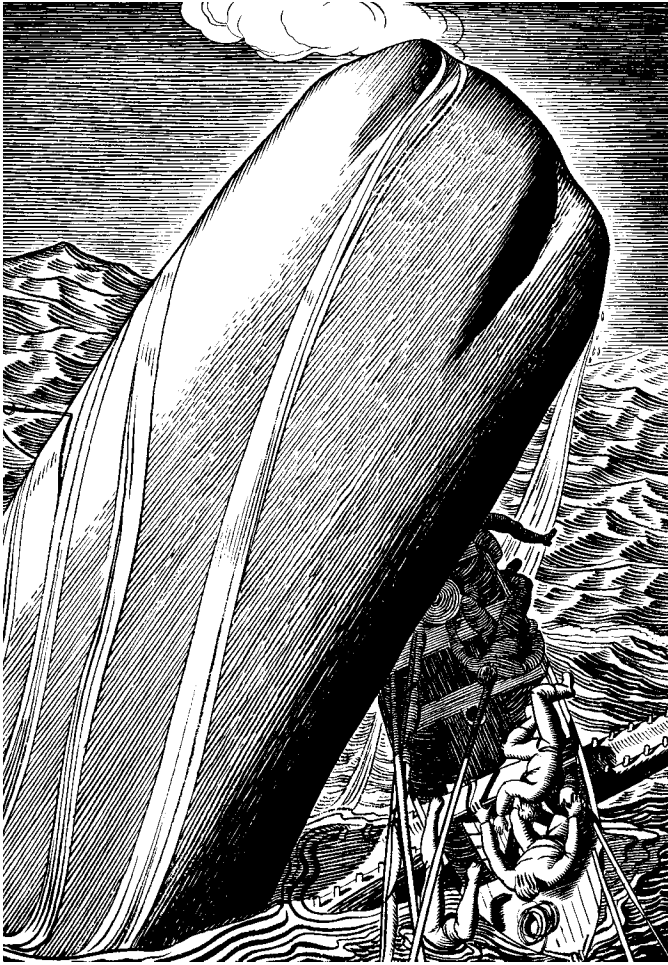
After five years of research and travel, I had tracked down over 100 works from private and public collections in many areas of the United States as far away as Alaska, as well as in eastern and western Canada and Russia. *Distant Shores* opened in June of 2000 and traveled from New England to Ocala, Florida, Chicago, and Anchorage.

The most complicated negotiations involved the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg. Senator Joseph McCarthy, in an attempt to label Kent a Communist, took away his passport and ordered all his illustrated books in overseas government libraries removed and burned (West, 2000). In retaliation, Kent gave the Soviet Union a major selection of his paintings, watercolours, and drawings in the 1960s. Since then, many attempts to bring these works back to the United States for exhibition had failed. With the support and foresight of the Norman Rockwell Museum, I was able to visit the Hermitage collection and make a groundbreaking arrangement for the inclusion of seven Greenland and Tierra del Fuego paintings. The accompanying book for *Distant Shores* was published by the University of California, Berkeley. In December 2001, the *Los Angeles Times* listed it as one of the best art books of the year.

Aesthetically, Kent had much in common with such 19th-century painters of the Arctic as Frederick E. Church and William Bradford, both of whom traveled to the Far North in search of those bleakly alien yet sublime landscapes described in the published narratives concerning the search for the Northwest Passage. For Kent, well versed in exploration literature, but not an armchair explorer, the lure of remote places was a search for spiritual fulfillment through his art, which found its inspiration in adventure, physical risk, and solitude.

