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## The Concept of “North” in the Works by Rockwell Kent

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*The article offers a study of paintings and graphic drawings by the artist Rockwell Kent for visualization of the concept of “North” in these works. The study is followed by a detailed review of “waves” of the professional and viewer’s interest in the works by R. Kent: in the 1920s, the artist took a leading position in American art, in the 1960s, he became popular in the USSR, in the 1980s, he restored attention of the American viewers, and in the present the interest in the works by R. Kent is maintained on the Internet. In accordance with the objectives, the study presents general characteristics of the series of works created by the artist during a trip to Alaska (1918-1919), Tierra del Fuego (1922-1923) and Greenland (1929, 1932-1933, 1935); representative works of these cycles – “Sun glare. Alaska” (1919), “Tierra del Fuego” (1922-1925), “November in Greenland” (1932-1933) – were analyzed. An image of an Eskimo – an indigenous inhabitant of Greenland formed in the graphics of R. Kent was studied. In addition, the article reveals the artistic traditions and techniques typical of the artist’s work as a whole.*

*Keywords: artist Rockwell Kent, paintings by Rockwell Kent, graphic drawings by Rockwell Kent, visual concepts, concept of “North”, North in fine arts, Alaska, Tierra del Fuego, Greenland Eskimos, study of Rockwell Kent’s artwork.*

### Introduction

In America public attention to Rockwell Kent (1882-1971) accounts for the 1920s, which is about a decade before the heyday of abstract directions in American painting. Despite the fact that Kent’s painting itself is characterized by the expansion of landscapes into local pure colours carrying symbolic meaning, after the birth of abstract expressionism, a phenomenon that could be considered as completely American, paintings and drawings by Rockwell Kent turned out to be somewhat forgotten. But in the Soviet Union, on the contrary, he became extremely popular: in

1962 he received the title of Honorary Member of the USSR Academy of Arts, in 1967 he received the International Lenin Prize “for peace between peoples”, books with his illustrations could be found in almost every home, and for many Soviet graphic artists his works became the standard model in the formation of their own artistic language. Thus, for example, it is known that the most outstanding Krasnoyarsk graphic artist Vladimir I. Meshkov, a self-taught artist who acquired a name because of lithographs with scenes of Northern life and lives of the Indigenous Small-Numbered Peoples, improved

his skills based on the graphics of Rockwell Kent, sent him letters with his works so that the master assessed them (mentioned in: Troshev, Zh. (1989) *North Rhapsody: the story about the artist*. Krasnoyarsk, Krasnoyarsk Publishing House, 165. Chapter 5: Music of paints, available at: <http://museumsrussian.blogspot.ru/2013/01/5.html>). After the collapse of the Soviet Union the artwork of R. Kent was forgotten in Russia as well for some time. Today, as evidenced by the Internet activity around a wide variety of the author’s works – drawings, paintings, book illustrations, etc. – attention to R. Kent gradually returns again, as his romantic trips to the Northern lands in order to withdraw from the bustle and noisy civilization, as well as his works of art that reveal the ontology of the North are becoming more and more relevant in the modern world that constantly invents options for its own end and searches for its own limits.

Before proceeding to the study of the concept of North in the works of Rockwell Kent, we need to outline the range of research materials that are dedicated to his works. One of the greatest American experts on the works by R. Kent is Ferris R. Scott who describes the entire corpus of works created by the artist, analyzes aspects of his biography and journeys, gives interviews about the work of the author, and researches “waves” of the viewer’s attention to R. Kent. For example, he writes about the attention to creativity of R. Kent in the USSR after the heyday of abstract expressionism in America: “...Kent became the first American to exhibit his art in the Soviet Union (1957-58). Inspired by the Soviet people’s enthusiasm, he donated hundreds of paintings, drawings, prints, and writings to them in 1960. (The bulk of these are held by the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg and the State Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow) (Ferris R. Scott. (2008) *The evolving legacy of Rockwell Kent*. Fine art Connoisseur,

Volume 5, Issue 1, available at: <http://scottrferris.com/Essays/legacy.html>)

