

At Home among Strangers

U.S. Artists, the Soviet Union, and the Myth
of Rockwell Kent during the Cold War

❖ Kirill Chunikhin

When exploring the representation of U.S. visual art in the Soviet Union during the Cold War, the first occurrence that comes to mind is the much-lauded art section at the 1959 American National Exhibition in Moscow (ANEM). The United States Information Agency (USIA) organized this display of 49 American paintings from the twentieth-century—including abstractions by Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko—to showcase “freedom of choice and expression in America. . . . the most important thing . . . which the Soviet citizen is denied.”¹ Contemporary and experimental American modernism would contrast canonic and conservative Socialist Realism, so the Soviet people would have to acknowledge the radical differences between the democratic and totalitarian systems.²

However, the U.S. government was not the only power that used American visual art for cultural warfare during the Cold War. Perhaps paradoxically in light of the energetic U.S. cultural policy of advancing American art abroad and the anti-American sentiments typical of Soviet propaganda, the Soviet government itself took the initiative in organizing exhibitions of a U.S. artist in the USSR during the Cold War. The 1957–1958 traveling exhibition of Rockwell Kent and many consequent shows, which were hosted by museums across the Soviet Union and attended by millions of people, indicate that U.S. art was selectively used by Soviet cultural policy officials, who did so by

1. “Office Memorandum, from Sivard to Roberts,” 9 October 1958, in National Archives and Records Administration at College Park, Maryland (NARA II), Record Group (RG) 306, Entry: UD-UP 10, Box 1, Folder: USA: 1965 (American National Exhibition in Moscow).

2. This interpretation dominates in contemporary historiography. For more on the 1959 ANEM, see Marilyn S. Kushner, “Exhibiting Art at the American National Exhibition in Moscow, 1959: Domestic Politics and Cultural Diplomacy,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Winter 2002), pp. 6–26. For a comprehensive account of U.S. cultural policy and the visual arts, see Michael Krenn, *Fall-Out Shelters for the Human Spirit: American Art and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

Journal of Cold War Studies

Vol. 21, No. 4, Fall 2019, pp. 175–207, https://doi.org/10.1162/jcws_a_00910

© 2019 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology

circumventing U.S. government agencies involved in cultural warfare, such as the USIA.³

By examining the Soviet promotion of Kent in the USSR, this article sheds new light on the Soviet approach to representing U.S. art during the Cold War.⁴ The article opens with a discussion of the historical contexts relevant to Kent's engagement with the USSR. By demonstrating how the transfer from late Stalinism to the "Khrushchev Thaw" in the mid-1950s made Kent's first exhibition feasible in the Soviet Union, the article further explores the unique role Soviet government and Communist Party institutions played in organizing Kent's shows. Second, the article examines how Kent's commitment to socialism and adherence to figurative art both made him a target for anti-Communist forces in the United States and prompted him to cooperate with the Soviet Union. Third, the article considers how Soviet ideology and the Cold War agenda shaped the representation of Kent, as well as the reception of his art in the USSR. Drawing on materials from U.S. and Russian archives concerning Kent's engagement with the USSR, the article adds to the existing scholarship on Kent and provides a comprehensive analysis of the complex aesthetic and political factors that made him a superstar in the Soviet Union.⁵ The article focuses on aspects of the Soviet regime's promotion of Kent that have not yet been thoroughly analyzed and presents Kent's

3. Soviet venues hosted the following notable solo exhibitions of Kent: (1) a 1957–1958 touring exhibition in Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev, Riga, and Odessa; (2) 1960 Moscow and Leningrad exhibitions; (3) a 1966 show of Kent's collection at the USSR Academy of Fine Arts; (4) a 1982 Moscow exhibition celebrating the 100th anniversary of Kent's birth. Alongside the "notable" exhibitions in the main Soviet cities, less significant shows took place in Kuibyshev, Novosibirsk, and other locations. This article focuses on the late 1950s and early 1960s because that is when Soviet propaganda established the myth of Rockwell Kent.

4. Kent was far from the only U.S. figurative artist subject to the Soviet policy of representation. However, Anton Refregier, Emmy Lou Packard, and others received nowhere near the level of publicity accorded to Kent, who was a highlight of the Soviet approach and a most notable figure among U.S. leftist figurative artists of the period. For more on the Soviet approach to the representation of U.S. art, see Kirill Chunikhin, "The Representation of American Visual Art in the USSR during the Cold War (1950 to the late 1960s)," Ph.D. Diss., Jacobs University Bremen, 2016, pt. 1. For a history of leftist artists in the United States and their connections with the Soviet Union up to the 1960s, see Julia Emily Tatiana Bailey, "The Spectre of Communist Art: American Modernism and the Challenge of Socialist Realism, 1923–1960," Ph.D. Diss., University College London, 2015, pp. 193–250.

5. For more on the provenance of Kent's works in the Soviet Union, see Scott R. Ferris and Ellen Pearce, *Rockwell Kent's Forgotten Landscapes* (Camden, ME: Down East Books, 1998). On Kent's cooperation with the Soviet Union, see Julia Tatiana Bailey, "The National Council of American-Soviet Friendship and Art in the Shadow of Cold War," *Archives of American Art Journal*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (Spring 2017), pp. 42–65. Focusing on Kent's biography, Bailey discusses his contributions to U.S.-Soviet relations from the 1940s to the late 1950s. In my analysis here I provide a detailed analysis of Soviet institutional frameworks and historical contexts that facilitated Kent's success in the USSR, and I also highlight the limits of Kent's agency vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, showing that Kent was a subject rather than an object of Cold War cultural diplomacy.

Soviet career as a Soviet project in which Kent himself had only limited agency. The article demonstrates that Kent occupied a specific symbolic position in Soviet culture. Soviet propaganda reconceptualized Kent's history to establish the "Myth of Rockwell Kent," a constructed public image that played a significant role in Soviet internal and external policies because it contributed to legitimizing Soviet ideology and anti-American propaganda.⁶ An analysis of the myth offers insights into the mechanics of knowledge production during the Cold War.

Kent's Exhibitions and the Thaw

On 17 February 1953, Kent, on behalf of the chair of the International Workers Order (IWO), a pro-Communist organization in the United States, visited the Soviet embassy in Washington, DC.⁷ While elaborating on the developing anti-Soviet sentiment in the United States, Kent complained that IWO, which was disbanded the next year, was losing its popularity among the public.⁸ Kent also inquired about an opportunity to exhibit his oeuvre in the USSR.⁹ He even brought photographic reproductions of his works, which were forwarded to the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, or VOKS—the Soviet body responsible for major international cultural contacts.¹⁰

6. My use of the word "myth" with regard to the Soviet representation of Kent is meant to imply that the official Soviet image of Kent emerged through a reconsideration of his biography. Methodologically, my use of the term follows that of Roland Barthes: as an utterance (i.e., act of speech) that—besides a basic denotation—has connotations. These connotations are established by a dominant ideology, which they in turn legitimize and naturalize. Therefore, in this article, I explore the emergence of various meanings embodied within the Soviet image of Kent. See Rolan Bart [Roland Barthes], "Mif segodnya" [1956], in *Izbrannye raboty: Semiotika, poetika* (Moscow: Izdatel'skaya gruppa Progress, Univers, 1994), pp. 72–130.

7. A reception of Kent at the Soviet embassy is not surprising. The artist had been in contact with Soviet institutions concerning socialist and anti-fascist issues at least since the 1940s. For Kent's correspondence with the USSR, see Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (AAA), Kent Papers, Alphabetical File: USSR 1941–1950, Reel 5242.

8. "Zapis' besedy s Rokuellom Kentom, 17 fevralya 1953, tretii sekretar' Novikov, posol'stvo SSSR," 17 February 1953, in Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF), Fond (F.) 5283, Opis' (Op.) 22, Delo (D.) 395, Listy (Ll.) 94–95.

9. *Ibid.*

10. VOKS is an acronym for Vsesoyuznoe obshchestvo kul'turnoi svyazi s zagranitse. In 1958, VOKS was dismantled, and the newly emerged Union of Soviet Societies for Friendship and Cultural Contacts (Soiuz sovetkikh obshchestv družby i kul'turnyh svyazei s zarubezhnyimi stranami, or SSOD) took over some of VOKS's responsibilities. For more on VOKS's activities before the Cold War, see Michael David-Fox, *Vitriny velikogo eksperimenta: Kul'turnaya diplomatiya Sovetskogo Soiuzi i ego zadaniye gosti, 1921–1941 gody* (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2015).



Figure 1. Meeting of VOKS Visual Arts Section, 5 March 1953. Credit: Rockwell Kent papers, [circa 1840]-1993, bulk 1935-1961. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

On 5 June 1953, VOKS's visual arts section—chaired by Aleksandr Gerasimov, president of the USSR Academy of Arts—reviewed Kent's art (Figure 1).¹¹ However, despite the dominant opinion that Kent was a “progressive” artist, the staging of an exhibition was ruled out.¹² Lidiya Kislova, the head of VOKS, claimed that Kent's show was “impractical” (*netselesoobrazno*) and did not fit into VOKS's cultural policy of the period.¹³ Indeed, VOKS documents from 1953 and earlier demonstrate that engaging with U.S. visual art was not a part of the institution's work schedule until 1955, when an outline of VOKS's prospective activities raised the issue of arranging an exhibition of Kent's work.¹⁴ Accordingly, on 7 February 1955, Kislova, recalling the 1953 VOKS session, asked a VOKS representative in the United States to

11. “Protokol i stenogramma rasshirennogo zasedaniya byuro seksii IZO VOKS, 5 iyunya 1953,” 5 June 1953, in GARF, F. 5283, Op. 21, D. 196, Ll. 27–41.

12. “Kislova k upolnomochennomu VOKS v SSHA, 31 marta 1953,” 31 March 1953, in GARF, F. 5283, Op. 22, D. 395, L. 102.

