

Rockwell Kent: Artist, dairyman ... and architect?!

BY LEE MANCHESTER, LAKE PLACID NEWS, AUGUST 2, 2002

Many people today are familiar with Rockwell Kent's paintings and engravings, some of which are part of the Rockwell Kent Collection at the Plattsburgh Art Museum. But few are familiar with another kind of art produced by Kent during his long Adirondack sojourn: his architecture.

That shortcoming is remedied with a tour conducted by Adirondack Architectural Heritage, a Keeseville-based organization dedicated to promoting, interpreting and preserving the unique historic architecture that has been erected in the villages, hamlets and camps of the 6-million-acre Adirondack Park.

Rockwell Kent, probably the best-known illustrator of his day, bought Asgaard Farm, a working dairy outside the Adirondack mill town of Au Sable Forks, in 1927. Though Kent had a love/hate relationship with the area, there was never any doubt that, once he was here, this was where he would stay until the day he died.

Rockwell Kent passed away in 1971.

He is buried at Asgaard Farm.

THE ROCKWELL KENT TOUR, conducted last Wednesday, July 24, is just one of 37 programs offered this summer by AARCH, the short name for the 12-year-old architectural heritage organization that's directed by Steven Engelhart.

Engelhart, who lived for a couple of years at Asgaard Farm when he and his wife first moved to the Adirondacks following graduate school, explained that Wednesday's tour was meant to shed light on the career of Rockwell Kent, "not as an activist, not as an artist, but as an architect."

Leading the Kent tour was Anne Mackinnon, a freelance writer who currently lives in Brooklyn. The author of a 1993 article for Adirondack Life magazine on Kent and his architecture, Mackinnon is uniquely qualified to introduce others to him and his work.

"I knew Rockwell Kent from the time I was a very young child," Mackinnon explained last week as she opened her tour. "My father was his doctor, and I visited Asgaard Farm many times while I was growing up just down the road in Au Sable Forks."

Though Kent is best known for his engravings and paintings, Mackinnon said that the man's creativity took any path it could find toward self-expression.

"If you knew him, nothing would surprise you, he was so capable in so many ways," said Mackinnon.

Born in 1882 in Tarrytown Heights, Kent trained at Columbia University as an architect. He left that program just before completing it in 1904 to study art.

Kent didn't design a house until he moved to Au Sable Forks in the mid-1920s. His first project was his own home, which he called Gladshiem, but so great was Kent's desire for social contact that he soon started redesigning houses nearby that would allow his friends and intellectual peers to settle in the area.

ONE SUCH DWELLING was the farm and B&B now known as Stony Water, situated on the Roscoe Road just outside Elizabethtown. Currently owned by Sandra Murphy and Winifred Thomas, in Kent's day the house was inhabited by his friend Louis Untermeyer, one of the preeminent anthologists of the 20th century.

"Louis Untermeyer and Rockwell Kent were very good friends," Murphy said. "They used to go skinny dipping in the pond across the road."

Kent added about a third to the Italianate farmhouse, originally built in 1870. The centerpiece of his contribution was a large, open living room designed specifically for Untermeyer, partly lined with bookshelves and crowned with an open-beamed ceiling.

According to Engelhart, Kent's work on Stony Water "was a very sensitive addition to a historically significant home.

"Keep in mind what cutting-edge architects were doing in residential design at that time," Engelhart reminded tour guests. "The Bauhaus school was in full swing. Their buildings were almost cubist in conception and nearly devoid of objects. He rebelled against that, as he rebelled against the trends of his day in painting."

THE BREWSTER HOUSE, in Elizabethtown, was the next stop on the AARCH tour of Rockwell Kent's architecture.

Judge Byron Brewster was a very prominent Republican politician on both the state and national levels. Those familiar with Kent's own left-leaning political stance — he'd joined the Socialist party in 1904 — might consider the two a very odd couple indeed, but they evidently got on quite well.

"They seemed to have a great deal in common," Mackinnon explained, "in terms of the size of their personalities as well as their gardens."

Brewster entertained movers and shakers from far and wide in his home, the old Durand Cottage. When fire struck the house in 1931, the judge decided to redesign and refurbish rather than raze and rebuild. Brewster could not, however, find an architect whose conception of the project matched his expectations in the least.

"These architects just don't get it," the judge is quoted as saying.

Eventually, Brewster asked Kent to lend a hand.

"I can only imagine that, after hearing the judge complain that the professionals couldn't do the job, Kent would have been very eager to step in," Mackinnon suggested.

"The Kent family lore has it that the original design for the Brewster house was sketched out on a napkin," Engelhart said. "That was taken to Bill Distin, in Saranac Lake, who finished the layout."

William G. Distin, of Saranac Lake, was an early associate of the famed Great Camp designer William Coulter. Four years earlier, Distin had designed the "new" Adirondack Loj to replace the original 1880 structure built by Henry Van Hoevenberg. The old Loj had burned to the ground in the catastrophic firestorm that swept through Essex County in 1903.

