

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART



ROCKWELL  
KENT  
BY NIGHT

COLLECTION IN CONTEXT

June 13–September 14, 1997

Rockwell Kent was an American of great talents—painter, printmaker, illustrator, architectural draftsman, explorer, author, and political activist. He was a man of intense passions and deeply felt beliefs. In 1932, the critic Henry McBride noted that “the only American artist that I can think of who sallies forth conqueringly into drawing room or wilderness is Rockwell Kent.”<sup>1</sup> Kent was equally at home in the artistic milieu of New York, among the fishermen of Monhegan Island or the inhabitants of Arctic Greenland, and on the Alaskan frontier. He was sympathetic to both the ardent discursive politics of intellectuals and the practical socialism of workers. Above all, Kent “believe[d] in Man as the supreme consciousness; and in the arts as the supreme expression of his [Man’s] spirit.”<sup>2</sup>

“Rockwell Kent by Night” acknowledges Kent’s relationships within the artistic milieu of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney and the avant-garde artists she supported in the three decades before World War II, Kent’s most productive years as an artist and author. This exhibition also celebrates two important acquisitions by the Museum in 1996: the paintings, drawings, and prints by Kent in the Charles Simon Bequest and the fifteen prints by Kent included in the acquisition of over 330 duplicate prints from the Philadelphia Museum of Art, purchased with the assistance of The Lauder Foundation. Many of the prints in the latter acquisition were formerly owned by Kent’s long-time friend and correspondent, Carl Zigrosser, himself an active supporter of young American artists and a promoter of American printmaking in the 1920s and 1930s through his employment at New York’s Weyhe Gallery. It was Zigrosser who first encouraged Kent to expand the range of his prodigious talents as a draftsman with wood-engraving and lithography.

Kent’s strong attraction to night imagery and his innate feeling for black-and-white—whether in the form of illustration, drawing, or print—can be summarized in his own rapture on the wood-engraving: “How like the night the wood block, coated black! How like a shaft of light the tool that cuts that black—and by its touch illuminates an object hidden there!”<sup>3</sup>

David W. Kiehl  
Curator, Prints

#### NOTES

1. Merle Armitage, *Rockwell Kent* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1932), p. 35.
2. Rockwell Kent, *It’s Me O Lord: The Autobiography of Rockwell Kent* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1955), p. 424.
3. Rockwell Kent, *How I Make a Woodcut* (Pasadena: Esto Publishing Co., 1934), p. 18.