13. *Ibid.*

14. “Plan meropriyatii otdela stran Ameriki VOKS na 1955 god, December 1954, in GARF, F. 5283, Op. 14, D. 567, L. 9.

inquire whether Kent was still interested in a Soviet exhibition.¹⁵ Finally, in 1957, VOKS put an exhibition of Kent on its schedule.¹⁶ This transition from declining to authorizing a show of Kent illustrates the crucial shift in Soviet cultural policy that occurred with the transfer of the USSR from Stalinism to the “Khrushchev Thaw.”

Despite rich cultural contacts with the West before World War II, the late-Stalinist Soviet Union was characterized by isolationism and xenophobia.¹⁷ Restrictions on artistic exchange were an essential counterpart of the domestic hardline cultural policy of *Zhdanovshchina* (1946/1947–1953), named for its architect and major Soviet ideologist, Andrei Zhdanov.¹⁸ This policy stipulated the supremacy of Soviet art and culture over the West. Essentially a patriotic and anti-Western campaign, *Zhdanovshchina* was characteristic of the more general pattern of treating relations between Soviet and Western cultures in a warlike mode. A 1947 article, “The Aspects of Two Cultures,” written by Vladimir Kemenov, a highly influential Soviet art historian and art functionary, even officially declared an aesthetic war with the West.¹⁹ Kemenov based his argument on the binary opposition of Western and Soviet arts and cultures. Within this opposition, Soviet art had exceptionally positive traits (progressive), whereas Western art was characterized by only negative features (reactionary). In Kemenov’s view, social factors caused these opposing cultural situations. Bourgeois society was dying or in decay, and its art was therefore decadent. In contrast, the Soviet Union had chosen the path to Communism. The success and achievements of Soviet art were consequences of and evidence that Soviet society had embarked on the correct path.

For Soviet art to develop further, it had to be protected from the allegedly “harmful” influence of the West. Consequently, the Soviet government sought

15. “Upolnomochennomu VOKS v SSHA Guku Yu. I. ot Kislovoi, 7 fevralya 1955,” February 1955, in GARF, F. 5283, Op. 22, D. 500, L. 14.

16. “Plan meropriyatii ot dela stran Ameriki VOKS na vtoroe polugodie 1957 goda,” May 1957, in GARF, F. 5283, Op. 14, D. 567, Ll. 64–76.

17. Although the first Soviet attempts to limit and control contacts with the West occurred in the early 1930s, pre-World War II interactions remained significant. See David-Fox, *Vitriiny velikogo eksperimenta*.

18. Antoine Baudin, “‘Why Is Soviet Painting Hidden from Us?’ Zhdanov Art and Its International Relations and Fallout, 1947–53,” in Thomas Lahusen and Evgeny Dobrenko, eds., *Socialist Realism Without Shores* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), pp. 227–256.

19. Vladimir Kemenov, “The Aspects of Two Cultures,” *VOKS Bulletin*, No. 52 (1947), pp. 21–24. Born in 1908, Kemenov was the deputy minister of culture in 1954–1956. In 1960, he became the head of the section of contemporary foreign art at the State Institute of Art History. Kemenov was one of the most notable opponents of modernism in the Soviet Union. See Oliver Johnson, “Aesthetic Enemies: The ‘Two Cultures’ Theory at the Outset of the Cold War,” in David Welch and Jo Fox, eds., *Justifying War: Propaganda, Politics, and the Modern Age* (London: Palgrave, 2012), pp. 270–287.

to prevent the incursion of as many foreign influences as possible, including academic and artistic exchanges. Western art exhibitions stopped visiting the Soviet Union, and even realist art by socialist artists sympathetic to the Soviet Union—such as the Mexicans Diego Rivera or David Alfaro Siqueiros—was not exhibited during the late Stalinist years.²⁰ Moreover, domestic sources of Western culture were eliminated: in 1948, the State Museum of New Western Art, which housed a major collection of impressionism and postimpressionism, was closed. Soviet academic journals likewise were forbidden from publishing information on Western art. Discussions of European and U.S. visual culture were therefore curtailed, apart from the occasional article denouncing modernist art.²¹ As a result, Soviet citizens were basically unaware of Western art. Most information on Western culture, whether the sciences or the humanities, could not be circulated in the Soviet Union.²²

The United States, although to a lesser extent than the Soviet Union, also contributed to the alienation of the two countries. The second Red Scare (1947–1954), the hearings of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), and the activities of Senator Joseph McCarthy all contributed to a menacing image of the USSR. Consequently, citizens from both countries lacked basic information about the other's culture, with a few notable exceptions. The Iron Curtain cut the world into two blocs, literally preventing free cultural exchange. In the Soviet Union, the agenda of overcoming isolationism started to emerge in 1953 after Iosif Stalin's death. As Frederick Barghoorn argued,

The most striking over-all difference between the post-Stalin slogans and those of the late Stalin period was the . . . growing frequency of “internationalist” symbols. This trend was signaled by the May Day slogans in 1953 which were issued about six weeks after the death of Stalin. The very first slogan contained the exhortation, “Raise higher the banner of proletarian internationalism!”²³

Focusing specifically on Soviet cultural policy, Eleonory Gilburd has maintained that, already in 1955 the decrees of the Communist Party of the Soviet

20. Baudin, “Why is Soviet Painting Hidden from Us?,” pp. 247–248.

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 231, 247–248.

22. This stemmed from the anti-cosmopolitan campaign, which was one of the dimensions of the policy of *zhdanovshchina*. The propaganda campaign, marked by xenophobia and chauvinism, glorified Soviet culture and science while simultaneously denouncing Western culture and science. As a result, information on Western culture was restricted and distorted. For more on the anti-cosmopolitan campaign, see Aleksandr Vdovin, “Nizkopoklonniki i kosmopolity,” *Nash sovremennik*, No. 1 (January 2007), <http://nash-sovremennik.ru/p.php?y=2007&zn=1&cid=7>.

23. Frederick C. Barghoorn, *The Soviet Foreign Propaganda* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964), pp. 36–37.

Union (CPSU) had legitimized “socialist internationalism”—a new trend in Soviet cultural politics aimed at engaging with Western capitalist countries.²⁴ This new party line explains the appearance of Kent’s show on the VOKS agenda in 1955 after its initial rejection in 1953.

The new trend in Soviet cultural policy became especially evident in 1956, after the CPSU’s Twentieth Congress, when Nikita Khrushchev promoted de-Stalinization in the Soviet Union, known in cultural policy as “the Thaw.”²⁵ At first, Khrushchev’s position heavily contrasted with previous explicit anti-American attitudes. Soviet propaganda of the mid-1950s reflected the new ideological trend by, for example, reconsidering the concept of peace. According to the recently actualized concept of “peaceful coexistence,” Marxism-Leninism admitted the Soviet Union could coexist and even cooperate with capitalist countries to take advantage of their technologies and therefore speed up the advent of Communism. To initiate contact with the Western bloc, the borders had to be cracked open. As a result, isolationist nationalist policy switched to a policy of friendship and peace, allowing cultural exchange between the Soviet Union and the United States, as well as with other countries.

The shift in policy influenced Soviet foreign cultural contacts significantly. In 1957, the Sixth World Festival of Youth and Students took place in Moscow, hosting 340,000 people from 131 countries. The festival’s slogan, “For Peace and Friendship,” clearly stated the agenda, and Gilburd argues that the festival was the culmination of the agenda of cultural universalism and peaceful coexistence.²⁶ The festival reflected an increase in artistic contacts between the Soviet Union and foreign countries, as can be seen from the Gorky Park exhibition, which consisted of some 4,500 works from 62 countries, including two canvases by Richard Colman, a minor abstract artist from the United States. From the late 1950s into the 1960s, Soviet-Western cultural contacts flourished, and the United States played a major role in this trend. Crucially, in 1958, the United States and the Soviet Union legitimized cultural exchanges with the Lacy-Zarubin cultural agreement. Previously unthinkable

24. Eleonory Gilburd, “The Revival of Soviet Internationalism in the 1950s,” in Denis Kozlov and Eleonory Gilburd, eds., *The Thaw: Soviet Society and Culture during the 1950s and 1960s* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), p. 364.

25. For more on the shifts in Soviet cultural policy, see Frederick C. Barghoorn, *The Soviet Cultural Offensive: The Role of Cultural Diplomacy in Soviet Foreign Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960), chs. 2–3; and Nigel Gould-Davies, “The Logic of Soviet Cultural Diplomacy,” *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (April 2003), pp. 193–214.

26. Gilburd, “The Revival,” p. 375.

forms of cultural contact—such as theater tours, art and other cultural exhibitions, and many others—became possible.²⁷

In 1957, the U.S. press optimistically responded to the USSR's nascent cultural policy: "MOSCOW, May 21—The Soviet Union looked at its western window today and saw an Iron Curtain. The fabric appeared to be Western, the Government said, and it appointed a committee to haul it down."²⁸ The optimistic political climate of friendship and peace was setting the stage for Kent's show to become a significant display of the new Soviet international and domestic policy. In the context of the Soviet Union's earlier cultural isolation from the United States, Kent's exhibition would signal a particular improvement in relations between the two superpowers. The exhibition thus established the international reputation of the Soviet Union as a country open to the West, a country that had overcome cultural Stalinism. As for internal policy, Kent's art answered the demands for Western art and acquainted the Soviet people with works deemed genuinely American. Kent clearly understood his mission, and in his official statement for VOKS, six months prior to his first Soviet show in December 1957, argued:

That at this time an American painter . . . should through his work have been chosen to be invited guest to the Soviet Union is . . . a matter of great significance. My paintings . . . will be seen and understood, and maybe even loved, by Soviet people. So may our peoples come at least to know and understand and love each other.²⁹

Soviet Institutions Organizing Kent's 1957 Exhibition

The first significant show of U.S. art in a Soviet museum, *Rockwell Kent: Paintings and Graphics* (*Rokuell Kent: Zhivopis' i grafika*), opened at the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow on 12 December 1957. This "large retrospective exhibition . . . in honor of . . . [Kent's] seventy-fifth birthday"

27. For more on the Soviet-Western cultural contacts that emerged during the Thaw, see *ibid.*; Barghoorn, *The Soviet Cultural Offensive*; and Yale Richmond, *Cultural Exchange and the Cold War: Raising the Iron Curtain* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003). On the Bolshoi Ballet's tours of the United States, see Cadra Peterson McDaniel, *American-Soviet Cultural Diplomacy: The Bolshoi Ballet's American Premiere* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014).