Also on the gradual return of interest in R. Kent in the American society: “Kent’s popularity has increased gradually, with waves of activity concentrated in the years immediately after his death; around his centennial in 1982; and around 2000 as the market for modern American art soared. The first wave saw the publication of Dan Burne Jones’s *The Prints of Rockwell Kent: A Catalogue Raisonné*, as well as the launching of George and Gladys Spector’s newsletter, *The Kent Collector*, now issued by the Rockwell Kent Gallery. The second wave focused on centennial exhibitions, and on the publishing of David Traxel’s *An American Saga: The Life and Times of Rockwell Kent* (1980) and the anthology mentioned above. The latest wave began with the publication of my own *Rockwell Kent’s Forgotten Landscapes* (1998, with Ellen Pearce), and the mounting of such exhibitions as the Adirondack Museum’s *The View from Asgaard* (1999) and *Rockwell Kent: The Mythic and the Modern* at Maine’s Portland Museum of Art (2005) (Ferris R. Scott. (2008) *The evolving legacy of Rockwell Kent*. Fine art Connoisseur, Volume 5, Issue 1, available at: <http://scottrferris.com/Essays/legacy.html>).

A detailed article by Fielding D. Dupuy “Seeking a new paradise for mankind: Rockwell Kent in Tierra del Fuego and the creation of a new national image for Chile” is devoted to R. Kent’s works created during his travels in the Chilean province of Tierra del Fuego located on the island of Tierra del Fuego – the southernmost point of the South American continent. The author includes R. Kent’s artwork in several romantic creative concepts of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century associated with finding paradise in deserted lands or in a wild nature (for example, he compares the literary works of R. Kent with the works of Henry Thoreau): “Kent also writes about wanting to

'improve the land [...] with gardens and meadows and fruit trees' thereby imagining a desolate place turned to paradise through his efforts. This belief system that wilderness is to be feared but, by the hand of man, an earthly paradise can be constructed from it was central to the popular conception of the United States, dating from the colonial period". (Fielding D. Dupuy (2012) Seeking a new paradise for mankind: Rockwell Kent in Tierra del Fuego and the creation of a new national image for Chile. *Image de la nation: art et nature au Chili*, 3, 29, available at: [http://cral.in2p3.fr/artelogie/IMG/article\\_PDF/article\\_a150.pdf](http://cral.in2p3.fr/artelogie/IMG/article_PDF/article_a150.pdf)). The author dwells on the study of the art features of Chilean works by Kent – graphics, paintings, writings and photographs which he equates with photojournalism and visual anthropology that acquired great significance in the 1920s. Fielding D. Dupuy highlights features that distinguish works of R. Kent created in Tierra del Fuego from works created in Greenland or on the island of Monhegan: "The Tierra del Fuego paintings are notably devoid of the human figure. This is in such contrast with Kent's other works that it must not be ignored. Kent is telling us it is a land in which a man has no place. The mystical elements in Kent's Alaska work with the human form set against the wilderness have been replaced in Tierra del Fuego with what Kent would later refer to as "stark, uncompromising realism". (Fielding D. Dupuy (2012) Seeking a new paradise for mankind: Rockwell Kent in Tierra del Fuego and the creation of a new national image for Chile. *Image de la nation: art et nature au Chili*, 3, 29, available at: [http://cral.in2p3.fr/artelogie/IMG/article\\_PDF/article\\_a150.pdf](http://cral.in2p3.fr/artelogie/IMG/article_PDF/article_a150.pdf))

In foreign research literature those who studied the artwork of Rockwell Kent also were: Dan Burne-Jones who was authorized by the artist to engage in archiving, collection and the museum and gallery activities with his works; Frederick Lewis who filmed a documentary

"Rockwell Kent" about travels and works of the artist in 2006 (Lewis F. (2012) *The stormy petrel of American art. Scandinavian review*, 8, 8, available at: [http://www.amscan.org/SR.Summer12\\_RockwellKent.pdf](http://www.amscan.org/SR.Summer12_RockwellKent.pdf); Lewis F. (2006) *Rockwell Kent. Documentary, DVD*); J. Milgram Wien and others. Of a particular interest among these works is a documentary film by F. Lewis, which uses biographical analysis for understanding the artist's works, expeditions of R. Kent are reproduced through video recording and archival photographs, selections from his writings are quoted, and great attention is paid to the artist's work on the frescoes for the interiors of public buildings that cannot usually be found in the research literature.