# Rockwell Kent by Night



*Blue Bird, 1919*

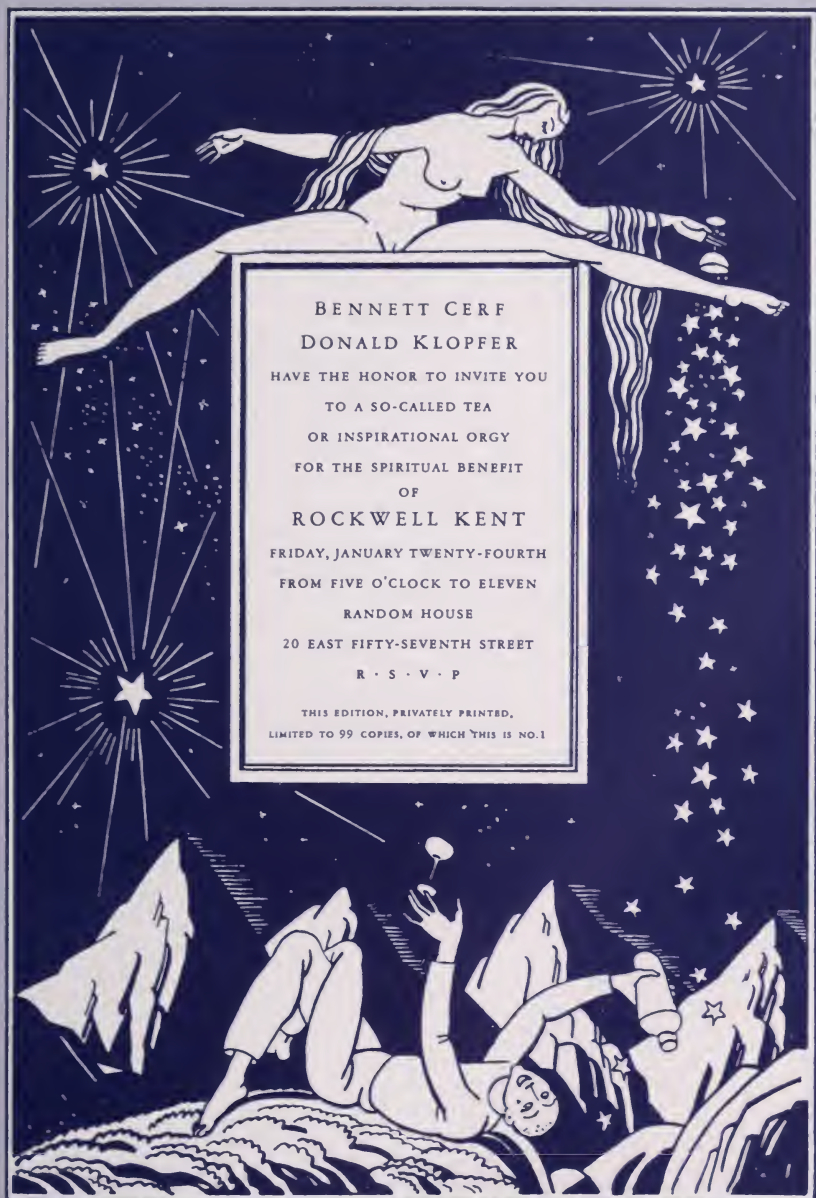
Rockwell Kent's fascination with the night sky prompted some of his most imaginative works and charted one of his more personal themes: the place of humanity in the cosmos. Throughout his life, Kent measured his activities as an artist against his devotion to nature. He subjected himself to some of the coldest and most remote environments on earth; moving to Maine, Newfoundland, and Alaska; voyaging in small boats to Tierra del Fuego and Greenland; and living with native Greenlanders above the Arctic circle. Kent captured these experiences in drawings, paintings, and prints, as well as illustrations for books he wrote and designed himself, producing some of the most authoritative evocations of nature's power in twentieth-century art. Kent's nocturnes are the ultimate extension of his idea of wilderness; they explore his conception of a universe in which natural forces and destiny interact.

In the early years, Kent was particularly concerned with elaborating the pleasures of night, defining it as a time of escape from practical cares. *Nocturnal Dance* (c. 1910-11), which departed from the realist model of Kent's teacher Robert Henri, offers an invented composition of classically dressed revelers, painted in luminous whites and creams, emerging from the darkness of a nocturnal landscape. Precedents for this Arcadian subject matter exist in the work of Arthur B. Davies, whose pastoral landscapes with Grecian friezelike arrangements of dancers are similar in form and spirit to Kent's composition; and Abbott H. Thayer, an established painter whom Kent assisted and whose mystical bent may have nurtured Kent's. The painting is also reminiscent of William Blake's engraved illustration of *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* made a century earlier. (Blake would become a major source of inspiration for Kent over the next few years.)

In other early works, night offers a place of sensual release, as in *The Lovers* (1918) who seem to be bathed in starlight. Celestial energy seems to pulse through the young girl depicted in *Blue Bird* (1919), based on Kent's daughter. She is a bounding beam of light and energy, a match for the stars around her. In *Flame* (1928), a supine male body seems to act as a conduit for the energy passing between heaven and earth.