"Though Kent had training, he was not a professional architect," Mackinnon said. "These designs grew out of friendships, and they reflect that."

Like Stony Water, the centerpiece of Kent's redesign of the Brewster house was the large, open living room.

"This was the room for which the house was renovated," Mackinnon said. "The

judge kind of held court here.”

WHILE KENT was by no means a modernist, neither was he a fan of much of the architecture to be found in the Adirondacks.

“Victorian and 1840 Greek and Adirondack French and jigsaw Yankee,” he wrote in his 1940 autobiography, “This Is My Own,” describing the structures he saw here. “The better groomed they were, the worse they looked.”

He thought of the bungalows of Keene Valley as being “huddled together like frightened sheep,” but he was equally repulsed by the “phony rusticity” of the Great Camps.

And as for Au Sable Forks ...

“There’s not much in his writings that tells what he liked in architecture,” Engelhart said, “but there’s ample evidence of what he didn’t like.”

Kent was not crazy about the architecture on Au Sable’s Main Street, which had been rebuilt in the mid-Twenties following the massive fire that leveled the village’s commercial district. He offered numerous suggestions on its redesign, even going so far as to draft plans for a new American Legion hall.

But the hall was never built, and Kent’s endorsement of leftist Henry Wallace’s 1948 bid for the Democratic presidential nomination against Harry Truman provoked a backlash in the conservative mill town. Wallace’s chief criticism of Truman was that he had been “too hard on the Soviet Union” following World War II.

“Within just a day or two of his endorsement,” Mackinnon said, “a boycott of his dairy had been organized through the Catholic church in Au Sable. The boycott drove him out of business. ...

“After the extraordinary interest he’d taken in this town, that was a terrible blow to him.”

Kent stopped doing business in Au Sable Forks after that, with but one exception: Though virtually bald, Kent continued to go to the barber shop run by his friend, Neil Burgess, for a weekly “trim.”

When faced with a rent increase at his Main Street shop, Burgess decided to build his own. He asked Kent to design it for him. The very modest two-story structure still stands at 2549 Main St., directly across the street from Holy Name parochial school.

“I’d driven by this house for 20 years,” Engelhart said when the Kent tour stopped at the former Burgess Barber Shop, “and I never noticed it until I read Anne’s article.”

The simple, unpretentious structure shares several design features with the central entryway of the Brewster house, something that does not readily make itself apparent unless one looks at photos of the two buildings, side by side. The Burgess shop actually looks as if the Brewster entry had been pulled straight out of the Elizabethtown home and transplanted onto Au Sable’s Main Street.

ASGAARD FARM was the next stop on the Kent architectural tour.

The central structure of the estate is a huge, white dairy barn with the name, “Asgaard Farm,” painted prominently on its side. A hayloft with a cathedral-like ceiling rises above the cattle pens on the ground floor of the barn Kent built.

Gladshiem, the two-story home Kent built at Asgaard in 1927, burned to the ground in 1969. A new house was quickly put up in its place by the 85-year-old artist for

himself and his wife. Erected on the same foundation as the original, the new home was a much simpler, single-story gray ranch house. It stands there to this day, but it doesn't draw much attention. It was Kent's final architectural project. He died just two years after it was finished.

A rare treat of the AARCH tour was a visit to Rockwell Kent's secluded studio, set off into the woods on the Asgaard estate.

"In all the times I came up here, I never visited this studio," Mackinnon admitted. "It wasn't a place he brought people."

Today, two large easels stand on either side of the huge, uncurtained window that lets light into the studio. On one of the easels, the architectural design for Kent's final home can still be seen, sketched on the same day as the fire that claimed Gladshiem. On the other, three figures can still be dimly seen on a canvas through the paint smeared over them, Kent perhaps planning to re-use the already stretched canvas after making an attempt at an earlier project.

Between the path to the studio and the Kent home lie three stone grave markers: one for R.K., one for his third and last wife, Sally Kent Gorton (1915-2000), and one for Sally's last husband, the Rev. John Gorton (1928-1980).

The motto carved on Kent's grave stone reads, simply, "This is my own."

THE FINAL STOP on the AARCH tour of Rockwell Kent's architectural projects was the home he designed for J. Cheever Cowdin, Wall Street operator and socialite, in the early 1930s.

Set well back on a dirt Jeep trail from the Sheldrake Road, which winds southward from Au Sable Forks above the river valley, the Cowdin house has an extraordinary view of Whiteface Mountain as well as the Adirondack High Peaks near Keene and Keene Valley.

The large two-story home was modeled on Gladshiem, "except that ... every room in it had to be a little longer, a little bigger, and much, much higher," Kent later wrote after he and Cowdin had a falling out over a property dispute.

The Cowdin home, which is available today as a vacation rental, can be viewed on the Web at haystackfarm.com.

TO LEARN MORE about the Rockwell Kent Collection, a permanent installation at the Plattsburgh Art Museum on the campus of SUNY Plattsburgh, visit the Kent gallery on the Web at www2.plattsburgh.edu/museum/kentkent.htm.