In Soviet research literature with all the advantages of fine art criticism (analysis of colours, composition and other pictorial aspects of works of R. Kent) a tendentious bias is clearly present – rapture at an idea that only a socialist worldview can appreciate the beauty of the works of R. Kent while in his country the artist's work faded under the onslaught of fancy anti-aesthetic Abstract Expressionism: "I just happened to see the beautiful painting by Kent 'Mount Equinox in Vermont' exhibited in one of the halls of the beautiful museum of the Art Institute in Chicago near Bellows and Sloan paintings, and their creations looked impressive and serious as the true carriers of high aesthetic values compared with defiantly huge canvases of abstract painters hanging in the next hall. However, Kent's paintings of those years can be found in museums of the United States very rarely, even less rarely than paintings of Edward Hopper. But as for the paintings of the Greenland series created in 1929-1935, them I could see only on the walls of a small apartment of Dan Burne-Jones in Oak Park, on the far outskirts of the immense Chicago! Paintings by Kent annoy the followers of Abstract, Surrealist or Neo-Expressionist art in the U.S., and they

try to forget or at least move it into the distant past.” (Chegodaev A.O. About Rockwell Kent and his autobiography. Introduction to the book of Rockwell Kent “It’s me, O Lord”. Moscow, Art, 1965, 695)

Later in the Russian art history a monograph by T. Petrova was dedicated to the artwork of R. Kent. Sections devoted to the R. Kent’s works are present in encyclopaedias and monographs on the works of American artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In the context of this study on not just the analysis of the artwork of Rockwell Kent, but the analysis of the concept of “North”, constructed in the visual language, it is also useful to attract more information about other options for visualization of the North concept in the works of other artists – both professional and amateur, among the Indigenous Small-Numbered Peoples (e.g. sources: Jacqueline Fry (1987) Contemporary Inuit art and art from other “tribal” cultures. American Review of Canadian Studies, Volume 17, Issue 1, 41-46; Trevor Holloway (1970) Artists of the Frozen North. Design, Volume 72, Issue 2, 4-8; Jeffrey Mifflin (2011) Arctic spectacles: The frozen north in visual culture, 1818-1875. Early Popular Visual Culture, Volume 9, Issue 4, 363-365; Skorobogacheva Y.A. (2008) Art of the Russian North. Moscow: White City, 304, etc.).

Importantly, for several years the global study of the concept of “North” in the world and Russian culture has been carried out by the research team of the Humanities Institute of Siberian Federal University – consequently, links to some of the works of this group of scientists also allow you to plunge into the broader context of the study (Koptseva N.P., Pimenov N.N., Seredkina N.N. (2013) Study of Applied and Decorative Arts and traditional religions of the Indigenous Small-Numbered Peoples of the North as a factor of the positive all-Russian cultural identity. Pedagogy of art, No. 2, 15 – 30; Koptseva N.P., Nevolko N.N., Reznikova K.V. (2013) Formation of ethnic

cultural identity in contemporary Russia through works of national art (by the example of the Evenk epos and Applied and Decorative Arts). Pedagogy of art, No. 1, 1 – 15).

### **Methodology**

To conduct the study the following methodological approaches were used:

1) The philosophical and art-historical analysis based on the consecutive application of methods of observation, measurement, analysis, synthesis, analogy, interpretation, extrapolation, induction, deduction in accordance with theoretical developments of V.I. Zhukovsky. Methodological approach is used for an adequate translation of the visual signs content into a verbal language, to verbalize a conceptual image of the “North” in the paintings of R. Kent.

2) The conceptual analysis in accordance with the methodological approach of Yu.S. Stepanov who suggests ways to penetrate into the “unspeakable” essence of universal cultural phenomena called a concept. In the present study a similar methodology is used to comprehend the essence of the concept of “North” in the works of art.

3) The concept of a “visual turn” in culture of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century originating in the works of W. Benjamin, M. McLuhan and F. Jameson. On the basis of this approach a research setting is formed, according to which concepts exist not only as verbal constructs, but may also have a visual representation that allows us to study the content of cultural phenomena in the analysis of works of art.