Kent began formal art studies at the age of ten, eventually studying at the New York School of Art. Encouraged by his parents to take up a profession, he first enrolled in architecture at Columbia University and excelled in drafting, a skill requiring a precision that was to influence his later style. Before finishing a degree, he left Columbia to study art full-time. Important to his intellectual growth was the guidance of the artist Abbott Henderson Thayer (1849–1921), who was committed to the American transcendentalists, particularly Ralph Waldo Emerson (Traxel, 1980). Thayer also stimulated Kent's interest in the Far North by introducing him to the Icelandic sagas. Heroic feats during Kent's youth, such as Roald Amundsen's successful transit through the Northwest Passage in 1906 and Robert Edwin Peary's race to the North Pole in 1909, also aroused his interest. Later friendships with prominent Arctic explorers such as Knud Rasmussen, Peter Freuchen, and Vilhjalmur Stefansson were to further enrich his knowledge of the Arctic.

But it was Robert Henri, the charismatic head of the New York School of Art, who started Kent on his odyssey.



*Whaling Scene*, by Rockwell Kent. Chapter 56, *Moby Dick* (1930). Reprinted with permission from R.R. Donnelley & Sons Company, Lakeside Press.

In 1905, Henri encouraged his restless and talented student to visit the summer art colony on Monhegan Island, Maine, telling him of “such cliffs and pounding seas, as made me long to go there” (Kent, 1955:116). When Kent arrived on Monhegan, he was captivated, not so much by the art colony as by the island’s unspoiled wildness and the resident community of lobster fishermen.

Responding to the rural beauty of the place, Kent decided to stay on through the winter and become part of island life. He learned the skills of the lobster fishermen and experienced the darkness and biting cold of winter mornings. He relished the rugged terrain of the island and the isolation and solitude that, as he was discovering, his nature required. Here there seemed to be time for everything:

Between and after days of work with maul and drill, with hammer and nails or at the oars, on days it blew too hard at sea, on Sundays, I was painting: painting with a fervor born...of my close contact with the sea and soil, and deepened by the reverence that the whole universe imposed. (Kent, 1955:137)

By the spring of 1907, Kent was able to exhibit 14 of his Monhegan paintings in New York. The *New York Sun*’s art critic wrote that Kent

...knocks you off your pins with these broad, realistic, powerful representations of weltering seas, men laboring in boats, rude rocky headland and snowbound landscapes... . The paint is laid on by an athlete of the brush....(Kent, 1955:147)

Although the show was a critical success, it would be many years before Kent sold a painting.

The life of Monhegan was an ideal Kent was to seek forever. Unfortunately, after he was married to his first wife, Kathleen, marital problems associated with a Monhegan girl from the past came to haunt him. In the interest of his family, he turned his eyes for the time away from Monhegan and to the North. Kent wrote:

If minds can become magnetized, mine was: its compass pointed north...I set out for the golden North, for Newfoundland, to prospect for a homestead. (Kent, 1955:204)

In 1914, Kent settled with his wife and children in Brigus, Newfoundland, a once-thriving seaport village. Here he hoped to found an art school. All went well at first; the community welcomed him, and the family reveled in the apparent freedom of their newfound Garden of Eden.

Matters began to turn when Kent, who had been to Germany in his youth and loved German music and songs, would traipse the hills singing them, with easel and paints under his arm. He made no effort to hide his admiration for German culture from the locals, whose anti-German sentiment was rising as World War I approached. As a result, many people, concluding that he might be a spy, prevailed on the government to exile him from the community. Some of the inhabitants remained friends throughout the crisis, including two members of the Bartlett family active in Arctic expeditions (Kent, 1955). They were sufficiently appalled at what was happening to appeal to the government to reverse the decision, but it was too late, and the Kents returned to New York with three sick children and an infant, on a ticket paid for by Kent’s mother (Kelly, 1987).

Several of Kent’s Newfoundland paintings reflect the frustration and humiliation he and his wife Kathleen lived through as a result of the experience. *The House of Dread* (Martin, 2000:64–65), a powerful composition reminiscent of the maritime paintings of Lawren Harris (1885–1970) (Larisey, 1993), shows a bleak house on the right with a woman leaning or falling from a second-story window and a man below with head bowed against the wall. Kent (1955:260) wrote: “It is ourselves in Newfoundland, our hidden but prevailing misery revealed.”