28. Max Frankel, "Soviet Bids West Lift Its 'Curtain' against Cultural Scientific Links," *The New York Times*, 21 May 1957, p. 3.

29. "Statement by Rockwell Kent for Use of 'VOKS,' Moscow, U.S.S.R., 15 June 1957," in AAA, Kent Papers, Alphabetical File: Exhibition Correspondence, 1926–1971, Reel 5177, Frame 1524–1525.

included 55 landscape paintings and 163 drawings.³⁰ The exhibition catalog demonstrates that all official institutions involved in the organization were Soviet. Besides VOKS, which initiated the show, the organizers included the USSR Union of Artists, which had sole control over official artistic practices; and the Pushkin Museum, a major Soviet art repository.³¹ The central organs of the CPSU authorized the project.³² The USSR's acting cultural at its embassy in Washington, Tamara Mamedova, managed the project. In March 1957, she invited Kent to the Soviet Representation Headquarters in New York City, where they reached an oral agreement for the exhibition.³³

The Soviet side managed all organizational activities except for selecting works, which was left to Kent's discretion.³⁴ The artist intended to prepare a cross-section of his more than 50-year-long artistic career and included landscape paintings created in Maine, landscapes of Alaska and Ireland, and numerous other works. Some 20–30 of the paintings included in the show were from Kent's personal collection, whereas others belonged to various U.S. museums and private collections.³⁵ Consequently, some of the paintings had to be loaned.³⁶ To expedite the process of assembling the works, Kent relied on a friend, the art dealer Robert McIntyre, to help Mamedova assemble the collection by making use of his network of acquaintances in the art community.³⁷

On 25 May, two months after the initial oral agreement, Kent finally received an official letter from the Soviet embassy clarifying that the exhibition was to open at the Pushkin Museum in September 1957. The Soviet side

30. Rockwell Kent to Holland Roberts, 28 March 1957, in AAA, Kent Papers, Alphabetical Files: American Russian Institute, Inc. (see also: Alexander, Gross W.), 1942–1969, Reel 5156, Frame 398.

31. *Kent: Zhivopis' i grafika*, exhibition catalog (Moscow: n.pub., 1957), p. 1. In numerous letters to friends and colleagues, Kent admitted that the Soviet Union had spearheaded the exhibition of his works in the USSR.

32. "Zamestitel' predsedatelya pravleniya VOKS N. Vizzhilin v TsK KPSS, 14 marta 1957," 14 March 1957, in GARE, F. 5283, Op. 22, D. 569, L. 43.

33. Kent to Morford, 24 March 1957, in Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives (TL&WLA), New York University, TAM.134, National Council of American Soviet Friendship Records, Box 23, Folder 23.

34. The available evidence indicates that Soviet officials did not participate in selecting works for the show. Moreover, no prescreening preceded the opening of Kent's exhibition. This might seem atypical because foreign exhibitions in the Soviet Union were almost always subject to inspections and censorship. Kent's show was exempt from prescreening because Soviet officials themselves initiated it and they had been aware of Kent's art since 1953, when VOKS received photographs of his works.

35. Kent to Mamedova, 21 March 1957, in AAA, Kent Papers, Alphabetical File: Exhibition Correspondence, 1926–1971, Reel 5177, Frame 1449–1450.

36. "List of Rockwell Kent Paintings in Museums and Private Collections," in AAA, Kent Papers, Alphabetical File: Exhibition Correspondence, 1926–1971, Reel 5177, Frame 1451.

37. Kent to Mamedov, 13 April 1957, in AAA, Kent papers, Alphabetical File: Exhibition Correspondence, 1926–1971, Reel 5177, Frame 1456.

suggested the paintings go on loan for three to four months. Mamedova claimed that all preparatory activities, such as packaging, insurance, and other aspects, would be handled by VOKS.³⁸ Finally, in July, Kent's paintings and drawings were ready for transport to Moscow.³⁹ However, shipping took longer than expected, and the exhibition had to be postponed until December. Because of the delay, Kent and McIntyre had to write numerous letters to private owners and museum directors, apologizing for the failure to return the works within three months, as had been agreed. In addition to the delays in assembly and transportation, there was another reason for prolonging the loans: the Soviet side now wanted to show Kent's paintings not only at the Pushkin Museum in Moscow but also at the State Hermitage in Leningrad. Having barely finished organizing the Moscow show, which was to open soon, Soviet cultural authorities arranged an additional presentation, turning Kent's solo show into a touring exhibition through various Soviet cities.⁴⁰ Initially assembled only for a two-month display in Moscow, the exhibition traveled to the State Hermitage in early 1958. Afterward, it was shown at the Odesa Museum of Western and Eastern Art and the Riga Museum of Fine Arts. At the end of 1958, the show moved to the Kyiv Museum of Western and Eastern Art, and Kent attended the exhibition in person. The show drew significant crowds. In Moscow and Leningrad alone, 300,000 people visited, and during the two-year tour more than 500,000 Soviet citizens saw the exhibition.⁴¹ The loaned paintings—initially borrowed for three months in July 1957—were finally returned to their owners nearly two years late, at the end of April 1959.

Given the Thaw and the Soviet cultural policy toward openness to the West, an exhibition of Kent was seemingly a natural event. However, the expanded scale of Kent's exhibition is unprecedented in the history of U.S.-Soviet cultural contacts during the Cold War. No other exhibition of U.S. art was accorded such a significant extension, which was made possible by the specific Soviet approach to the representation of Kent.

38. Mamedova to Kent, 25 May 1957, in AAA, Kent Papers, Alphabetical File: Exhibition Correspondence, 1926–1971, Reel 5177, Frames 1480–1481.

39. Ferris and Pearce, *Rockwell Kent's Forgotten Landscapes*, p. 74.

40. Documents on the extension of Kent's show can be found in the archives of SSOD in GARF, F 9576, Op. 8, D. 18, Ll. 178–181.

41. Letter, Soviet Cultural Authorities to Rockwell Kent about his gift, in *Rockwell Kent, 1882–1971: Zhivopis', grafika: Vystavka proizvedenii iz sobranii GMII im. Pushkina i Ermitazha i chastnykh kollekt-sii: K 100-letiiu so dnya rozhdeniya khudozhnika*, exhibition catalog (Moscow: Sovetskii Khudozhnik, 1983), attachment 2.

Organized exclusively by the USSR, Kent's exhibition was never part of an official exchange. Such exchanges normally involved U.S. government institutions such as the Department of State and USIA. As a solely Soviet project, Kent's exhibition had initially emerged before the 1958 Lacy-Zarubin agreement, which provided a framework for official U.S.-Soviet exchanges. Bypassing the State Department and USIA when getting Kent's art to the Soviet Union meant that the project faced fewer bureaucratic hurdles because the Soviet Union did not need to agree on anything with the U.S. side.⁴² Despite this, the Kent exhibition was still a time-intensive, expensive, and laborious project for the USSR.⁴³ Soviet officials had to carry out a long series of actions and procedures, such as approaching the artist; assembling, insuring, and shipping the works; and covering expenses, advertising, and so on. But without the need to involve U.S. agencies, the exhibition was much more feasible. The history of failures in U.S.-Soviet exchanges in the visual arts proves this assertion.

Had U.S. government institutions been involved in the Kent project, they could easily have derailed the show by refusing to satisfy the Soviet terms and conditions of exchange. In 1956-1957, for example, Alfred Barr failed to obtain some Picassos from Soviet museums and to exhibit nineteenth-century U.S. art in the Soviet Union.⁴⁴ Mikkonen argues that the project nearly came to fruition but was canceled when the U.S. government declined to provide guarantees for Soviet loans. When Soviet officials approached Kent outside U.S. government channels in 1956-1957, they minimized the organizational risks of the exhibition.⁴⁵ Simultaneously, by exclusively organizing Kent's show, the Soviet authorities demonstrated that U.S. art was welcome in the Soviet Union and that major museums could host significant exhibitions if U.S. government agencies were not involved.

42. U.S.-Soviet negotiations over an exhibition were usually extremely complicated, as the case of the *Graphic Arts: USA* exhibition (1963-1964) demonstrates. See Chunikhin, "The Representation of American Visual Art," pp. 159-165.

43. For example, Kislova, in a letter from 28 November 1957, proposed to Deputy Minister of Culture Nikolai Danilov an estimate for the Moscow exhibition totaling 34,500 rubles. "Kislova to Danilov, 28 noyabrya 1957," 28 November 1957, in GARF, F. 9576, Op. 8, D. 18, L. 213. Kent did not receive a significant financial reward for loaning his paintings, and the Soviet Union covered only some of his expenses for packaging and transportation.

44. Simo Mikkonen, "Soviet-American Art Exchanges during the Thaw: From Bold Openings to Hasty Retreats," *Proceedings of the Art Museum of Estonia: Art and Political Reality*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (2013), pp. 57-76.

45. Tamara Mamedova, the VOKS representative in the United States, was engaged in both the cancelled Barr project and Kent's show. Mamedova could not but appreciate the opportunity to bypass U.S. government institutions and work directly with Kent, who was the most convenient U.S. artist for the Soviet Union to exhibit.

Perhaps the most important benefit of this approach was that it enabled the Soviet Union to work directly with an artist in order to represent American art the way Soviet officials wanted, with no limitations set by the U.S. State Department or USIA. The Soviet government was free to choose any artist it wanted; and the works could be exhibited for as long as necessary in cities chosen by Soviet artistic organizations. In the case of Kent, the exhibition was postponed, rescheduled, and prolonged. It is doubtful whether such organizational delays would have been forgiven had the Kent exhibition taken place under a signed agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union.