### **Point**

*“Geography” and typology of works by Rockwell Kent, general characteristics of the artist’s artwork.*

Rockwell Kent received architectural education at the Columbia University in New



Fig. 1. R. Kent. The Commuters (Urban Landscape), 1923

York, during his studies he periodically published mocking caricatures about a big city life (*Fig. 1*), which did not seem to him comfortable and suitable for a harmonious life. Together with the university, he also attended painting classes where he met the artist Edward Hopper. Early works by Rockwell Kent with landscapes of New Hampshire and Mount Monadnock were presented at the exhibition of the Society of American Artists in 1904. From 1905 till 1910 he lived on the island Monhegan, Maine – a Northern corner of nature in the United States. In 1918 he went to the next trip to the Northern lands in Alaska together with his 10 year old son, from which he returned in 1919 with a series of paintings, prints and a book titled “Wilderness” that made him a successful artist and writer. In 1922–1923, he travels to Tierra del Fuego, the farthest land of South America, “supplementing”

his artistic and aesthetic study of Northern areas that started in Alaska with introduction with the opposite geographical point. From this trip Rockwell Kent brings a more modest amount of paintings (only about 22 works remained), but a lot more drawings that illustrated his travel diary “To the south of the Strait of Magellan”.

In general, it should be noted that the graphic drawings and paintings are equally present in the works of R. Kent. His graphic works are made in a variety of different techniques – linocut, xylography, lithography, pencil drawings and some others. Most of the graphics are illustrations to his own books: “Wilderness” (1920), “Voyaging Southward from the Strait of Magellan” (1924), “N by E” (1930), “It’s me, O Lord” (1959), “Greenland Journal” (1962).

Since during his travels R. Kent also constantly created texts on his travels, the

Publishing House Lakeside Press in Chicago offered him a job as a book illustrator at the end of the 1920s. He chose a book by Herman Melville “Moby Dick” that at that time was thoroughly forgotten to such an extent that in 1930 it was published without the author’s name on the cover focusing on the name of the famous illustrator R. Kent. Subsequently, he also did illustrations for “The Canterbury Tales” by Geoffrey Chaucer, “Beowulf”, “Candide” by Voltaire, “Decameron” by Boccaccio, and for some works of William Shakespeare. Rockwell Kent is often compared to Leonardo da Vinci and the artists of the High Renaissance in the aspect of universality of artistic abilities – besides the fact that he was a painter, graphic artist, writer and traveller, he also was engaged in the creation of advertising posters for such companies as General Electric, Rolls Royce and others, who sponsored his trip.

In 1929, 1931-1932, 1935, he took a trip to Greenland.

Since the late 1940s, Rockwell Kent had been living and working on the Asgor farm in the Adirondack Mountains.

Thus, the study of the concept of “North” in the works by Rockwell Kent is based on the works created by the artist in Alaska, Tierra del Fuego (except that in fact it is not North, but South, we still pay attention to this series of works on the principle of similarity of geo-climatic conditions of Alaska and Tierra del Fuego: icebergs, snow, tundra conditions in the winter season, a similar way of life of the indigenous peoples) and Greenland. In addition, some book illustrations of the artist allow us to deepen our idea of conceptual artistic intents of the author, so we address them as well for completeness of the research.

Before we begin to analyze the concept of “North” in the works of the artist, we need to say a few words about his work as a whole.

Artistic traditions relevant for the artwork of R. Kent are as follows:

A) Painting and graphic art of Romanticism. The artist himself was fond of engravings by William Blake and anyone could see the use of the artistic techniques of the English romanticist in the graphics of R. Kent: large anthropomorphic characters interact with global and universal forces of life (divine and celestial spheres in William Blake’s works and stellar and solar systems in R. Kent’s works). R. Kent continues a particularly romantic line of representation of an individual – a lonely hero able to comprehend the deepest mysteries of existence, primarily through the contemplation of nature. Similarity is found when comparing the works of R. Kent and Caspar D. Friedrich in terms of representation of a man as a small grain of the universe, insignificant grain compared to the powerful nature (*Fig. 2–5*).

B) Painting of Symbolism in the spirit of Puvis de Chavannes who implicates allegorical messages into frozen statue-like anthropomorphic figures and into each iconic sign of the image. R. Kent’s works are also visually close to the Himalayan series of paintings of N. Roerich who, during his life in Russia, headed the Artistic Association “World of Art” that was developing an idea of symbolism (*Fig. 6–7*).

C) An artistic idea of P. Gauguin who went to Tahiti in search for “the earthly paradise” to immerse in a culture fundamentally different from the European, which preserved the ancient models of the human being, and to tell about the primary meanings of life through the language of visual images.