Celebrating the earthly pleasures of the night, and clearly tweaking prohibition laws, Kent's *Invitation to Tea* (1930) lightheartedly proposes midnight lunacy and the possibility of enjoying more than tea at a party hosted by Bennett Cerf, the founder of Random House and Kent's publisher. More cerebral and fantastic is another work from 1930, Kent's cartoon for the decoration of the Cape Cinema in Dennis, Massachusetts, which became a ceiling mural for one of the more ambitious Art Deco movie palaces of the 1930s.

Kent was an able sailor, and his knowledge of celestial navigation clearly inspired his imaginative entries into the heavenly dominions. In *Godspeed* (1931), an angel benevolently pilots a ship to safety. Returning to this device a year later in *God Bless the Greenlanders*, Kent depicts a guiding angel as a Greenland woman hovering before a celestial orb. The work reflects a real-life experience, a fierce coastal storm during which Kent, in a boat at sea, was endangered. He dedicated the picture to the captain who saved his life. Kent's celestial overseers are equally powerful but far less dependable in *The Birthday Book* (1931). In this cosmic comedy, written, designed, and illustrated by Kent, a good and an evil fairy preside over the birth of a child, and, like puppeteers at cross-purposes, dictate and countermand her fate from the clouds. Destiny was a major concern for Kent throughout his career. In the portfolio *The Seven Ages of Man* (1918), Kent's protagonist passes from a star-spangled infancy, to childhood revelry and adolescent romance, and finally to an



BENNETT CERF  
DONALD KLOPPER

HAVE THE HONOR TO INVITE YOU  
TO A SO-CALLED TEA  
OR INSPIRATIONAL ORGY  
FOR THE SPIRITUAL BENEFIT  
OF  
ROCKWELL KENT

FRIDAY, JANUARY TWENTY-FOURTH  
FROM FIVE O'CLOCK TO ELEVEN  
RANDOM HOUSE  
20 EAST FIFTY-SEVENTH STREET  
R · S · V · P

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*Invitation to Tea*, 1930

early death in the no-man's-land of World War I.

Kent's illustrations for Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1930) were the most important of his career, and a profound elaboration of his views about nature and human destiny. For this landmark edition published by The Lakeside Press, Kent plumbed his own arduous experience at sea, seasoned maturity as an artist, and years of practice as a draftsman, to



*Hail and Farewell*, 1919

create images of great narrative power and spiritual complexity. In his final drawings, he mastered the graphic contrast of black and white to symbolize Melville's theme of dualism in nature. The first of the three volumes opens with the white outline of a man set in a field of darkness. On the title page of volume three, this white outline of a figure seems to fall, like Icarus, from a black sky.' As Kent would later brag: "They considered it the most

beautiful book ever published in America. The only black title pages that every [sic] were...<sup>22</sup> Throughout the book, Kent consistently portrayed the monomaniacal Ahab in shadow, while the white whale is a study in shifting gradations. These visual transformations evoke Melville's questions about the ambiguity of the whale's power and whiteness. Melville notes that at night the whalers are unable to hunt; it is then that they sense the creature's most awesome presence, as it seems to be everywhere and nowhere in the indeterminate darkness. Kent's whales are at their most supernatural by night: in *The Battering Ram*, a sublime beast's plunge sweeps even the stars down into the watery depths. The whale seems equally in tune with the sky and the sea, rising to the heavens in *Night and Stars* (c. 1927-30).

The *Moby Dick* project, realized between 1928 and 1930, synthesized Kent's symbolic and literary approach in drawing and printmaking. Alternating between tones of darkness and light, and laden with symbols of the cosmos, the prints of this period focused on themes of courage and loss at sea. Some of Kent's most powerful wood engravings, made between 1927 and 1932, show night as an infinite space that serves as a backdrop to introspection, if not fear. These visions of vulnerable but steadfast voyagers and anxious, shorebound women seem to expose Kent's most personal musings and prior convictions about men and women in the face of overwhelming natural forces. Though many of these prints were created with programmatic and commercial intentions as illustrations and advertisements, they remain among the artist's most mysterious and dramatic works. In *Hail and Farewell* (1930), a heroically proportioned, nude male figure stands precariously on the rope ladder of a ship, looking back to the receding shoreline. His face masked by the darkness, his hands extended into space, he suggests a daring actor in a darkened natural theater of the sublime.