The Soviet Union's monopolistic administration of Kent's exhibition epitomizes an ideal technique of Soviet cultural engagement with the West: the whole enterprise was done on Soviet terms. The benefits the Soviet authorities enjoyed within such a framework are especially evident when compared to a concurrent mode of U.S.-Soviet cultural interactions—namely, the 1958 Lacy-Zarubin agreement. Dominant scholarly narratives on the Thaw depict the agreement as a significant breakthrough that helped the Soviet Union to overcome postwar isolationism. Although the agreement did allow contacts that were previously impossible, it also deprived the Moscow of the exclusive power to govern cultural exchanges. Future exhibitions under the Lacy-Zarubin agreement were characterized by tough organization, complex negotiations, and, sometimes, reciprocal censorship. Such a mode of cultural contact significantly limited the Soviet Union's opportunities to shape the image of the West in the USSR. In contrast, exhibiting Kent while bypassing the State Department and the USIA enabled Soviet officials to put forth, without restrictions, their own selective narrative about the artist.

Ignored at Home, Welcomed Abroad

Kent's position in U.S. society is a key factor in explaining the nature of his engagement with the Soviet Union. In a letter to his friends Joseph and Trudy Bunzel, dated 26 March 1957, Kent claims that people would interpret his acceptance of the Soviet offer to exhibit in Moscow as subversive.⁴⁶ Kent, who was both a popular and a controversial figure in the United States, had good reason to expect such a domestic reaction.⁴⁷

46. Kent to Joseph Bunzel and Trudy Bunzel, 26 March 1957, in AAA, Kent Papers, Alphabetic Files: Bunzel, Joseph and Trudy, 1957–1971, Reel 5165, Frame 159.

47. In 1937, *The New Yorker* commented on Kent's popularity in America as follows: "That day will mark a precedent, which brings no news of Rockwell Kent." Quoted in Constance Martin and Richard

Kent was known as a landscape painter and prominent book illustrator, widely recognized in 1930 for creating a series of illustrations for Herman Melville's novel *Moby Dick*. He was also known as an explorer who traveled to Greenland, Tierra del Fuego, and other regions. He had memorialized these expeditions in paintings and books created during and after his trips. However, Kent and his enterprises were not always a source of positive news. Since his early years, Kent had been a staunch socialist struggling for labor rights. Throughout his life, he involved himself in various leftist organizations, such as the National Committee of People's Rights and the IWO. Kent participated in leftist movements not only by creating paintings and graphics on social issues but also by his frequent, direct, social-political actions. For example, in 1927 he boycotted the state of Massachusetts over the execution of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti by refusing to send his works to an exhibition there.

Kent's pro-socialist stance provoked a wide range of reactions, including expressions of solidarity from the Soviet Union and harsh rebukes from certain U.S. authorities. In 1953 Kent became a subject of Senator McCarthy's commission investigating pro-Communist books, including writings by Kent, kept in U.S. libraries overseas. McCarthy initiated a hearing, and Kent appeared before the senator. When asked whether Kent was a Communist, the artist (who never was) declined to answer, citing his Fifth Amendment right to avoid self-incrimination.⁴⁸ His response was interpreted as a confession, and the hearing had a serious effect on his position in the United States, making him a *persona non grata*.⁴⁹ Kent's position became even more complicated when, in 1955, the U.S. State Department canceled his passport and Kent found himself both undesired at home and unable to go abroad.⁵⁰

Given the opposition to Kent, the U.S. government might have been inclined to treat an exhibition of the allegedly "un-American" artist in the USSR's leading museums as subversive. However, Kent overdramatized the anticipated reaction. In 1957 and 1958, McCarthyism was coming to its end, and the U.S. press was unlikely to trumpet the HUAC-inspired

West, *Distant Shores: The Odyssey of Rockwell Kent* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 1.

48. Kent's ideology is described most precisely as anarcho-socialist. See Allan Antliff, *Anarchist Modernism: Art, Politics, and the First American Avant-Garde* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), pp. 145–166.

49. Rokuell [Rockwell] Kent, *Eto ya, gospodi!* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1964), pp. 635–640.

50. For an account of Kent's passport case, see Kent Germander, "Rockwell Kent's Historic Passport Case" (paper presented at the "Rockwell Kent in Winona: A Centennial Celebration" festival, Winona, Minnesota, 9 February 2013), http://kenmcculloughpoet.com/rockwellkentwinona.org/events/symposium/docs/Kent_Passport_Lecture.pdf.

anti-Communism, as had been the case at the peak of the Red Scare.⁵¹ Kent himself contributed to neutralizing McCarthyism as part of his continual attempts to restore his right to travel. To get back his passport, he sued the U.S. government, a case ultimately known as *Kent v. Dulles*, and in 1958 Kent regained his freedom of movement. His success inspired a series of court cases brought by other victims of the Red Scare.

At a time of retreating McCarthyism, Kent's show—now less vulnerable to politically motivated accusations than before—was not denounced. However, neither was the exhibition favored or praised. Instead, it went practically unnoticed in the United States.⁵² Shortly before the exhibition opened on 10 December, Kent informed Holland Roberts, the director of the American Russian Institute, that the State Hermitage had requested the exhibition after Moscow and that this was a definite sign of success. Nevertheless, the artist doubted that the U.S. press would cover the show, and he complained that people in the United States had underestimated its significance:

I am wondering if our press will give it even a notice. If we can't even launch a pill into space, we have at least launched a show of American pictures into the heart of Russia. That is at least something that we might well show ourselves proud of.⁵³

Kent's prognosis was correct. Except for a few articles published in the Communist press in the United States, such as *People's World*, U.S. media outlets basically ignored Kent's show.⁵⁴

In contrast to the silence of the U.S. press, the Soviet media provided strong and positive support.⁵⁵ Leading Soviet newspapers and magazines such as *Sovetskaya kul'tura*, *Pravda*, *Iskusstvo*, and *Ogonek* reviewed Kent's exhibition.⁵⁶ The articles' language is rich with plaudits such as "outstanding

51. Landon R. Y. Storrs, "McCarthyism and the Second Red Scare," *Oxford Research Encyclopedias: American History*, July 2015, online at <https://oxfordre.com/americanhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/19780199329175.001.0001/acrefore-9780199329175-e-6?mediaType=Article>.

52. The U.S. press ignored Kent for more than just political reasons. His position in the U.S. art scene was also crucial.

53. Kent to Roberts, 10 December 1957, in AAA, Kent papers, Alphabetical files: American Russian Institute, Inc. (see also: Alexander, Gross W.), 1942–1969, Reel 5156, Frame 422.

54. "Rockwell Kent: World's Most Versatile Man," *People's World* (San Francisco), 7 September 1957, p. 11.

55. Thus, as early as 4 June 1957, six months before the exhibition, a large article about Kent and the forthcoming show was published in *Sovetskaya kul'tura*. See K. Chugunov, "Khudozhnik, publitsist, borets za mir!" *Sovetskaya kul'tura*, 4 June 1957, p. 4. Several press releases were also published.

56. "Vystavka proizvedenii sovremennogo amerikanskogo khudozhnika Rokuella Kenta," *Pravda*, 13 December 1957, p. 6; A. Litvinov and A. Ulyanov, "Rokuell Kent," *Ogonek*, No. 35 (25 August 1957), p. 24; and many more.

American artist,” “the author of remarkable landscapes,” “great master Rockwell Kent,” and “one of the most respected and prominent artists-realists in the United States.”

When the paintings finally returned to the United States, Kent undertook one of the most unexpected enterprises in the history of cultural relations between the United States and the Soviet Union: In 1960, he bestowed approximately 900 of his works on the USSR, adding pieces in subsequent years.

The Gift

“The Great Kent Collection” is how Kent joked about his vast, personal collection of paintings and drawings during an interview with Soviet correspondents.⁵⁷ Forty years later, in the 1990s, Scott Ferris, a prominent Kent researcher, frequently used this label, with no humor intended, to indicate the historical and aesthetic value of the collection, which encompasses Kent’s works from the early 1900s to the late 1960s.⁵⁸

Investigating the provenance of the collection, Ferris showed how Kent’s personal sympathies for the Soviet Union influenced his decision to give the collection.⁵⁹ Kent’s sincere pro-Soviet stance guided him. He expressed his admiration for the USSR in multiple interviews and particularly emphasized that his gift coincided with the Soviet call before the United Nations for complete and lasting world disarmament.⁶⁰ However, these altruistic motives were not the only factors behind the decision.

Kent’s position on the U.S. art scene of the late 1950s was another reason for the gift. In a 1960 letter to Andrei Chegodaev, the artist recalled the incredible success of his 1957–1958 touring exhibition in the Soviet Union and complained that, after returning to the United States, his paintings were still unpacked and placed in a shed at his farm in the Adirondacks.⁶¹ He complained that in the wake of the 1953 HUAC hearing, dealers and museums had steered clear of his art. Before the hearing, Kent had reached a preliminary

57. “Dar Rokuella Kenta sovetскому narodu: Press-konferentsiya v Ministerstve kul’tury,” *Pravda*, 17 November 1960, p. 4.

58. Ferris and Pearce, *Rockwell Kent’s Forgotten Landscapes*, p. 75.

59. *Ibid.*, pp. 74–75.

60. “Dar Rokuella Kenta sovetскому narodu.”

61. Rockwell Kent to Andrei Chegodaev, discussing his gift, in *Rockwell Kent, 1882–1971*, attachment 1.

agreement with the Farnsworth Museum in Rockland, Maine, about constructing a separate wing to showcase works from his vast personal collection. The museum terminated the agreement after the hearing, and Kent had not had a single show in the United States since then.