D) Impressionism as a tradition of plein-air painting made in such a technique where mutual reflection of colours in each other is important. The last feature is characteristic of the paintings by R. Kent mainly created until the 1920s, but subsequently he produced his own austere and concise visual style, and the need to work “on location” almost always retains its relevance in the artist’s life.



Fig. 2. William Blake. Isaac Newton. 1795



Fig. 3. R. Kent. Drifting. 1933

The central theme of the artwork of R. Kent is a romantic search for a harmonious model of co-existence between a man and nature, visual presentation of the fundamental truths about nature, an image of a human hero capable to “reach” to natural greatness or, at least, able to contemplate this greatness; visual and naturalistic cognition of such phenomena as “pristine wilderness”, “nature in the absence of a human”.

Artistic techniques of R. Kent:

- in some ways the pagan understanding of nature (attitude towards nature as towards a creation with its own temper) is reflected in the application of the method of anthropomorphization when natural phenomena are represented in the form of human figures;
- “plotlessness”, a focus on a few key characters: earth, water, mountains, sky are presented almost in each work, but human figures can be seen occasionally.



Fig. 4. Caspar David Friedrich. Wanderer above the Sea of Fog. 1818



Fig. 5. R. Kent. Artist in Greenland. 1935





Fig. 6. Nicholas Roerich. Mount of Five Treasures (Two Worlds). 1933



Fig. 7. R. Kent. May, North Greenland, 1935-37

In a situation of occurrence of human figures an active action or event can rarely be noticed, people are often painted in the calm and contemplative states or during everyday activities, which reveals one of the ideas of R. Kent that at some moments in life nothing is happening, but only at such moments a soul can open up to the world;

– ascetic choice of characters leads to the fact that many meaningful ideas of R. Kent’s works are in colour relations: until the 1920s when the impressionistic technique is important for him, the meaning of works is mainly composed of the interpenetration of colours into each other; later, local colour spots without subtle light-and-dark nuances and the

variety of colours become more typical characteristics of R. Kent’s works;

- layered division of the image where every layer has its character (layer of earth, layer of water, layer of mountains, and layer of sky) and its colour. Thus, the layered structure of the universe typical of the natural philosophic approach is emphasized.

*Visualization of the concept of “North” in the paintings by Rockwell Kent*

Paintings made in Alaska, Tierra del Fuego and Greenland differ from each other in colour, characters and ideological content, so each series of works reveals its aspect of the concept of “North”.

A pictorial series created in Alaska differs by an impressionistic technique, where multiple shades and their correlation on the painting surface are important, dominating features are light pastel colours (key colours – yellow, green, blue and their shades); a few (no more than three) human characters are depicted in the paintings – surely it is justified by the actual state of things (the artist went on a trip with his son where they met a local old man), but there is also an idea of

chosenness of people who discover the Northern nature.

A representative of this period may be “Sun glare. Alaska” (1919) (*Fig. 8*). An artistic idea of the work can be described as: lighting/sanctification of the chosen people by sunlight – a divine being with the power of manifestation (emanation) of everything. This idea consists of the fact that the painting is made by layers-levels (sun – sky – mountains – water surface – snow land with three human figures pulling a boat in the centre), the dynamics of colourful strokes from the upper central point to all the rest allows us to determine the character of the “Sun” as the main in the hierarchy of these levels (special significance of directions of colourful strokes and images of the sun is emphasized in another work of the “Whales” series created in 1919 (*Fig. 9*), where the sun is a source of strength once again, but the movement of light diverges from it radially). Sunlight shows the outlines of the mountains first, then shows the embossed surface of mountains, creates glare on the water surface and, finally, people pulling the boat are coming at the viewer along the “solar path”.



Fig. 8. R. Kent. Sun glare - Alaska, 1919



Fig. 9. R. Kent. Killer Whales in Resurrection Bay, Alaska (Whales), 1919

Thus, in a series of works created in Alaska, the concept of “North” is revealed as a place for the chosen people able to understand nature in its primordial purity; North is a place for pagan religious worldview, as in the North it is especially noticeable that nature is an independent creature living by its own laws and rules; North is a clear understanding that everything in the world exists in the hierarchy and a man takes a minor position in this hierarchy.

