

ROCKWELL KENT: The Art of the Bookplate
by Don Roberts

Once upon a time in America—if you were a book person—you would commission an artisan to emboss on a block of soft wood your family name within a decorative design. From this matrix, your bookplate would be imprinted on 2-by-three inches of paper. These modest talismans of ownership would then be affixed to the front inside covers of the books in your library.

Just as you employed a particular person to cut your hair or repair your car, you engaged someone to create your bookplate. And, as did so many other material possessions, your library would serve as a conspicuous index of your worth.

The peak time of the bookplate as aesthetic artifact was the period between World Wars I and II, when most of the nation turned its back on the world at large to focus on matters domestic. In the arts, painters such as Grandma Moses and Grant Wood depicted unadorned rural tableaux, while writers composed homespun narratives like “Winesburg, Ohio” and “our Town,” which emphasized the virtues of small-town life. At Sunday concerts, John Philip Sousa's patriotic marches energized park visitors to stamp their feet in collegial unison. Back then, it was not TV talking heads but speakers on the Chautauqua circuit who instructed and entertained.

This bygone age is engagingly evoked by Don Roberts in “Rockwell Kent: The Art of the Bookplate.” Although the book centers on Kent, who was one of the best known U. S. artists and illustrators for much of the first half of the 20th century, Roberts slips in mini-cultural history of the times with deft and telling detail.

The bookplate came into being shortly after the invention of movable type in 15th century Germany. Its raison d'etre was utilitarian. Bookplates served as tangible evidence of ownership and were meant to inhibit book theft. Early bookplates by such artists as Albrecht Durer featured coats of arms and armorial motifs than emphasized a family's lineage.

It was not long before mottoes and sayings found their way onto bookplates. Some were humorously chiding, like Sir Walter Scott's: “Please return this book; I find that though many of my friends are poor mathematicians, they are nearly all good bookkeepers.” Well-known illustrators William Hogarth, Kate

Greenaway, Marc Chagall and Eric Gill further developed this miniature art form. Bookplates became collectors' items.

In today's condition-conscious rare-book circles, the presence of a bookplate is generally considered a defect unless it establishes a book's provenance or is that of a notable person. Special collections departments in some institutional libraries now mark their volumes with ink visible only under ultraviolet light or emboss them with microchips. But let's go back to Rockwell Kent's time, when so much thought and energy were lavished on the making of these personalized slips of paper. A summary of his lifetime achievements reads like one of those typerbolic publisher's introductions of a new author by way of his previously esoteric (and sometimes fictional) occupations. In Kent's case, however, it is true.

He was as renowned book designer for major publishers—creating fine editions of such classics as “Moby-Dick,” “Beowulf,” “Candide” and the complete works of Shakespeare. He created the Random House logo still in use today. His paintings were regularly shown in prominent art galleries and museums. Painters Marsden Hartley, John Sloan and Edward Hopper were among his admirers and friends, the last having been Kent's roommate as they began their careers.

Chronically restless (he rose at 5 a.m. and expected everyone else to do likewise), Kent traveled periodically, usually alone, exploring the world from Greenland's northern climes down to the Patagonian archipelago. After returning home, he wrote—and illustrated—several bestselling books about his adventures.

Married three times, Kent regularly began romantic dalliances with other women, then 'fessed up to his mates and encouraged them to welcome his newest inamorata into the family fold. That the wives accepted such arrangements attests to an always loving husband's formidable powers of persuasion.

Though the social milieu Kent matter-of-factly inhabited was largely that of the wealthy and privileged, he was a lifelong political activist of socialistic bent. During the Cold War, he fearlessly traded barbs with Sen. Joseph McCarthy at a congressional hearing on Communist activities and breezed out free of the contempt charges others faced in that politically repressive era.

Charismatic and multifaceted, Kent also created 160 bookplates,

working closely with varied patrons: millionaires as well as those without the wherewithal to pay; personal friends, including Margaret Sanger and Bennett Cerf, and people randomly encountered. Kent invited their ideas. He saw the creation of a bookplate as a collaborative venture: “The best way by all odds is to pick a good designer, confide to him the story of your life, your likes, your aspirations...” When his clients did, Kent was happy to employ his technical mastery in their behalf.

In his bookplates, Kent gave the human form a modern, idealized treatment, imbuing his Art Deco-style renderings with an indelible sharpness of line that was at once geometrically precise and flowing. He borrowed freely from Mythology, drawing magnificently plumed birds with talons that metamorphosed into human hands. He limned trim, high-breasted female nudes being borne on flying horses—an image that conveys the notion of classical chastity as well as sexuality.

A recurring theme in his bookplates is of reaching. A lonely arm thrusts into the night sky as if seeking a star to touch. In these more self-conscious times, such a flamboyant gesture could be regarded as overly earnest, even corny. Kent's bravura position in the art world hierarchy after World War II was taken over by the Abstract Expressionists, then the newest darlings of art critics. Bookplates, too, are relics, but Kent's heroic images still live as an authentic expression of their time.

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