Such a loss of popularity was typical for U.S. artists and entertainers accused of Communism during the Red Scare. For example, Paul Robeson, a notable activist for human rights and a globally renowned singer, was unable to resume his singing career in the United States after McCarthy's prosecution of him (though he did continue to perform with great success overseas).⁶² Although Kent, Robeson, and others whose passports had been canceled regained their right to travel in the late 1950s, they could not fully repair their reputations in the United States.

However, the decline of Kent's artistic popularity should not be seen only a result of his activism or of McCarthyism and its aftereffects. Kent was an aesthetic outsider in the U.S. art establishment of the 1950s, when avant-garde scored its biggest successes in the United States. In contrast to Pollock's action paintings and Rothko's multiforms, Kent's realism appeared old-fashioned, even obsolete. Kent acknowledged that his devotion to realism contributed to his alienation from the artistic life of the period: "In the last years, I did not contribute to exhibitions because U.S. shows mainly focus on modernist-abstract tendencies. . . . At such an exhibition realist art would look like a horse among a herd of cattle."⁶³ Moreover, Kent argued, even if he could construct a special exhibition hall for his works, doing so would have been as useless as "[Soviet violinist David] Oistrakh . . . playing the violin somewhere in the Sahara."⁶⁴ Given Kent's dearth of US exhibitions from 1942 to 1966, the United States might well have seemed to him just such a desert.⁶⁵ Such marginalization could not but prompt Kent to appreciate the advantages of cooperation with the Soviet Union, where his realist art was welcomed.

At the end of the 1950s, after Kent sensed no opportunities to exhibit his works in the United States in the immediate future and recalling his success in the USSR, he decided to present most of his paintings, drawings, prints,

62. For more on Robeson and McCarthyism, see Barbara J. Beeching, "Paul Robeson and the Black Press: The 1950 Passport Controversy," *The Journal of African American History*, Vol. 87, No. 3 (Summer 2002), pp. 339–354.

63. "Govorit Rokuell Kent," *Pravda*, 17 January 1958, p. 6.

64. Kent to Chegodaev, in *Rokuell Kent, 1882–1971*, attachment 1.

65. The lone exception in this period was the 1955 show *Right to Travel* at Art of Today Gallery, which sought to bring public attention to Kent's passport case. For more, see the brochure *Right to Travel*, 1955, in TL&WLA, TAM.134, Box 1, Folder 8. Kent's exhibition drought in the United States finally ended in 1966, after 24 years.

and books to the Soviet Union.⁶⁶ At a press conference held after the gift was formally accepted, Kent admitted that it should be interpreted as a both a peace act and a particular gesture aimed at criticizing internal U.S. policy: “I can only hope that the American people, who have often shown their liking for my work as a painter, realizing that their access to it is hindered by institutional and governmental control, will understand the compelling motives of my gift.”⁶⁷

Kent’s gift prompted his second Soviet exhibition, which opened at the Moscow Academy of Arts on 19 November 1960. The show occupied thirteen halls and contained almost 900 works; it was four times larger than the 1957 show.⁶⁸ At the opening ceremony, Kent—who had spent two months in the USSR traveling throughout the Russian, Georgian, and Armenian republics—read his donation statement aloud. As with the 1957–1958 touring exhibition, the gift was framed within the context of U.S.–Soviet friendship. Khrushchev personally expressed appreciation of the gift as of a sign of friendship in a 20 June 1960 issue of *Sovetskaya kul'tura*.⁶⁹

When organizing Kent’s first, comparatively small show in 1957, few could have predicted the extent to which Soviet contacts with the artist would develop. Kent’s pro-Soviet position and his opposition to the U.S. political and aesthetic mainstream helped him leap an ideological hurdle, facilitating his promotion in the Soviet Union. But what about the art itself? How did the Soviet authorities deal with it?

More Than a Great Artist

That the official reception in the Soviet mass media was positive is no surprise. Promotion of Kent was, in a way, a state project. Numerous official institutions (such as VOKS and various state museums) were involved in promoting him. The prevalence of favorable assessments is thus unsurprising. Although Soviet critics had published extensively on Kent since 1957, discussion of his art usually avoided much evaluation. Articles on Kent consisted

66. Kent delivered his offer through Chegodaev. On 20 June 1960, the highest-ranking Soviet cultural authorities wrote Kent a collective letter acknowledging the acceptance of his gift. The letter was signed by Ekaterina Furtseva, the USSR minister of culture; Sergei Gerasimov, First Secretary of the USSR Union of Artists; Nina Popova, chair of SSOD; and Boris Ioganson, president of the USSR Academy of Arts.

67. “Dar Rokuella Kenta sovetkomu narodu.”

68. Kent estimated just the 80 paintings as worth \$200,000–\$300,000.

69. Nikita Khrushchev, “Gospodinu Rokuellu Kentu,” *Pravda*, 20 November 1960, p. 1.



Figure 2. Rockwell Kent's *Russian Mass*, 1933 (lithograph). Credit: The La Guardia and Wagner Archives, La Guardia Community College/The City University of New York.

of clichés, involved standard arguments, and ultimately reproduced the same narrative.⁷⁰ According to this depiction, Kent was one of the best contemporary U.S. artists, and his figurative art was progressive as opposed to the decadent modernism that was widespread in the “Mecca of abstractionism” (i.e., the United States).⁷¹ Soviet critics also hailed Kent as a versatile artist who over his long career (50-plus years) had worked in various techniques, including prints, drawings, and painting.

Negative appraisals of Kent's art were infrequent in the USSR and were usually caused by Kent's symbolist works, such as the *Russian Mass* (see Figure 2), which was displayed in the 1957–1958 touring exhibition. That painting stood out from the majority of Kent's realist oeuvre because of its mystical subject matter. In 1958, during a meeting of the academic council of the Pushkin

70. Some articles on Kent were not only compositionally or semantically alike but even contained identical passages. For example, two articles dedicated to different occasions—one to Kent's 1957 show and one to his 1960 gift—were authored by different writers, Evgenii Levitin and E. Krivich, and published in different newspapers (*Sovetskaya kul'tura* and *Literatura i zhizn'*) but included lengthy word-to-word repetitions when discussing Kent's biography and art. See Evgenii Levitin, “Vystavka Rokuella Kenta,” *Sovetskaya kul'tura* (Moscow), 7 January 1958, p. 4; and E. Krivich, “Iskusstvo Rokuella Kenta,” *Literatura i zhizn'* (Moscow), 23 November 1960, p. 4.

71. Anatolii Chlenov, “Polotna Rokuella Kenta,” *Moskovskii Komsomolets* (Moscow), 26 November 1960, p. 3.

Museum, Irina Kuznetsova criticized the work for its stylistic resemblance to William Blake's oeuvre.⁷² In the Soviet Union, symbolist art, such as Blake's, was considered too "decadent" because it did not focus on "objective reality." However, Kuznetsova also argued that mysticism was atypical of Kent's painting and that the majority of his works were realist.

This negative criticism of a small number of Kent's art works by no means detracted from the overwhelmingly positive reception of Kent in the USSR. At least since 1953, Soviet cultural authorities had advanced a narrative that provided a minor negative criticism of Kent's oeuvre while allowing a favorable appraisal of his art in general. Soviet critics argued that, because Kent lived in the bourgeois society where "decadent" art flourished, he was inevitably subject to "decadent" artistic influences.⁷³ Thus, Soviet critics represented Kent as an artist who created his symbolist works unwittingly rather than intentionally. Kent was further portrayed as an artist fighting with "decadent" artistic influences. The fact that the majority of his works were realist was seen as proof that Kent was a "progressive" artist.

Articles in Soviet newspapers and exhibition catalogs often reproduced illustrations of Kent's oeuvre. Which works were most commonly reproduced and why? *The Greenlanders* (Figure 3) was featured in several articles on Kent's first 1957 exhibition in the Soviet Union.⁷⁴ The cover page of Kent's Soviet catalog for the 1958 exhibition at the Hermitage (which took place within the 1957–1958 touring exhibition) also reproduced the painting, which portrays three men using a rope to tow something up a hill. Soviet critics claimed that *The Greenlanders* showed "a courageous struggle against the severities of nature" and that the painting hailed the people's labor.⁷⁵ The work was thus used in depicting Kent to Soviet audiences as an artist focused on the theme of labor. Such a representation was potentially effective: the aestheticization of labor was one of the goals of official Soviet art.⁷⁶ The audience, being

72. "Stenogramma zasedaniya uchenogo soveta GMII, 11 yanvarya 1958," 11 January 1958, in Otdel rukopisei Gosudarstvennogo muzeya izobrazitel'nykh iskusstv imeni A. S. Pushkina (GMII), F. 32, Op. 4, D. 34, L. 35.

73. Stenographic Record of a Meeting of the VOKS Section of Fine Arts on 5 June 1953, in AAA, Kent Papers, Alphabetical File: Kent Collection 1953–1947 [sic], 1960–1961, Reel 5199, Frame 131.

74. See, for example, the article "Vystavka proizvedenii sovremennogo amerikanskogo khudozhnika Kenta," *Pravda*, 13 December 1957. See also Levitin, "Vystavka Rokuella Kenta." The painting was created circa 1935–1940 and belongs to a private collection.

75. "Vystavka proizvedenii sovremennogo amerikanskogo khudozhnika Kenta," *Pravda*.

76. For more on the aestheticization of labor in Soviet culture, see Evgeny Dobrenko, *Politekonomiya sotsrealizma* (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2007), ch. 3 (pp. 208–265).