Kent also used the dangers brought on by the night to respond to events in his life and to current affairs. He painted *House of Dread* (c. 1915) in Newfoundland during World War I. He later wrote that this bleak and lonely scene captured his "mood of despair" at the time.<sup>23</sup> Kent's sympathy for German culture and his strong pacifist beliefs not only caused him to be deeply opposed to the war, but forced him to leave the territory under suspicion of being a German spy. Kent described his work at that time as a "continuous wail of lamentation of man's tragic, solitary lot in the vast and soulless cosmos."<sup>24</sup> This painting of two anguished figures, one in and another near a house at the edge of a seaside cliff, portray, as Kent said, an intensified version of his family's life in Newfoundland at this time: "It is ourselves in Newfoundland, our hidden but prevailing misery revealed."<sup>25</sup> Kent also used darkness as metaphor for the evils of World War II. An angel laments the destruction of war as sparks fly from the bombs below

in *As Angels Weep* (c. 1940). In *Nightmare* (1941), a solitary man, surrounded by a curtain of darkness, convulses with terror as he falls back into an abyss.

Even in paintings made from direct observation, Kent's fascination with the cycles of night and day is apparent. *The Trapper* (1921) depicts a trapper returning with a dead animal in the long shadows of the evening. Despite Kent's pacifist opposition to hunting, the painting seems to acknowledge the temporal structure of life by pairing death with nightfall. Living with Inuit groups in Greenland in the early 1930s intensified Kent's sense of the overpowering forces of nature, but it also stimulated him to glory in the optical effects of polar nights: "Those Arctic nights: how wonderful they were! The frozen sea, the land, the mountain-sides and peaks all white and gleaming in the moonlight or the light of stars and the aurora!"<sup>6</sup> No painting presents these observations more clearly than *North, Greenland*, (c. 1931). In a much later painting of upstate New York, *Moonlight, Winter* (c. 1940), Kent views the outside of his own farmhouse on a peaceful winter night. It is a traditional composition but for the abstracted snowbanks and radiating moonlight. Particular points of light define the volume of the vast darkness, and washes of cool yellows seep into a multi-hued night sky. Making an ordinary night seem extraordinary, Kent evokes a sense of nature's immensity, and a place for human existence within that larger world.

May Castleberry

Librarian and Associate Curator, Special Collections

#### NOTES

1. Elizabeth A. Schultz, *Unpainted to the Last: Moby Dick and Twentieth Century American Art* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1995), p. 31.
2. Rockwell Kent interviewed by Paul Cummings, February 26 and 27, 1969, transcript in the Archives of American Art, p. 20.
3. Rockwell Kent, *It's Me O Lord: The Autobiography of Rockwell Kent* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1955), p. 290.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 289.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 290.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 455-56.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful to the lenders for their generous participation. Our special thanks to Jake Wien for his ready answers to our many questions, and for his extraordinary support of our efforts. Thanks also to Barry Lopez for his thoughtful comments on Kent and the Arctic. We dedicate this exhibition to the memory of Paul Cummings.



## WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

All works listed are by Rockwell Kent (1882-1971). Works are listed in chronological order. Dimensions are in inches followed by centimeters; height precedes width precedes depth.