The artwork created in Tierra del Fuego is different from the pictures made in Alaska by dark gloomy colouring (dominating features are shades of gray, ochreous colours and tones), if the sun glare lights mountain peaks, then a special “layer” is set for this under the uppermost edge of the paintings, where the sun does not reach tiers of water and earth; images of people are completely absent in the paintings at this time. Although, as in the case of Alaska, R. Kent took the journey with a partner and during his stay in Tierra del Fuego he met other people in the southernmost city of Ushuaia, and not far from Cape Horn that he was about to visit, including local Indians, The Yaghan, – these people are in photographs taken

by R. Kent during the trip. Apparently the artist finished some of the paintings after his return from Tierra del Fuego, as their completion is dated 1925, 1927 – therefore, in addition to plein-air, natural impression of landscapes, R. Kent also applied an analytical method of constructing the image in accordance with the author’s artistic idea.

A representative of this series of works may be the painting “Admiralty Sound. Tierra-del-Fuego” (1922-1925) (*Fig. 10*). Here again we see the layered structure of the image: dark gray sky; snow-capped peaks of the mountains in the distance and on the top; close obscure mountains; water surface with the “fragments” of the mountains rising above from the water; a Northern dwarf tree with sinuous branches in the foreground, which is grown in the ground of reddish ocher shades. If in the works created in Alaska a key character was the sun that shines on the monumental Northern view and chosen people, the sunlight here is almost entirely absent; light (white) spots are moved either to the background or to the upper tier of the painting, that is pushed as far from the “earth” level



Fig. 10. R. Kent. Admiralty Sound - Tierra del Fuego, 1922-25



Fig. 11. R. Kent. Virgin Peaks, Tierra del Fuego, 1922-27

retaining its inaccessibility to it (this method is constantly found in this series of works – for example, it can also be observed in the painting “Virgin Peaks. Tierra-del-Fuegro”, 1922-1927) (Fig. 11). The main character of the painting is a dwarf tree with sinuous branches. Being the only organic creation in the painting, it demonstrates

the rigors of survival in the Northern nature (dry branches and one broken off), but at that it maintains the pursuit to “reach” to the snowy mountains and the sky with its two branches, but its third branch is still twisted to the ground. Visual content of the painting is the idea that in the Northern conditions only the basic urge to

survive is retained, harmonious understanding of terrestrial and celestial spheres is almost unattainable: it is very difficult to get out of the cycle of earthly needs to penetrate into the higher heavenly spheres.

Thus, the concept of “North” in a series of works created in Tierra del Fuego is revealed as follows: the North is a place not suitable for human life; Northern life is reduced to the basic physical survival, Northern conditions require extraordinary efforts to rise above earthly problems of existence and move to the high level of spiritual existence.

In paintings of the Greenland series R. Kent formed a specific visual style, which is sometimes referred to as “ascetic, harsh realism”. The paintings maintain layered imaging (usually it is a ternary structure: an earth surface with human figures and sometimes dwellings, a water surface with floating ice floes; mountain ranges and the sky or a large mountain filling almost all the space in the background, a snow-white plain in the middle ground, and people and dogs in the foreground), local colours clearly separating one

layer from the other are used. Unlike paintings created in Alaska and Tierra del Fuego in this painting there are a lot more people, and dogs also become significant characters. The number of paintings created in Greenland is much more, therefore we can observe changeability of nature throughout the calendar cycle: there is a collection of Greenland landscapes in winter, spring, summer and fall. In the works of this series there are analogies between the Northern paintings and European culture phenomena – for example, comparison of a rock with a gothic style in the painting “Greenland Gothic” (1935-1937) or analogy between a boatman in the painting “Dead Calm” (1932) (*Fig. 12*) and Charon, etc. In the Greenland series there is also self-reflection of the artist – for example, in the painting “Artist in Greenland” we can observe an artist painting icy massif (or glacier) in the open air, the sacred action of which is guarded by a pack of dogs; if we take into account the fact that R. Kent portrays himself, we may come up with an idea of going beyond your limits, the Northern peace and creativity allow the spirit to



Fig. 12. R. Kent. Dead Calm - North Greenland, 1932



Fig. 13. R. Kent. November in Greenland. 1935 – 1937

soar above everything and look at everything from the universe.