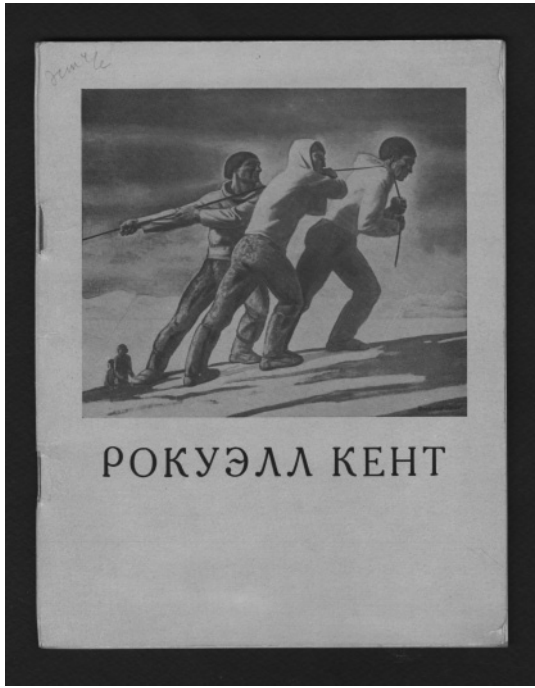


Figure 3. Rockwell Kent's *Greenlanders*, ca. 1935–1940 (oil painting).

familiar with labor themes in art, would conclude that Kent's artistic inclinations resonated with those of official Soviet art.⁷⁷

The Greenlanders was also presented as representative of Kent's art in general. The painting showcased well what the Soviet authorities argued to be typical for Kent's art; that is, his focus on human beings and nature:

Kent's favorite hero—the acting and struggling man—goes through all his art. That is why he might be attracted so much by the austere nature of Extreme North—Greenland, or of Extreme South—Tierra del Fuego, because there the constructive role of human labor can be seen especially comprehensively and stately.⁷⁸

Kent's political prints and drawings were used for Soviet depictions of Kent as a socialist. For instance, Soviet newspapers often featured Kent's print

77. The subject matter and composition make the potential resonance of *The Greenlanders* even more appealing. The work has a strong resemblance to Ilya Repin's *Barge Haulers on the Volga* (1870–1873), an iconic work for the average Soviet (and now Russian) citizen.

78. Levitin, "Vystavka Rokuella Kenta."



Figure 4. Soviet press reproduction of Rockwell Kent’s 1937 wood engraving *Workers of the World, Unite!*

Workers of the World, Unite! (see Figure 4), which shows a worker preparing to hit two swords. Like several other works by Kent—from paintings to book illustrations—it was also reproduced as a postcard. Postcards allowed even wider distribution of Kent’s oeuvre, including works relating to the peaceful agenda essential to Kent’s Soviet exhibitions. For example, a postcard featuring Kent’s *Even in Soldiers’ Helmets Shall Doves Weave Their Nests* (Figure 5) was issued in 20,000 copies and contributed to his reputation as a peacemaker.

The Soviet press never subjected Kent’s art to a thorough stylistic or formal analysis, and a typical article would dedicate just a few sentences to provide a concise, descriptive account:

Kent’s works attract with their thorough execution of details, with the loving attitude of the author toward the subject of depiction; at the same time, they distinguish with their romantic excitement, which is typical for the artist when he tells the viewer about what he had seen.⁷⁹

79. Ibid. The same in Krivich, “Iskusstvo Rokuella Kenta.”

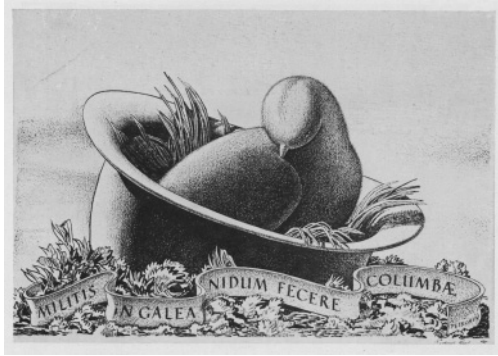


Figure 5. Soviet postcard featuring Rockwell Kent's drawing *Even in Soldiers' Helmets Shall Doves Weave Their Nests*, 1960.

Instead of discussing Kent's style, articles focused heavily on Kent's biography. His artistic accomplishments were never the central theme in the Soviet press. Narratives exploring Kent's socialism, peacemaking, and travels normally overshadowed any discussion of his art. As a result, rather than focusing on Kent's artistic biography, the Soviet Union represented him as a diverse personality. Kent was portrayed as a versatile, multi-gifted man—a convinced socialist who managed to survive the McCarthy years in the United States. He was someone who had visited the southernmost point of South America and spent six months in the snows of Greenland. All of these traits were highlighted in the Soviet press:

A brilliant painter and master of graphic works, an excellent writer, an inexhaustible and courageous traveler, a notable fighter for peace, Rockwell Kent is one of those universally gifted and full of stormy creative energy who are plentiful in the twentieth century, probably not less than in Renaissance.⁸⁰

This quotation exemplifies Kent's reception in the Soviet Union for two reasons. First, it shows the degree of respect Soviet officials accorded to Kent. Comparing him to a Renaissance man indicates the high position Kent occupied in Soviet culture, which tended to lionize the mystique of the great Renaissance man.⁸¹ Second, it demonstrates that in Soviet culture Kent was more than just an artist; he was a romanticized hero. The Soviet critic Konstantin Chugunov argued, for instance, that "Kent's qualities have been

80. Andrei Chegodaev, "Rokuell Kent," in *Kent: Zhivopis' i grafika* (1957), exhibition catalog, p. 6.

81. Eleonory Gilburd, "Picasso in Thaw Culture," *Cahiers du Monde Russe*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (January–June 2006), p. 78.

discussed so much, that stories about Kent have become a legend.”⁸² Indeed, Kent ultimately became a distinct social myth.

The Myth of Rockwell Kent

Kent’s image and reputation became enshrouded through a myth constructed by Soviet propaganda from the late 1950s into the 1960s. He was a frequent subject in the Soviet press, and his books, including an autobiography, were translated into Russian and issued in thousands of copies. Furthermore, Kent was a regular subject of Soviet newsreels.⁸³ One of the apogees of this myth-making is the movie *The American Artist’s Gift*, which shows Kent’s visit to the Soviet Union in the 1960s, including his walks around the Kremlin, his discussions with high-ranking Soviet officials, his meetings with Soviet “workers,” and various other activities.⁸⁴ One of the most significant episodes of the movie shows the Soviet sculptor Evgenii Vuchetich making a bust of Kent. Never before during the Cold War had the Soviet Union’s most prominent sculptor created a bust of a living U.S. artist—a sign of the official adulation afforded to Kent. Photographs of the Kent and Vuchetich session were also printed in Soviet newspapers (see Figure 6).

In addition to championing Kent in the mass media, Soviet institutions frequently lauded him for his achievements in the arts and in public activities. Kent was elected an honorary member of the USSR Academy of Arts in 1962 in recognition of his artistic achievements. As a social activist, peacemaker, and friend of the Soviet Union, he was awarded the International Lenin Peace Prize for Strengthening Peace among Peoples in 1967—the highest state honor awarded to a foreigner by the Soviet government.

What did the Soviet state gain from championing Kent? The benefits were complex. The myth of Kent had two main connotations. The first was that Kent was a peacemaker, and the second was that Kent was a victim of bourgeois society.

The first connotation—Kent as a peacemaker—helped frame the Soviet Thaw policy in a favorable light: Kent’s exhibitions in the USSR proved both Soviet openness toward the West and the relevance of the agenda of

82. Chugunov, “Khudozhnik, publitsist, borets za mir!”

83. See for example, *Novosti Dnya*, No. 52 (1957); and Nos. 28, 41, 48 (1960). These films are stored in the Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Kino- i Fotodokumentov (RGAKFD), items No. 15355, 18592, 18605, and 18612.

84. *Dar amerikanskogo khudozhnika*, camerawork by G. Monglovskaya and Y. Monglovskii (Moscow: Tsentral’naya Studiia Dokumental’nykh Fil’mov, 1960), in RGAKFD, No. 16064.



Figure 6. Soviet press photograph showing the sculptor Evgenii Vuchetich making a bust of Rockwell Kent, 22 November 1960.

internationalism in the Soviet Union. However, a full understanding of the complex meaning of Kent within the Thaw is possible only when other international exhibitions of the period are also considered. Unlike the iconic art shows that occurred during the Thaw—the 1956 Picasso exhibition, the art display at the 1957 Sixth Youth Festival, and the 1959 ANEM—Kent’s exhibitions did not present modernist art, which was officially prohibited in the Soviet Union.⁸⁵ Instead, Kent’s shows introduced comparatively conservative figurative art, acceptable from the viewpoint of Soviet aesthetics. Thus, Kent’s exhibitions were an ideologically correct and “ideologically safe”

85. Although the 1956 Picasso exhibition, the art display at the 1957 Sixth Youth Festival, and the 1959 ANEM did not focus exclusively on modernist or abstract art, Cold War historiography and Russian cultural memory treat them as modernist exhibitions. The significance of those shows was precisely in exposing Soviet visitors to contemporary modernism. See Gilburd, “Picasso in Thaw Culture”; Gilburd, “The Revival”; and Krenn, *Fall-Out Shelters*, pp. 147–178.

alternative to the Western modernist art displayed in the USSR during the Thaw. Kent's works conveniently allowed "peaceful" cultural contacts with the West without exposing Soviet visitors to allegedly anti-Soviet art.

Furthermore, by functioning as an "alternative" representation of Western art, Kent's exhibitions supported the official Soviet aesthetics. Influential Soviet art critics such as Kemenov and Chegodaev compared Kent's shows of "good" realist art to the shows of "bad" modernist art, thus foregrounding Kent's image as a supporter of Soviet art and an opponent of modernist art.⁸⁶ Kent himself facilitated such a representation by straightforwardly manifesting his pro-realist and anti-modernist aesthetic position in artist statements for his Soviet catalogs.⁸⁷ He thus played the role, in the Soviet Union, of the U.S. artist who shared the Soviet regime's perspective on art, not challenging but proving the validity of Soviet aesthetics "from the outside." This feature of Kent's shows was especially crucial for Soviet art discourse in the late 1950s, when, because the sudden, Thaw-granted access to Western modernist art, basic concepts of Soviet aesthetics, such as "realism," were being reconsidered.⁸⁸ Moreover, this access greatly stimulated the emergence of Soviet unofficial art, which further challenged the official art discourse.⁸⁹

Unlike exhibitions of Western modernist art, which challenged Soviet art, Kent's shows legitimized it and, in a way, neutralized the impact on Soviet culture of Thaw-era exhibitions of modernist art. Kent's shows thus contributed to maintaining the pre-Thaw status quo within the arts. After all, his shows arguably undermined achievements of the Thaw in opening the Iron Curtain. Under the guise of cultural liberalization and openness to the West, Kent's exhibitions advanced comparatively conservative art instead of modernist styles, access to which defined, de facto, the cultural significance of the Thaw.