### PAINTINGS, DRAWINGS, AND PRINTS:

*Nocturnal Dance*, c. 1910-11

Oil on canvas, 22 x 42 1/2 (55.9 x 108)

Baker-Pisano Collection

*House of Dread*, c. 1915

Oil on canvas, 27 3/4 x 37 3/4 (70.5 x 95.9)

Plattsburgh Art Museum, State University of New York; Rockwell Kent Gallery & Collection, Gift of Sally Kent Gorton

*Untitled (Female figure riding a deer through starry heavens)*, c. 1916-17

Graphite and watercolor on paper, 3 1/2 x 3 1/4 (8.9 x 8.3)

The Stanley Collection

*And Women Must Weep*, c. 1917

Ink on paper, 6 x 6 1/4 (15.2 x 15.9)

Philadelphia Museum of Art; Purchased with the Lola Downin Peck Fund, from the Carl and Laura Zigrosser Collection

*The Infant*, from the portfolio *The Seven*

*Ages of Man*, 1918

Linecut: sheet, 4 3/4 x 4 (12.1 x 11);

image, 4 7/16 x 4 5/16 (11.3 x 10.2)

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Juliana Force 31.947.1

*The Lovers*, from the portfolio *The Seven*

*Ages of Man*, 1918

Linecut: sheet, 4 5/8 x 4 3/16 (11.7 x 10.6);

image, 4 7/16 x 3 15/16 (11.3 x 10)

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Juliana Force 31.947.3

*The School Boy*, from the portfolio *The Seven*

*Ages of Man*, 1918

Linecut: sheet, 4 3/4 x 4 1/8 (12.1 x 10.5);

image, 4 1/2 x 3 15/16 (11.4 x 10)

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Juliana Force 31.947.2

*The Soldier*, from the portfolio *The Seven*

*Ages of Man*, 1918

Linecut: sheet, 4 13/16 x 4 3/16 (12.2 x

10.6), image, 4 5/8 x 4 (11.7 x 10.2)

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Juliana Force 31.947.4

*Blue Bird*, from the portfolio *Twelve Prints by Contemporary American Artists*, 1919

Wood engraving: sheet, 14 7/8 x 15 3/8

(37.8 x 34); block, 6 1/16 x 6 1/16

(15.4 x 15.4)

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney 31.694.2

*Old Man amid Waves*, or *Pelagic Reverie*, 1919

Original drawing for *Wilderness*, 1920

Pen and ink over graphite, sheet, 6 7/8 x

8 13/16 (17.5 x 22.4)

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney 31.551

*The Trapper*, 1921

Oil on canvas, 34 x 44 (86.4 x 111.8)

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase 31.258

*Angel*, 1926

Wood engraving: sheet, 5 7/8 x 6 7/8 (14.9 x 17.5); block, 4 7/8 x 6 5/16 (12.4 x 16)

Philadelphia Museum of Art; Purchased with the Lola Downin Peck Fund, from the Carl and Laura Zigrosser Collection

*Masthead*, 1926

Wood engraving: sheet, 11 1/4 x 8 11/16

(28.6 x 22.1); block, 8 x 5 1/2 (20.3 x 14)

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase, with funds from Mr. and Mrs. William A. Marsteller 87.11

*Over the Ultimate*, or *Voyager*, 1926

Wood engraving: sheet 8 11/16 x 11 1/4

(22.1 x 28.6); block, 5 1/2 x 8 (13.97 x 20.3)

Philadelphia Museum of Art; Purchased with the Lola Downin Peck Fund, from the Carl and Laura Zigrosser Collection

*Twilight of Man*, 1926

Wood engraving: sheet, 8 11/16 x

10 15/16 (22.1 x 27.8), block, 5 1/2 x 7

15/16 (14 x 20.2)

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase, with funds from The Lauder Foundation, Leonard and Evelyn Lauder Fund 96.68.170

*Moonshine, Ireland*, 1926-27

Oil on canvas, 34 x 44 (86.4 x 111.8)

Robert Miller Gallery, New York

*Precipice*, 1927

Wood engraving: sheet, 8 3/4 x 6 1/4 (22.2 x 15.9), block, 8 1/8 x 5 5/8 (20.6 x 14.3)

Philadelphia Museum of Art; Purchased with the Lola Downin Peck Fund, from the Carl and Laura Zigrosser Collection

