

ROCKWELL KENT

1872 - 1971

Commemorative Essay by Lily Sands, Tarrytown

Sleepy Hollow High School, May 23, 2012



Lily Sands is a sophomore at Sleepy Hollow High School. She is fifteen and has been a Tarrytown resident since 4th grade. Lily plays three instruments and participates in varsity sports year round. She is a High Honor Roll student and a journalist for the schools newspaper, Hoof Prints. Lily is very excited to have won the Tarrytown and Sleepy Hollow Hall of Fame essay competition, and would like to thank her family and teachers for their support.

Rockwell Kent

1872-1971



Raised in Tarrytown, Rockwell Kent went on to become one of America's most symbolic artists. While his bold and dramatic landscapes illustrate the stark beauty of the natural world, his depictions of human exhortations, including a wood-cut of a man both suffering and exultant from his arduous life with the sea, portray a straightforward but deep understanding of the human soul. A self-proclaimed socialist, he was rejected by many during the McCarthy era, and his talent went unappreciated. However, today he is widely recognized as one of America's premier artists. His work graces The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Chicago Art Institute, the Whitney Museum of Art, and our very own Warner Library.

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As I did my research for this essay, I spent many hours not only pursuing old articles about Rockwell Kent, but also reading some of the biographies of other inductees to the Hall of Fame. As I read essay after essay, it seemed as if every nominee had built a church or a road in Tarrytown, or had donated to a school or founded a hospital. Rockwell Kent did none of these things. He was not born in Tarrytown, and he did not die here. Although he grew up in a house that still stands on Wilson Park Drive, he left the area right after high school and only came back for occasional family visits. Even though he designed a bookplate for the Warner Library, he never devoted his time or energy towards improving the local community.

Why then, one might ask, should he even be considered for our Hall of Fame? A nonconformist as well as a genius, Kent stands out as one of the greatest artists in American history. His controversial views on politics caused many to spurn him, despite his undeniable artistic talent. Nevertheless, he stayed true to his beliefs, and his individuality revealed itself through his powerful works of art. Eventually America was forced to recognize his brilliance, and today he is a renowned artist throughout the United States and the world. I am proud to come from the same town as such an extraordinary man as Kent, and I hope that, although he was not properly appreciated during his lifetime, he will be remembered and honored forever in the Tarrytown-Sleepy Hollow Hall of Fame. By honoring him in this way and underscoring his open views, I hope that every resident of our two towns will open their own minds just a little bit, as well.

Kent was born in Pocantico Hills in 1882, to Rockwell Kent Sr., a young lawyer, and Sara Ann Holgate. The family moved to Tarrytown shortly thereafter, and the Kents lived comfortably until Rockwell, Sr. died of typhoid and left Sara, young Rockwell, and his siblings in poverty. Kent grew up poor, yet lived within a wealthy neighborhood, and on several occasions he clashed with Tarrytown's preeminent families, including the Rockefellers. These

encounters may have influenced his leftist leanings later in life.

Kent was educated at Horace Mann High School and Columbia University, where he first studied architecture, and then began his artistic career under the guidance of several masters. Kent spent his first six post-college years on Monhegan Island, Maine, a remote and very artistic colony about fifteen miles off of Boothbay Harbor. He then traveled extensively throughout Alaska, Greenland, Newfoundland and Tierra del Feugo.

Many of his best works are landscapes which illustrate the harsh and majestic splendor of glaciers, mountains, cliffs, and sea, and several of his memoirs recall thrilling tales of foreign adventure and rugged survival. His woodblock prints depict an austere beauty that he saw in the human soul that is surprisingly similar to the beauty he saw in the wilderness at the ends of the earth. Despite an adventurous nature, Kent also had his more conventional side. He was a distinguished illustrator of his time, bringing to life many famous books, including Moby Dick and The Canterbury Tales.

Although Kent gained popularity during his early career (Kent was the youngest artist to have his work featured in the Met), his espousal of socialist ideas in his middle years distanced him from his peers. During the McCarthy Era he was brought before the House Un-American Activities Committee, and at one point had his passport revoked. Alas, his masterly yet controversial public murals were plastered over, and art dealers rejected his work. After being unable to gain support in America, Kent eventually donated hundreds of his works to the Soviet Union, where he won the Lenin Peace Prize in 1967. During a highly politically charged era, it was as if Kent was driven from his own country.

Although my life is only loosely connected to Kent's through Tarrytown (his "Auntie Joe" built the house right next to mine), I have long known his name. My family has owned a cottage on Monhegan Island since the same time that Kent lived and worked there. Not only have I viewed his work in the small island museum, I have seen his name signed in one of the old, dusty guest books that sit in a chest in the house.

When I began this project, I asked my grandmother if her great aunt, the original owner of our cottage, had told her anything about Kent. My grandmother responded that yes, Kent had been part of a group of young artistic friends that included my great-great-aunt. She told me stories about parties and practical jokes, and I imagined Kent and my own ancestor playing shuffleboard on the kitchen floor of our house, and painting the sea and the sunsets from the back porch. But then she shared with me that, after Kent had become more open about his socialist opinions, my aunt's tightly-knit Monhegan crowd turned their backs on their old friend. My grandmother's words were confirmed in Kent's autobiography, It's Me Oh Lord, in which he said that when he returned to Monhegan later in life, after WWII, he and his wife were treated with disdain.

I was incredibly sad to hear that even open-minded people of that time, including my own great-great-aunt, would ignore a long-standing friendship and judge people based on labels placed on them by society. Although Kent was widely ostracized during his life, he remained true to his values, and continued doing what he was best at--making awe-inspiring depictions of the world and the human spirit. Rockwell Kent is one of the most interesting and inspiring people to have ever graced our town. His talent deserves to be remembered for posterity, not only by the world as a whole, but by the people of the town that raised him. Likewise his story should not go untold, because it is a true reminder that sometimes we all need an open mind to recognize and appreciate the best aspects of those around us.

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