

Higher Latitudes: Rockwell Kent on Monhegan Island
Ben Cosgrove
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“Truly I loved that little world, Monhegan. Small, sea-girt island that it was, a seeming floating speck in the infinitude of the sea and sky, one was as though driven to seek refuge from the impendent cosmic immensity in a closer relationship to people and to every living thing.”

–Rockwell Kent

The island of Monhegan rises hulkingly out of Maine’s Muscongus Bay, about ten miles off the coast. The island is small – barely a square mile in area – but its northern two-thirds is composed of preserved forest, thatched with hiking trails and set high upon majestic black cliffs that stand taller than any others in the state.

There is a village on the island as well, home to around 275 people in the summer and about a fifth of that in the winter, and the best view one can get of it is probably from the top of the hill that hosts Monhegan’s iconic 1824 lighthouse. From this point, you can see not only the dense forest to the north but the low-lying boggy meadow around which the village is clustered, sea-battered wooden houses perched along the surrounding hills, and the island’s lifeline: a busy ferry dock that regularly launches and receives boats to and from the mainland.

Onto this dock in 1905 stepped a young artist named Rockwell Kent, who had journeyed there on the advice of his mentor, the painter Robert Henri. Kent’s paintings, woodcuts, and drawings, particularly the illustrations he did for a 1930 edition of *Moby Dick* (illustrations today considered responsible for lifting the book from relative obscurity to full-blown canonization), are now iconic: stark, solid forms bathed in an ethereal northern

light. His figures, be they human, animal, or a feature of the landscape, are bulky and strong but always improbably graceful; his colors and light are bold but never brash.

Kent would also become a reasonably prolific writer, and his own, largely autobiographical books – these have titles like *Wilderness*, *N by E*, and *Greenland Journal* – tell the story of a life spent in tireless search of ever more challenging landscapes. He had a personality exactly as bold, harsh, and austere as his images: Kent was famously uncompromising, outspoken, highly opinionated, occasionally and unrepentantly philandering, and he tended to be most at home in inhospitable, frigid, solitary environments. At the same time though, he harbored overwhelming empathy and spent his whole adult life as a passionate and outspoken advocate for workers' rights. You can get a startlingly good sense of his worldview even from his depictions of the human form in his artwork: his people may be blocky, unpretty, and severe, but they are invariably imbued with arresting dignity and poise.

I personally discovered Rockwell Kent when I stumbled on an old copy of *N by E* in a used bookstore. Its appearance had been dimmed by age and light but the book grabbed me somehow, and I found myself reading the whole thing in the store. It's an autobiographical account of a journey he took to Greenland, and it is full of what turns out to be typically Kent-ish outrageousness. Essentially, as a middle-aged man, he talks his way onto a ship bound for Greenland, which wrecks on the rocks off the coast of what is now Nuuk. He then instructs the other two travelers on board to wait, while he goes ashore and wanders through the wilderness for days looking for a native village. He finds them, saves the other passengers, then, having dispatched them safely home, remains in Greenland rambling around the interior for months, where he paints, seduces local women, and so on, before he catches a freighter to Europe at the end of the narrative.

At the time he was first setting foot on Monhegan's ferry dock, Kent was a much younger man, still sorting out his artistic and philosophical sensibilities. He had grown up in Tarrytown, New York but resented his family's upper-middle-class life for what he saw as its insulated, arrogant complacency; he escaped as soon as he could. After graduating from Columbia with a major in architecture, he decamped for the Monadnock region of southern New Hampshire, where he would make his first mature landscape paintings. Soon, however – and in what would become a recurring pattern in his life – Kent found the landscape too tame for his tastes and moved north and east to the rocky coast of Maine.

It would turn out to be the place that would forge both the style of his art and the principles he carried through the rest of his life. “Monhegan,” he recalled ecstatically in his autobiography, “its rock-bound shores, its towering headlands, the thundering surf with gleaming crests and emerald eddies, its forest and its flowering meadowlands; the village, quaint and picturesque; the fish-houses, evoking in their dilapidation those sad thoughts on the passage of time and the transitoriness of all things human so dear to the artistic soul.” Kent at last had found the inspiration he had been looking for. “It was enough to start me off to such feverish activity in painting as I had ever known.”

Kent spent the five months of this first visit working as a laborer, drilling wells around the island. This was dangerous and back-breakingly difficult work: the workers would repeatedly strike a steel bore with a gigantic iron sledgehammer for eight hours a day (he calculated that each day demanded about seven thousand blows); the work resulted unavoidably in torn muscles, painful blisters, and mental strain from the concentration required to keep from crushing one’s fingers.