*Final Encounter*, c. 1927-30

Original drawing for *Moby Dick or The Whale*, 1930

Ink over graphite on paper, sheet, 10 7/16 x 7 1/2 (26.5 x 19.1); image, 10 x 7 1/16 (25.4 x 17.9)  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;  
Charles Simon Bequest 96.60.40

*Moby Dick in Full Strength*, c. 1927-30

Preparatory drawing for *Moby Dick or The Whale*, 1930

Ink over graphite on paper, mounted on paperboard, sheet, 7 1/2 x 7 1/4 (19.1 x 18.4); mount, 11 7/8 x 11 1/2 (30.2 x 29.2)  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;  
Charles Simon Bequest 96.60.41

*Night and Stars*, c. 1927-30

Original drawing for *Moby Dick or The Whale*, 1930

Ink over graphite on paper, sheet, 10 7/16 x 9 9/16 (26.5 x 24.3); image, 10 x 7 (25.4 x 9.54)  
Spencer Collection, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations

*Flame*, 1928

Wood engraving: sheet, 11 3/8 x 8 3/4 (29.2 x 22.2); block, 8 1/8 x 5 5/8 (20.6 x 14.3)  
Philadelphia Museum of Art; Purchased with the Lola Downin Peck Fund, from the Carl and Laura Zigrosser Collection

*The Lovers*, 1928

Wood engraving: sheet, 9 x 12 5/16 (22.9 x 32.9); block, 6 1/2 x 10 1/16 (16.5 x 25.6)  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;  
Purchase, with funds from The Lauder Foundation, Leonard and Evelyn Lauder Fund 96.68.171

*Bowsprit*, 1930

Wood engraving: sheet, 10 1/16 x 11 1/16 (25.6 x 28.1); block, 5 7/16 x 6 15/16 (13.8 x 17.6)  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;  
Purchase, with funds from Mr. and Mrs. William A. Marsteller 87.14

*Hail and Farewell*, 1930

Wood engraving: sheet, 14 3/8 x 11 3/16 (36.5 x 28.4); block, 8 x 5 1/2 (20.3 x 14)  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;  
Purchase, with funds from The Lauder Foundation, Leonard and Evelyn Lauder Fund 96.68.172

*Hail and Farewell*, 1930

China white on black paper, 12 1/16 x 8 1/4 (30.6 x 21)  
Collection of Jake Milgram Wien

*Invitation to Tea*, 1930

Color linocut and linecut: sheet, folded, 11 1/2 x 8 1/8 (29 x 20.6); image, 9 13/16 x 6 3/4 (24.9 x 17.1)

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;  
Purchase, with funds from The Lauder Foundation, Leonard and Evelyn Lauder Fund 96.68.173

*The Lookout*, 1930

Wood engraving: sheet, 14 1/16 x 10 15/16 (35.7 x 27.8); block, 7 15/16 x 5 1/2 (20.2 x 14)  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;  
Purchase, with funds from Mr. and Mrs. William A. Marsteller 87.12

*Starlight*, 1930

Wood engraving: sheet, 6 3/8 x 7 7/8 (16.2 x 20); block, 5 5/16 x 6 13/16 (13.5 x 17.3)  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;  
Purchase, with funds from The Lauder Foundation, Leonard and Evelyn Lauder Fund 96.68.174

*Study sketch for Cape Cinema ceiling mural*, 1930

Gouache and metallic inks over graphite, 28 x 36 (71.1 x 91.4)  
Raymond Moore Foundation, Owner and Operator of the Cape Playhouse, Dennis, Massachusetts

*Godspeed*, 1931

Wood engraving: sheet, 6 5/16 x 7 7/8 (16 x 20); block, 5 5/16 x 6 15/16 (13.5 x 9.5)  
Philadelphia Museum of Art; Purchased with the Lola Downin Peck Fund, from the Carl and Laura Zigrosser Collection