The suffering inspired some of Kent’s most moving art and a surprising response many years later. In the 1960s, Joey Smallwood, then premier of Newfoundland,

certainly one of Canada's most vibrant personalities and a great admirer of Rockwell Kent, came across Kent's government file. The premier was shocked and horrified. Deciding to rectify the stupidity of the community's provincialism, Smallwood invited Kent back for a public apology and a week of festivities. So 53 years later, Kent returned with his third wife, Sally. At a luncheon for over 200 guests, the premier and Kent regaled their audience with the story of "Newfoundland's Famous Spy." In appreciation, Kent wrote a charming book (*After Long Years*, 1968) enhanced by drawings from his time in Brigus and dedicated to Joseph Smallwood.

Monhegan and Newfoundland confirmed Kent's love of the North:

I crave snow-topped mountains, dreary wastes, and the cruel Northern sea with its hard horizons at the edge of the world where infinite space begins. Here skies are clearer and deeper and, for the greater wonders they reveal, a thousand times more eloquent of the eternal mystery than those of softer lands. (Kent, 1996a:xxviii)

In 1918, Kent again turned his back on the commercial art world. With a free passage aboard the S.S. *Admiral Schley*, he sailed to Alaska, accompanied by his nine-year-old son, Rockwell Jr., arriving in Seward in August. Kent, always resourceful, made friends with an aging trapper named Olson, who persuaded the artist and his young son to come to his home on tiny Fox Island, 12 miles below Seward in Resurrection Bay. Here life was reduced to the elemental, and father and son began a nine-month adventure that surpassed the most vivid of childhood dreams. "It's a fine life," wrote Kent in a letter, "and more and more I realize that for me at least such isolation...is the only right life for me" (Kent, 1996a:106).

Isolation, however, is a two-edged sword. At one time he writes, "I have terrible moments" (Kent, 1996a:xii), and at another, he explains his ambivalence:

There is discomfort, even misery in being cold. The gloom of the long and lonely winter nights is appalling and yet do you know I love this misery and court it. (Kent, 1996a:xxviii)

On the more positive side, he found plenty of time for painting, study, and reflection as he immersed himself in the literature of such thinkers as William Blake and Friedrich Nietzsche, seeing himself as a modern superman. Surrounded by the natural forms of trees, the sea, the sun, and the northern light, Kent composed pictures that, like those in Newfoundland, projected an iconography both personal and Christian. Many of the paintings of this period again recall Kent's friend, theosophist Lawren Harris. Though it has yet to be established when Kent and Harris first met, the connection is confirmed by the fact that Harris owned prints of Kent's Alaskan paintings (Larisey, 1993:30). The Alaskan sojourn was a turning point in Kent's career. His

reputation was established by the success of the subsequent gallery showing of his paintings and by the publication in 1920 of his book *Wilderness: A Journal of Quiet Adventure in Alaska*, based on his diaries and letters and illustrated with his drawings.

Back in New York in 1919, Kent was unable to settle down. By 1922, hoping to escape once again from personal problems, his familiarity with Baron George Anson's voyage around the Horn in the 1740s (Martin, 2000:30) impulsively led him to follow in Anson's footsteps and book passage to Tierra del Fuego. Rationalizing his decision, he wrote:

Forever shall man seek the solitudes, and the most utter desolation of the wilderness to achieve through hardship the rebirth of his pride. [The place to which he was going seemed to offer the]...spirit-stirring glamour of the terrible. (Kent, 1924:2)