Something in the act of using his body to the point of exhaustion led him to a kind of internal apotheosis. For one thing, he was finally able to shed the shame he had felt living the life of a painter from Tarrytown. When he arrived on the island, watching lobstermen toil, he had experienced a life-changing revelation:

“I envied them their strength, their knowledge of their work, their skill in it; I envied them their knowledge of boats and their familiarity with that awesome portion of the infinite, the sea. I envied them their worker’s human dignity [...] God, how I envied them their power to row! To pull their heavy traps! I’d see my own thin wrists, my artist’s hands. As though for the first time I saw my work in true perspective and felt its triviality... was I as a painter to constitute myself an onlooker at the doing of the fundamental jobs of life, or be one doing them? What would I do, I thought, should working men not work for me? The answer shamed me.”

Something about this new lifestyle assuaged his sense of dishonorable uselessness; it made him feel that he was finally living richly, fully, and directly, with no degree of analytical distance between his work and his experience.¹ It changed how he painted. “Life,” he wrote,

1. This philosophy of Kent’s was manifest in his respective opinions of Thoreau, who “loves life and lives,” and of Emerson, “the professional dreamer and thinker who thinks beautiful thoughts and does not live.”

“not just as looked at but as lived, was to me so exhilarating and so infinitely beautiful that I could strive for nothing but, through experience, a greater share of it. If only I could recreate the world as I beheld and sensed or, even in some measure, understood it... it was enough.”

It is perhaps a testament to his confidence in the rawness of his experience that he would think himself capable of rendering something elemental or infinite at all; that he would consider his perception of the world to be this clear, true, and objective. Whether or not that confidence was deserved – it depends on your philosophy – it enabled the development of the style that would characterize his work for the rest of his life. He was painting things as he saw them, but in his mind he saw them more honestly than others could. His artwork was transcendental: “Only when the blue paint of a sky ceases to be just color,” he wrote, “becoming, as it were, the depths of space, is that blue right, and truly beautiful.”

In the spring of 1907 an exhibition of Kent’s Monhegan paintings was mounted in New York City, where his striking new style made quite an impression. Noting that Kent’s broad brushstrokes “could be seen in a ten-acre field without a spyglass,” James Huncher of *The New York Sun* went on to deliver what would prove to be an accurate description of much of Kent’s work going forward: “He knocks you off your pine before you can sit down with these broad, realistic, powerful representations of weltering seas, men laboring in boats, rude rocky headlands and snowbound landscapes... the paint is laid on by an athlete of the brush. Dissonances are dared that make you pull up your coat collar.”

What was most obvious to the metropolitan attendees, however, was the unusually strong connection between the artist’s life and his work. “Mr. Kent lives with the fishermen of this desperate coast, and he has evidently endured the rough weather, the bleak scenery, for the sake of catching their reality,” wrote a reporter. Another reporter noted one could see from the work the artist’s conviction “that a man’s art be thoroughly consistent with his life and not apart from it, as it often happens to be.”

“There is too much respect,” Kent told a newspaper, “for art itself; that’s the last thing we ought to respect. We must live as human beings live, love and hate, feel and think, act and enjoy; out of this comes art, but it is incidental. Character is formed out of life, and art is an expression of a live personality; that sort of art has a truer ring than any other art.”

He returned to Monhegan after the brief trip back to New York for the exhibition and stayed this time for several years. Seeking a sense of commitment and rootedness on the island – and drawing at last on his architectural background from college – he built a house for himself, which still stands, on Horne Hill.² He found a good deal of other work as a carpenter on the island, and many of his structures are still extant: a pair of cottages near the ferry dock, a house for his mother now owned by the Wyeth family, his own house and studio, and a couple others. He worked as a lobsterman as well. He married, he founded an island art school, and he built a life on Monhegan.

Eventually, however, Kent outgrew even this place. He made plans to create a communal art school in Newfoundland, where land costs were lower. He boarded a freighter there in the winter of 1910 and did not return to Maine for decades or ever live there again. “I had served what in a lifetime’s schooling may be called by kindergarten years in the mountains of New Hampshire,” he said, “and having passed from there to the grammar school of a North Atlantic island, I was now... headed for higher latitudes.”

Kent’s life would proceed in this pattern from here on out, from one harsh landscape to a harsher one as he grew too comfortable in the first: from Maine to Newfoundland, from Newfoundland to Alaska, from Alaska to Iceland, from Iceland to Greenland, and so on. But one can see Monhegan in all the places he went and all the work he did for the rest of his life. The coast of Maine, with its striking topography, its low but brilliant northern glow, the ascetic demands of its winters, and the violent contrast of sea and sky with rock, crag, and precipice, could not have provided a truer geographic mirror for his personality, and would remain the unwavering foundation of his visual language. It is a landscape unlike any other — one exactly as raw, unique, and strangely beautiful as Kent’s life itself.

² After Kent left Monhegan, the painter James Fitzgerald moved into the house, and it is now owned by the Monhegan Museum; when I visited this summer, it was being used as a residence for two interns who were there for the season to study Fitzgerald and his work.