One of the representatives of the Greenland series is “November in Greenland” (1932-1933) (Fig. 13). A tiered structure of the work consists of: 1) mountains and sky that are similar to each other in colour (just as the sky combines slightly yellowish whiteness and a blue-black-gray surface, the same colours are used for the image of mountain peaks) – they represent untouchable nature, nature as such; 2) water surface with floating glaciers, the shapes of which resemble the outline of the mountain peaks – the intermediary space between the earthly world inhabited by people and nature in its purity, as here partly descended mountains and a man capable to come into this space meet (we can see a boat mooring on the shore); >>>

3) the earthly world is the world of human existence, on which nature also spread its mighty powers, as people’s dwellings are like the outlines of the floating glaciers. Thus, the model of the universe is revealed here – powerful primordial nature penetrates into the human world (movement

from the distant view to the foreground is set by the gradual reduction of forms in sizes towards the bottom edge of the painting, as well as by the fact that people’s huts nearer to the viewer do not fit completely within the image, they are creeping up on “us”), “arranges” the world of humans by its own image and likeness (at first the outlines of the mountains are repeated in the glaciers, and then in the lines of dwellings).

Thus, in the Greenland series the concept of “North” is filled with such content as: Northern nature subjugates the human world, builds the human world according to its laws and regulations; Northern nature allows a person to go beyond his own limits and look at the world from the universe; the North is primarily phenomenology of relations between a man and nature in its purest form, where nature in the North goes through phenomenological cleanup and appears in its original essence – a phenomenon that, in fact, is indifferent to human life, it exists by its own harsh laws.

*Visualization of the concept of “North” in the graphic works by Rockwell Kent*

As already mentioned, the artist created graphic drawings in every expedition, they illustrated his books about travels. In the context of this study we will focus on several graphic works created in Greenland, because there R. Kent lived in a small village (about 200 people) among the Eskimos and his graphic works created there visualize not so much an idea of romantic needs of a person in a conversation with the Universe without any intermediaries (which is typical of his previous drawings), but a synthesis of philosophical knowledge about people living in the North and ethnographic details.

Based on the ethnographic details in the graphic drawings we can observe ethnic clothing of the Eskimos, ethnic specific types of faces (narrowed eyes, swarthy faces indicating the constant interaction with bright sunlight reflected in snow), traditional activities – rowing, hunting,

sledding, etc. Importantly, R. Kent depicts the Eskimos mostly in moments of relaxation when “nothing happens” and they are immersed into a contemplative calm state observing the world around them (e.g., an engraving “A Young Greenland Girl”) (*Fig. 14*), which emphasizes the artist’s desire to show the viewer not details of everyday life of the indigenous people, but a perfect man disconnected from the scurry of life and able to listen to the world.

Xylography of “A Greenland swimmer” (1932) (*Fig. 15*) allows you to clearly see that R. Kent violates the anatomical correctness of the human body image in order to highlight specific differences in a character’s lifestyle – in this case the character has disproportionately large hands, revealing him primarily as a person who specializes in rowing, whose physiology “adjusted” to this type of activity. Similar



Fig. 14. R. Kent. Young Greenland Woman, 1933



Fig. 15. R. Kent. Greenland Swimmer, 1932



Fig. 16. R. Kent. Greenland Courtship, 1934

shape – a large torso, broad shoulders compared to a narrower figure below the belt (for example, it can also be observed in the work “Greenland

flirting”, 1934) (*Fig. 16*) – have all the Eskimos in the graphic drawings of R. Kent, which points to their strength as rowers and hunters.





Fig. 17. R. Kent. Greenland Mother Nursing Child, 1934

Just as Paul Gauguin having explored the culture of Tahiti presented the image of a Tahitian woman as Mother, Madonna, Rockwell Kent in his graphic drawings often portrays Greenland mothers with babies: in his drawings the Northern “Madonnas” are presented as vessels full of lifeblood to provide protection for their children from the outside world – for example, in the drawing “Greenland mother feeding a baby” (1934) (Fig. 17) a woman is with exaggeratedly large breasts, with her leg bent obstructing a sleeping baby from the outer space where her meditative look is directed to.

Thus, in the graphic drawings by Rockwell Kent a certain presentation of a person is modelled – an inhabitant of the North whose physiology is influenced by Northern nature and physical activity needed in the Northern

conditions; it is a man attentive to the states of nature unencumbered with rules and regulations of “big” civilization lifestyle.