Once again leaving his wife and children in May 1922, Kent sailed to the Straits of Magellan aboard the S.S. *Curaca*, landing at Punta Arenas six weeks later. This adventure Kent recorded in his illustrated *Voyaging: Southward from the Strait of Magellan* (1924). A wood engraving also entitled *Voyaging*, which he did for a deluxe edition of the book, is a self-portrait, commemorating Kent's extraordinary hike over the Brecknock Pass below Admiralty Sound to Ushuaia, the southernmost town in the world (Martin, 2000:30). The engraving portrays an idealized, muscular Kent, a dignified figure of Olympian size gazing toward the viewer from the summit, with a forested valley and snowcapped mountains in the background. Kent and his companions did try to sail around the Horn in a converted lifeboat, but fog, cold, and a perpetual gale forced them to turn back, lucky to be alive. When Kent returned home, his long-suffering wife, Kathleen, hoped that he had completed the last of his therapeutic voyages. She was wrong: other adventures were to follow. The couple divorced in 1925, and the following year Kent married Frances Lee, a beautiful and intelligent woman in her twenties, who devoted her time to editing his writings and managing his complicated career.

Kent's expenses were now considerable. To support his divorced wife and children, he needed to accept commercial assignments, which, for an artist of his reputation, were not hard to come by. He was approached in 1926 by R.R. Donnelley & Sons, the large Chicago press, to illustrate an American classic for their elegantly designed Lakeside Series. Kent chose Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, first published in 1851, which the reading public for a good many years had largely ignored. It was to be one of the most successful projects of his career. The book and Kent were well matched, Ahab's obsessive quest for the Great White Whale harmonizing with Kent's equally obsessive search across thousands of miles of ocean for self-fulfillment. Four years of research prepared Kent well for the task. He read much of the literature on whaling,

including in all probability William Scoresby's *Account of the Arctic Regions and of the Whale Fishery* (1820), cited by Melville in *Moby Dick* and often mentioned to this day as "a classic of whaling literature" (Martin, 1988:40).

Donnelley's enthusiasm for the first group of drawings that Kent submitted was immense:

These drawings have excited the greatest interest and approval of every one who has seen them here. They exceed our highest expectation of how you would do this work. As works of art, reflecting the spirit of Melville's book, they could not be finer... The work has our utmost devotion and its successful accomplishment is our most important objective. (Badaracco, 1992:37)

Perhaps thinking (like Melville) that meditation and water are wedded forever, Kent succumbed to temptation before he had completed more than half the drawings. In 1929, he accepted an invitation to help crew a small sailing boat to Greenland, a journey that he and his two young companions barely survived when they were shipwrecked in Karajak Fiord on the island's west coast. Just as Kent had found his way over the Brecknock Pass in Argentina (Martin, 2000), summoning Herculean deliberation, he managed their rescue by climbing alone for three days over rivers, mountains, and boggy plains until he regained the sea and was rescued by a lone Greenlander in a kayak. The Greenlander guided him to a settlement where he obtained help for his shipwrecked crew. It was just the kind of introduction to a new place that Kent thrived on. He fell in love with Greenland and spent the summer painting and making many friends. Like Gauguin in the South Seas, Kent in the frozen North found an indigenous people, warm and sensuous, whose community he wished to be a part of. The Greenlanders' way of life, isolated from the conventions of Western society, self-contained and self-sufficient, totally charmed him. He recorded the time in his book *N by E* (1996b). During the same summer, he also met two distinguished Arctic ethnographers, Peter Freuchen and Knud Rasmussen, who would encourage him to make his two subsequent trips to Greenland. At the end of the summer, he accepted their invitation to return with them to Denmark where, joined by his wife Frances, he completed the *Moby Dick* illustrations.

Published in 1930, Donnelly's deluxe edition sold out rapidly, and a less expensive edition contracted to Random House and containing 270 of the original 280 illustrations appeared the same year. The extent of its popularity can be gauged by its choice as a Book-of-the-Month Club selection and by Robert Frost's tribute to Kent's artistry nearly 20 years later. In Frost's dramatic poem *A Masque of Mercy*, the 'Bookseller' says to a potential customer who has asked about a whaling story, "Oh, you mean *Moby Dick*/By Rockwell Kent that everybody's reading" (Frost, 1947:4). Melville's death in 1891 had passed almost unnoticed. It might be said, without too much exaggeration, that Rockwell Kent brought him back to life.