The second connotation advanced in the myth of Kent—that he was a victim of bourgeois society—emerged because the Soviet press and art history publications devoted obsessive attention to the ideological troubles Kent

86. See, for example, Chegodaev's introduction to Kent's exhibition in *Kent: Zhivopis' i grafika* (1957), p. 9.

87. For example, see Kent's statement in *Kent: Zhivopis' i grafika*, exh. cat. (Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Gosudarstvennogo Ermitazha, 1958), pp. 8–9.

88. Susan Reid, "(Socialist) Realism Unbound: The Effects of International Encounters on Soviet Art Practice and Discourse in the Khrushchev Thaw," in Matthew Cullerne Bown and Matteo Lafranconi, eds., *Socialist Realisms: Soviet Painting 1920–1970* (Milan: Skira, 2012), pp. 261–276.

89. Soviet unofficial artists, such as Vasily Sitnikov, Erik Bulatov, Oleg Vasil'ev, and Igor Makarevich, have acknowledged that exhibitions during the Thaw had a major impact. See, Renee Baigell and Matthew Baigell, eds., *Soviet Dissident Artists: Interviews after Perestroika* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), pp. 157, 206, 290–291, 340–342.

encountered in the United States. Whereas the “peaceful” connotation was inherent in the myth of Kent from the beginning, the second connotation flourished only in 1959 and 1960. In articles published during Kent’s 1957–1958 touring exhibition, the idea of U.S.-Soviet friendship prevailed, and the articles did not emphasize Kent’s legal troubles in the United States.⁹⁰ However, Soviet texts from the 1959–1960 period altered the depiction of Kent. Although the idea of “friendship between the two countries” remained, numerous Soviet articles from this period discussed Kent as a *victim* who found refuge in the Soviet Union.⁹¹ This shift occurred along with changes in the internal policy of the Soviet Union, as the Thaw-period trend of liberalization started to decline.⁹² Moreover, in 1960, U.S.-Soviet relations hardened after the U-2 shootdown. Accordingly, what was originally a sign of peaceful relations between the Soviet Union and the United States became another opportunity for Soviet criticism of the United States. Emphasizing the dark side of Kent’s story, Soviet officials cast him as an unappreciated genius resisting the world of McCarthyism and abstraction. In the first Russian-language history of U.S. art, Chegodaev, the leading Soviet specialist on the topic (and also Kent’s friend), canonized Kent as a political victim in a discussion of the reasons for his absence from the seminal ANEM:

[O]ne of the most prominent contemporary American artists Rockwell Kent wrote me that . . . his works had not been included in the show obviously because of political reasons. He also added that he, as well as William Gropper, was absolutely hostile to “careless abstractionism” which was the “current fashion here”—in the United States! . . . The jury did a grave disservice to the American people when they decided to represent the nation’s artistic achievements and tastes in a wrong and comic manner.⁹³

How accurate was the Soviet portrait of Kent as an artist-victim? On the one hand, Kent did suffer as a result of his political affiliation. On the other hand, it does not necessarily follow that this was the sole (or even primary)

90. One of the few exceptions is an article by Chugunov, who briefly discussed the passport issue and did not focus on the political story. Chugunov, “Khudozhnik, publitsist, borets za mir!”

91. See, for example, Chlenov, “Polotna Rokuella Kenta.”

92. In the visual arts, the retreat from the achievements of the Thaw culminated with Khrushchev’s infamous 1962 visit to the exhibition *Thirty Years of the Moscow Union of Artists*. Outraged by the new standards in Soviet official art, Khrushchev launched an ideological campaign against modernist art. For a comprehensive analysis of the exhibition, its premises, and consequences, see Yurii Gerchuk, “Krovoizliyanie v MOSKH,” ili *Khrushchev v Manezhe* (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2008).

93. Andrei Chegodaev, *Iskusstvo SSHA: Ot voiny za nezavisimost’ do nashih dnei* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1960), pp. 6–7.

reason for his declining popularity as an artist. The story of how the art for the ANEM was assembled undermines the Soviet Union's contentions about Kent's treatment.

Chegodavev insists that Kent was absent from the ANEM for "political reasons." He also implies that the curators intentionally omitted Kent because of his pro-socialist background. Artists' political backgrounds *were*, since at least 1946, one of the factors used by the State Department when determining whether to include them in U.S. exhibitions. That year, the State Department had withdrawn the exhibition *Advancing American Art* after the Communist affiliations of several of the included artists provoked significant domestic criticism.⁹⁴ Cancellations of exhibitions as a result of artists' political backgrounds continued throughout the 1950s, and the 1959 ANEM art section avoided suspension only because of President Dwight Eisenhower's personal involvement.⁹⁵ Controversy over the exhibition nevertheless raged thanks to, in part, the Communist affiliations of 34 of the 67 assembled artists.⁹⁶

That dozens of artists with past Communist or socialist affiliations (e.g., Ben Shahn and Peter Blume) were included refutes Chegodavev's claim about why Kent was absent from the ANEM. For the curators, an artist's political affiliation was hardly a key factor. The reason that Kent's art was omitted had little to do with his politics. The ANEM's guiding conception was to assemble contemporary art representative of the U.S. scene. Kent's conservative figurative works did not fit into the conception of the exhibition, which was that of a contemporary art show. Kent's claim that his works were excluded because he was not an abstractionist is also false. Other contemporary realist art, such as Andrew Wyeth's *Children's Doctor* (1949), was included in the show.

One outcome of the controversy over the initial ANEM art section was the arranging of an additional display of pre-World War I realist art. This collection was meant to balance the modernist, leftist artists of the main art section, thus providing a more diverse picture of the visual arts in the United States. Kent was absent from this additional section as well—although, as a realist artist he could have been included in the display. His exclusion is thus a further indication that the quality of his art rather than his politics is what induced curators not to include his works in a grand exhibition of the highlights of U.S. fine art.

94. Krenn, *Fall-Out Shelters*, pp. 26–45.

95. *Ibid.*, pp. 9–178; and Jane De Hart Mathews, "Art and Politics in Cold War America," *American Historical Review*, Vol. 81, No. 4 (February–December 1976), pp. 762–787.

96. For a reconstruction of the controversies concerning the ANEM, see Kushner, "Exhibiting Art at the American National Exhibition in Moscow, 1959."

Nevertheless, the dominant interpretation of Kent in Soviet art discourse was as a political victim who was unfairly ignored in his homeland, and the myth of Kent occasionally worked as distinct anti-American propaganda. Represented as a convinced socialist, a great artist, and a fighter for peace, Kent became a symbol of “progressive forces” in the United States. Simultaneously, his story showed how reactionary the United States was. The Soviet Union used the troubles Kent encountered at home to demonstrate the flaws of U.S. society, culture, and politics. From the official Soviet perspective, the myth of Kent was capable of aiding both explicit and implicit criticism of the United States.

Furthermore, the Soviet Union represented Kent as a U.S. artist with an “anti-American” stance.⁹⁷ Soviet propaganda actively exploited not only Kent’s biography but also his selected art to tarnish the United States. A good example is Kent’s drawing *My God! Can That Be an American Eagle?* (see Figure 7) showing a bald eagle hunting a dove carrying a laurel branch—the double symbol of peace. On 21 May 1960, the front page of *Sovetskaya kul’tura* reproduced the drawing. On the page, the drawing correlates to an article, “The Screen Unmasks the Provocateurs,” which discusses a Soviet documentary about the 1960 U-2 incident. An article below the image provides an alleged foreigner’s opinion about the benefits of life in the Soviet Union and the disadvantages of life in the United States. Appearing amid materials with explicit and implicit anti-Americanism, Kent’s drawing worked as a visual case of anti-American propaganda.

Kent, or his part, steadfastly worked to reinforce his Soviet reputation as an opponent of U.S. politics. Acting as a dissident, Kent openly criticized the U.S. government throughout his career. For example, when he received the Lenin Peace Prize in 1967, he donated half of the award to the embassy of Communist North Vietnam, and during the award ceremony he characterized U.S. military operations in Vietnam as “cruel,” “senseless,” and “marauding.”⁹⁸ Moreover, when in the United States, Kent acted as a Soviet propagandist, defending the USSR from criticism. For example, upon his return to the United States after his first Soviet exhibition in 1957–1958, Kent

97. I distinguish the terms “un-American” and “anti-American” when discussing Kent. U.S. anti-Communist politicians such as McCarthy coined the term “un-American” to denounce U.S. citizens such as Kent for their allegedly “subversive” activities. Therefore, I have employed the term “un-American” to characterize the attitude of U.S. politicians toward particular artists. The term “anti-American” refers to anti-Americanism; that is, to a discourse aimed at denouncing the United States. Because the Soviet Union exploited Kent to criticize the United States, I distinguish the anti-American connotations within the Soviet myth of Kent.

98. “Stenogramma sobraniya, posvyashchennogo vrucheniiu Leninskoi premii Kentu, 31 maya 1967,” 31 May 1967, in GARF, F. 9522, Op. 1, D. 106, Ll. 91–93.