In the context of talking about the graphic drawings by R. Kent it should also be noted that his book illustrations and custom works are not directly related to the topic of the North, but in all these works there are general concepts of the artist. For example, in the most famous illustrations to “Moby Dick” there is a romantic thirst for pursuit of a dream, for simulation of life as the eternal search for the desired, which is typical of R. Kent. Of a particular interest, in this case, may be a graphic series consisting of four drawings ordered to R. Kent in 1937 by the scientific community looking into apocalyptic perspectives of the human civilization. He presented four options for doomsday, namely: “The Clash with the Moon”, “Cooling of the



Fig. 18. R. Kent. Solar Fade-Out, 1937

Sun” (*Fig. 18*), “The Sun Blast” and “De-gravity”. We can say that doing visual analysis of the North he, as in this series, cognizes the limits of the universe, those states where life is reduced to the basic, therefore, vital matters, feelings, experiences.

### Conclusions

The study found that since the 1920s the interest of professionals and ordinary viewers to the artwork of Rockwell Kent is seen in “waves”, it is periodical. The current interest in the works of the artist that is present primarily in modern media, the Internet and television, is due to the fact that the world is in a constant state of modelling options of its own outcome, the end or at least the complete disappearance of all the achievements of the civilization, which will make a person revert to the original laws of existence,

and in the works of R. Kent depicting the ascetic simplicity and complexity of life in the North, at the “edge of the world” such a “cleanup” of the world has already been made and revealed to the viewers.

The study of paintings and graphic works by Rockwell Kent allowed us to reveal the following content of the concept of “North”:

- North is a space for the chosen people capable of perceiving nature in its pristine purity;
- North implies pagan religious experience of the world, where nature and every natural phenomenon is a separate creature with its own character and way of life;
- North puts a person in a strict hierarchical system, where he occupies one of the lowest levels;

- North is a space in which life of organic beings goes in a particularly harsh environment, and therefore requires endurance and determination;
  - Northern life is reduced to the basic physical survival, requires tremendous efforts to rise above worldly problems of existence and go to the higher level of spiritual life;
  - Northern nature subordinates the human world itself, builds the human world according to its laws and regulations;
  - North is a space, in which a person is able to go beyond his own limitations and see the world from the perspective of an indifferent universe, estranged from the earthly problems;
  - North changes a person’s physiology in accordance with the vital factors (protection from the damaging effects of the environment, a human body is subject to a certain kind of activity, etc.);
  - North requires from a human attention and observation, as well as allows him to retain the purity of perception of the world unencumbered with rules and regulations of a “big civilization”.
- In such verbal terms we disclosed the content of the concept of “North” in the works of art created by Rockwell Kent.

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## **Концепт «север» в творчестве Рокуэлла Кента**

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*Статья предлагает исследование живописных и графических произведений художника Рокуэлла Кента на предмет визуализации в этих работах концепта «север». Предваряет исследования подробный обзор «волн» профессионального и зрительского интереса к творчеству Р. Кента: в 1920-е годы художник занимает ведущее положение в американском искусстве, в 1960-е годы становится популярен в СССР, в 1980-е годы к художнику возвращается внимание американских зрителей, в современности интерес к творчеству Р. Кента поддерживается в Интернете. В соответствии с задачами исследования дана общая характеристика циклам работ, созданных художником во время путешествия на Аляску (1918-1919), во время путешествия на Огненную Землю (1922-1923) и во время путешествия в Гренландию (1929, 1932-1933, 1935); проанализированы репрезентативные произведения из этих циклов – «Солнечные блики. Аляска» (1919), «Огненная земля» (1922-1925), «Ноябрь в Гренландии» (1932-1933). Исследован образ эскимоса – коренного жителя Гренландии, формирующийся в графических изображениях, созданных Р. Кентом. Помимо этого в статье раскрываются художественные традиции и приемы, характерные для творчества художника в целом.*

*Ключевые слова: художник Рокуэлл Кент, живопись Рокуэлла Кента, графика Рокуэлла Кента, визуальные концепты, концепт «север», север в изобразительном искусстве, Аляска, Огненная Земля, Гренландия, эскимосы, исследования творчества Рокуэлла Кента.*

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