The Donnelley edition of *Moby Dick* has been lauded for its integration of text and story and for its energy and suggestive power as a masterpiece of 20th-century book illustration.

Kent's identification with Melville's story jumps from the page, as in *Moby Dick Rises*, where the white whale, seen above and below the surface piercing the heavenly, starlit sky, seems indeed a force to strike terror in the heart of Ahab himself. One finds in many of the *Moby Dick* illustrations connections with the imagery from Kent's earlier adventures, such as the sailing adventure in *N by E* and his time on Monhegan Island.

On the advice of Peter Freuchen, Kent returned to the west coast of Greenland in 1931, settling on the island of Igdlorsuit, about 360 kilometres north of the Arctic Circle. Knud Rasmussen arranged for Kent to have at his disposal a team of eight dogs. Salamina, the lovely Greenland girl he was to paint and write two books about, *Salamina* (1935) and *Greenland Journal* (1962), came to live with him. Later in the year, Frances joined him. In 1934, on his third and last visit, Kent was accompanied by his 14-year-old son Gordon, who today lives in upstate New York and takes an active interest in promoting his late father's art.

In the early 1930s, Kent met the eminent Arctic explorer and writer Vilhjalmur Stefansson (1879–1962), and the two became close friends. In the 1940s, Stefansson asked Kent to contribute text and illustrations to his *Encyclopedia Arctica*, an ambitious 17-volume work funded by the U.S. Government. Describing the project, Stefansson (1948:45) wrote, "Rockwell Kent, our contributor on the scenic qualities of arctic lands, is foremost of all artists who have ever spent whole years at a time in the Arctic." As to whether the *Encyclopedia* should include colour plates, he declared:

There is a commercial argument for it, since the pictures of artists like Rockwell Kent, who is doing the papers on Greenland and Alaska scenery, will add considerably to sales volume. (Stefansson, 1948:46)

Shockingly, though the writing of this monumental project was near completion, Senator McCarthy, under the guise of saving the world from Communism, suppressed its publication. It now exists in typescript, in a few libraries, including that of the University of Calgary, and on microfilm.

Of all the stages in Kent's odyssey, Greenland was his favorite and gave rise to the largest body of work. Greenland is the subject of a major portion of the more than 80 paintings that Kent gave to Russia. These "...paintings of Greenland have become documents of a culture now lost to advanced technology" (Ferris and Pearce, 1998:88). For the rest of his life until his death, Kent continued to paint and repaint many of the pictures of this beautiful land. It was for Kent an island of magic in which, by disclosing its secrets, he found happiness:

How rich in everything was Greenland! Whether I sought the wilderness to find in mountain forms the substantive of abstract beauty or to renew through solitude the consciousness of being; or whether, terrified by both, I turned gregarious and needed love or friendship or to rub shoulders in a Greenland dance—all everything was there. And no more complete with majesty were the mountains, nor limitless the ocean, than human kind seemed what it ought to be. (Kent, 1996b:226)

All day intermittently the snow has been gently falling—floating downward, it seemed to lay itself most gently over all the world.... Whiter than snow appear the moonlit mountains; and the shadows are luminous with the reflected light of the white universe...young people...begin to sing.... And their voices heard in harmony are as beautiful as the night itself, and like the moonlight, clear and sweet. (Johnson, 1976:171)

Kent's artistic imagination was both visual and literary. It was the literary, however, that first drew Kent to the Far North and the polar seas. His early reading of Icelandic sagas and his study of the exploration narratives of the various searches for the Northwest Passage provided Kent with the stimulus to experience for himself "...the Far North at its spectacular worst" (Kent, 1955:452). The power of his illustrations for *Moby Dick* comes from both his incisive literary perception of Melville's great novel and his own firsthand encounters with the polar seas.

*Distant Shores* was an exhibition designed to show the art that Kent created in paintings, engravings, and books out of his response to the Far North, the polar seas, and the wilderness that he himself confronted. These works reflect his deep belief that his art and his life were one and the same.

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