*Sea and Sky*, 1931

Wood engraving: sheet, 14 7/16 x 11 1/8 (36.7 x 28.3); block, 9 15/16 x 6 1/2 (25.2 x 16.5)  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;  
Purchase, with funds from the Print Committee 87.10

*North, Greenland*, c. 1931

Oil on canvas, 33 15/16 x 44 1/16 (86.2 x 111.9)  
Private collection

*God Bless the Greenlanders ("Gutip sernigliiget kalatdlit")*, 1932

Watercolor and graphite on paper, 11 7/8 x 8 7/8 (30.2 x 22.5)  
Collection of Jake Milgram Wien

*Drifter*, 1933

Wood engraving: sheet, 7 9/16 x 8 3/4 (19.2 x 22.2); block, 5 5/16 x 6 13/16 (14.8 x 17.3)  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;  
Charles Simon Bequest 96.60.39

*Starry Night*, 1933

Wood engraving: sheet 9 7/8 x 7 5/8 (25.1 x 19.4); block 7 x 5 (17.8 x 12.7)

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase, with funds from The Lauder Foundation, Leonard and Evelyn Lauder Fund 96.68.182

*Dogs Resting, Greenland*, c. 1935/7

Oil on wood, 34 1/8 x 44 1/2 (86.7 x 113)  
Plattsburgh Art Museum, State University of New York; Rockwell Kent Gallery & Collection, Gift of Sally Kent Gorton

*Lunar Disintegration*, from the series *End of the World*, 1937

Lithograph: image, 12 1/16 x 10 1/16 (30.6 x 12.6)  
Collection of Jake Milgram Wien

*Moonlight, Winter*, c. 1940

Oil on canvas, 28 x 34 1/4 (71.1 x 87)  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Charles Simon Bequest 96.60.42

*Though Angels Weep...*, c. 1940

Ink and conté crayon on paper, 4 1/2 x 6 5/16 (11.4 x 16)  
Collection of Jake Milgram Wien

*Night Flight*, 1941

Chiaroscuro wood engraving: sheet, 12 1/2 x 9 1/2 (31.8 x 24.1); block, 8 1/2 x 6 3/8 (21.6 x 16.2)  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase, with funds from The Lauder Foundation, Leonard and Evelyn Lauder Fund 96.68.183

*Nightmare*, 1941

Lithograph: sheet, 14 7/8 x 12 7/16 (37.8 x 31.6); image, 10 7/8 x 8 (27.6 x 20.3)  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase, with funds from the Print Committee 92.125

BOOKS:

*Architectonics: The Tales of Tom Thumtack, Architect*

By Frederick Squires, with decorative cover and illustrations by Rockwell Kent  
New York: The William T. Comstock Company, 1914  
Collection of Jake Milgram Wien

*Wilderness: A Journal of Quiet Adventure in Alaska*

By Rockwell Kent, with drawings by the author and an introduction by Dorothy Canfield  
New York and London: G.P. Putnam's Sons, Knickerbocker Press, 1920  
Library Collection, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

*Voyaging: Southward from the Strait of Magellan*

By Rockwell Kent, with drawings by the author  
New York and London: G.P. Putnam's Sons, Knickerbocker Press, 1924  
Collection Jake Milgram Wien

*Moby Dick or The Whale*

By Herman Melville, with illustrations by Rockwell Kent  
3 vols.: Chicago: R R Donnelley & Sons, 1930  
Printed by The Lakeside Press  
Library Collection, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

*Moby Dick or The Whale*

By Herman Melville, with illustrations by Rockwell Kent  
New York: Random House, 1930  
Printed by The Lakeside Press  
Andritz/Rightmire Collection

*A Birthday Book*

By Rockwell Kent  
New York: Random House, 1931  
Library Collection, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

Cover *Starlight*, 1930 (detail)

Photo credits: *Starlight*, *Invitation to Tea*, *Blue Bird*, and *Hail and Farewell* by Geoffrey Clements

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