Figure 7. Rockwell Kent’s ink drawing *My God! Can That Be an American Eagle?* used in a Soviet press propaganda cartoon, 21 May 1960.

told journalists that the USSR should not be characterized as a repressive dictatorship: “They [the Soviet people] are free. They enjoy complete lack of restraint. There is no fear of rooms being wired, phones tapped, or conversations reported. They have been conditioned to love and to trust.”⁹⁹ Notably, in the same article, Kent both defended the Soviet Union and criticized the United States by calling U.S. citizens “the most brain-washed people in the world.”¹⁰⁰ Such activities enhanced his Soviet reputation as anti-American. Of course, the Soviet press never explicitly labeled Kent an “anti-Americanist.” To attribute to Kent such an antagonistic characteristic would undermine the peaceful connotation of the myth of Kent. Nevertheless, anti-Americanism

99. “Rockwell Kent’s Comments (Pro and Con) on Visit to the USSR for *People’s World*, 29 November 1958,” in GARF, F. 9576, Op. 8, D. 41, Ll. 42–43.

100. *Ibid.*

was inherent in the myth of Kent, turning it into a powerful propagandistic tool of official Soviet rhetoric.

Thus, the Soviet myth of Kent embodied a contradiction. Soviet officials depicted the artist simultaneously as a genuine U.S. artist and as an anti-American activist. This ambiguity stemmed from the Soviet mythology that conceptualized U.S. society not as a single nation but within the theory of class struggle; that is, as a working class struggling against capitalist bosses.¹⁰¹ Kent, the victimized comrade fighting for all-human democratic values and the artist who created universally understandable art, symbolized this class war in the United States. Kent's story was an allegory showing that progressive democratic forces in the United States were already carrying out the inevitable Communist revolution there:

But Kent was hammered out of some phenomenal material, which was a hard nut to crack for American reaction. The reason for this lies in a firm connection of the artist with the working class, whom Rockwell Kent is committed to. That is why in the name of Kent we greet the genuine progressive America, America of hardworking and gifted people, whose contribution to the development of world art and science we highly appreciate and whose final victory over the internal forces of reaction and militarism we trust in.¹⁰²

Conclusion

In the Soviet Union, championing Kent was a complicated project undertaken exclusively by Soviet institutions. By organizing exhibitions that bypassed U.S. government agencies beyond any U.S.–Soviet official agreements, the Soviet Union had no limitations in shaping the depiction of Kent. Several factors made Kent's ultimate Soviet success possible. First, it was Kent's a staunch socialist with great sympathy for the Soviet Union. Second, it was Kent's political opponent of the U.S. government, as well as his struggles against HUAC and McCarthy. Third, he occupied an aesthetic position seemed passé and out of touch with the contemporary U.S. artistic mainstream of the 1950s and 1960s. In the context of the Thaw, these factors cumulatively prompted

101. Eric Shiraev and Vladislav Zubok, *Anti-Americanism in Russia: From Stalin to Putin* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), pp. 9–19.

102. Vladimir Kemenov's speech at a reception on the occasion of awarding Kent the International Lenin Peace Prize, the Central House of Literature in Moscow (*Tsentral'nyi dom literatorov*), 1967, cited by Vladimir Kemenov, "Rokuell Kent—khudozhnik, pisatel, boret's," in Vladimir Kemenov, *Khudozhestvennoe nasledie i sovremennost': Ot Leonardo da Vinci do Rokuella Kenta* (Moscow: Izobrazitel'noe Iskusstvo, 1989), p. 257.

Kent to cooperate intensively with the Soviet Union, for which he turned out to be a politically and ideologically convenient U.S. artist.

What of Kent's agency, though? Was he merely a political pawn of the institutional frameworks and historical contexts explored in this article? Or is this too reductionist, denying him any agency? Was Kent so passive that he did not (or could not) influence the Soviet Union's promotion of him? If not, how did he influence and help shape the Soviet project of representing U.S. art, of which he was a most notable subject?

On the one hand, Soviet institutions at all times set the tone of Kent-Soviet relations, thus requiring the artist to act within scenarios created by Moscow. For example, in 1953, VOKS rejected Kent's proposal to arrange an exhibition of his work in the Soviet Union. In 1955, however, Soviet authorities decided to cooperate with Kent, thus starting a new chapter in the history of U.S.-Soviet artistic relations. On the other hand, Kent was arguably a coauthor of his future Soviet success. From at least 1953, he had steadily worked to arrange exhibitions of his work in the Soviet Union, and his eagerness to exhibit drove his Soviet career. Moreover, at the end of the 1950s, his most significant action—the decision to donate the “Great Kent Collection”—triggered further exhibitions. Could one, therefore, claim that Kent was the one who “arranged” his 1959–1960 exhibitions by donating his oeuvre at the right time?

The role of Kent's donation—an act of agency—should not be overlooked: the exhibitions that followed would not have been possible without those works. However, that does not mean Kent's donation launched a process that inevitably led to the exhibitions. Donations of art to the Soviet Union did not automatically result in major shows. In some cases the Soviet Union simply rejected donated works.¹⁰³ Furthermore, once a gifted collection was accepted, instead of finding its place at a display it could be put in storage. Finally, Soviet officials could have chosen to arrange either a minor local display or a grand tour. The major exhibitions that followed Kent's gift were unusual. Although Kent had good reasons to hope that his works would be exhibited, he had no guarantee in advance that this would be the case. Most notably, after donating his art, Kent could hardly influence Soviet decision-making regarding its exhibition. Once gifted, the works were entirely under Soviet jurisdiction and in the orbit of the Soviet administration, which alone determined how Kent would be represented in the USSR.

103. Chunikhin, “The Representation of American Visual Art in the USSR during the Cold War,” pp. 85–96, 108.

In post-Soviet Russia, the “Great Kent Collection” does not exist as such. Instead of a holistic display covering most aspects of Kent’s artistic biography, only parts of the collection can now be found at the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow, the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, the National Gallery of Armenia in Yerevan, and a few other museums. Furthermore, only a few key works by Kent are included in museums’ permanent exhibits, whereas the bulk of the hundreds of items are preserved in storage.¹⁰⁴ The Soviet Union’s promotion of Kent and construction of the myth of Kent derived from the Cold War context. With the end of the Cold War, Kent’s oeuvre lost its ideological utility and most of its representational significance. In the absence of a political motivation to exhibit Kent, the aesthetic motivation—the quality of Kent’s art—was apparently not strong enough to ensure that his works retained significant space within the permanent collections of major Russian museums.

Without an Iron Curtain, the power of the myth of Kent significantly decreased. In the 1950s and 1960s, the exhibitions of Kent’s figurative art, although indeed signifying an increased mutual understanding and peace between the USSR and the United States, simultaneously undermined the impact of other iconic exhibitions of the Thaw period, which mainly focused on modernist art. Moreover, close scrutiny of the rhetoric used by Soviet officials when discussing the exhibitions reveals the actual subtext of exhibiting U.S. visual art during the Cold War. For the Soviet Union, “peaceful” artistic contacts did not exist beyond the framework of ideological war. The exhibitions might have officially signified increasing mutual understanding, but they always also implied that an ideological clash was taking place. Consequently, Kent’s exhibitions were another opportunity for Soviet propaganda to present the binary opposition of the Soviet Union and the United States as one of good against evil. This binary frame guided and determined the representation of Kent, whose “socialist” biography and realist art, when nuanced by Soviet critics, echoed and supported Soviet anti-Americanism. When displayed in Soviet museums, realist art by the “suppressed” and “underappreciated” Kent highlighted controversies taking place within the United States. His art drew attention to issues such as the opposition between abstraction and realism, the conflict between genuine art and political censorship, and the militarism of the United States. Furthermore, Kent’s support of the

104. For example, the catalog of the Hermitage Museum identifies 26 canvases, ten of which were included in the permanent display as of December 2017. See *Gosudarstvennyi Ermitazh: Zapadno-evropeiskaya zhivopis': Katalog-2* (Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1981), pp. 305–307. The Pushkin Museum displayed several of Kent’s paintings until 2015. Neither museum displays Kent’s prints.

official Soviet perspective on art and politics legitimized the Soviet ideology “from outside,” and Kent’s criticism of the United States contributed to Soviet anti-American propaganda. Ultimately, in the Soviet Union, Kent, whom McCarthy had accused of being “*un-American*,” became *anti-American*. The Soviet myth of Kent was embedded with anti-Americanism and strengthened Soviet anti-American sentiment. Thus, paradoxically, American realist art in the Soviet context became anti-American.

Exemplifying the unique Soviet approach to the representation of U.S. art, the case of Kent reveals a major technique of knowledge production within the Cold War. Any phenomenon within the orbit of the Cold War was potentially subject to two minimum representations: U.S. and Soviet. Both sides sought to establish a dominant narrative on any given Cold War phenomenon. For example, the antonymic representations of Kent in the United States and in the Soviet Union demonstrate how a debate over a public person allowed a meeting of the two competing discourses. Crucially, while defining Kent in terms of Cold War values, both sides simultaneously challenged and thus contributed to the feasibility and legitimacy of the other’s perspective. Kent’s case is an apt demonstration of this twofold process. Representing Kent as an enemy of the United States was essentially a procedure of inscribing him into the Cold War context. However, the accusations of un-Americanism both represented Kent as marginal in the United States and allowed the Soviet Union to react to U.S. interpretations of Kent. Soviet reactions were shaped by the goals of Soviet propaganda. After all, the ostracism of Kent in the United States both discontinued Kent’s exhibitions in his homeland and made feasible his success in the Soviet Union. As for the deprivation of the right to travel, it indeed prevented him from crossing U.S. borders for some years while greatly increasing the mobility of the myth of Kent within the international Cold War culture.

Acknowledgments

I want to thank the JCWS editorial team and peer reviewers for valuable feedback. I express my sincere gratitude to my colleagues and friends Isabel Wünsche, Yuri Leving, Diana Greenwald, and Joseph Madura for commenting on earlier drafts of my article. During the academic year of 2015–2016, I had the privilege to be a fellow at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. My research would have been impossible without support from the Terra Foundation for American Art. The archives of American Art and Steinway & Sons have been very helpful in obtaining some of the illustrations.