



Rockwell Kent
American, 1882 - 1971

Citadel

1932-1933

oil on canvas mounted on plywood

overall: 86.36 × 111.76 cm (34 × 44 in.)

Inscription: lower right: Rockwell Kent; reverse, in black crayon: Landscape Snow

Gift of Deborah and Edward Shein 2013.155.1

ENTRY

Unlike his talented contemporaries and classmates George Bellows (American, 1882 - 1925), Edward Hopper (American, 1882 - 1967), and Guy Pène du Bois (American, 1884 - 1958), who, following the lead of their charismatic teacher Robert Henri (American, 1865 - 1929), made the life of the city their chief subject, Rockwell Kent's primary obsession was always nature and wilderness. Throughout his long career, whether in Greenland, where *Citadel* was painted, or in Maine, Minnesota, Newfoundland, Alaska, Argentina, New York, Vermont, or Ireland, the peripatetic Kent was drawn again and again to a certain type of barren, isolated, and often cold and forbidding landscape. During the course of his far-flung travels, the motif of the mountain came to occupy an especially prominent place in the artist's imagination. As evidenced by the title of his 1909 painting of the Berkshire Mountains, *Men and Mountains*, as well as his 1959 publication of the same name, Kent was fond of quoting the British visionary poet William Blake: "Great things are done when men & mountains meet." [1]

Citadel was painted thinly over a white ground with the weave of the canvas still visible across its entire surface. The foreground of white snow and background of gray clouds are rendered with simple, fluid, and undifferentiated brushwork. By

way of contrast the dark, jagged mountain is constructed using quick, abrupt, dynamic brushstrokes that register not so much as visual illusions, but as directly applied painted gestures in an almost expressionistic fashion. With its stark, bold, central pyramidal form dominating the canvas, *Citadel* ranks among the most iconic and abstract of all Kent's many Greenland subjects. [2]

Kent initially went to Greenland as part of the three-man crew of the cutter *Direction* that set sail from Baddeck, Nova Scotia, on June 17, 1929. [3] A month later, just after Kent and his companions reached port and anchored for the night near Karajak fjord, *Direction* sank during a storm. Kent managed to salvage his paint supplies, and over the next several months created his first images of Greenland before moving on to Copenhagen to complete his popular and lucrative illustrations for Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* and to begin work on a new assignment, Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

Awed and inspired by what he had seen in Greenland, Kent was soon planning his return. Beginning in the summer of 1931, this second stay, backed in part by corporate sponsors, was a much more ambitious yearlong expedition, during which Kent built a home and immersed himself in the lives of the native Greenlanders. [4] Kent's final excursion, from September 1934 to March 1935, was primarily devoted to writing a lengthy memoir of this second trip, *Salamina* (1935), which took as its title the name of Kent's housekeeper and female companion, or *kifak*, in Greenland.

Kent later discussed his Greenland travels at some length in two popular autobiographical volumes, *This Is My Own* (1940) and *It's Me O Lord* (1955), and near the end of his life published his diary of the second journey as *Greenland Journal* (1962). Along with *Salamina* and Kent's numerous paintings, drawings, and photographs, this rich trove of sources illuminates the circumstances under which *Citadel* was made, as well as the philosophical and political meanings with which Kent invested his Greenland imagery. [5]

Karrat Island, the setting of *Citadel*, had caught Kent's attention on January 2, 1932, when he was riding north across the frozen sea on a dogsled from his base in Igdlorssuit to Nugatsiak. [6] Kent next returned to Nugatsiak on March 16, and the following day he drove out to the island after learning of a small house for rent there: "No sooner had I seen the cove where stood the house, and had one glimpse of its stupendous views, than it was settled in my mind to stay. . . . The cove, three sides surrounded by the steep hillsides and ledges of the foreland, lay

beautifully sheltered from most winds. Its background was the donjon keep of Karrat. . . . One would breathe deep and fast who lived in such a place.” [7]

Interspersed among Kent’s writings are numerous passages that explain how he worked outdoors, along with several descriptions that relate to the imagery of *Citadel*. Kent first painted Karrat Island from a vantage point near the modest hut that he rented for his weeklong stay in March 1932:

Just as a painter doesn’t *have* to have a duplex studio . . . so does he not have to have an easel. . . . A stick to prop the canvas with and stones to hold it down: that’s good most any time of year. But in the *deep* snow, a couch; I found one in my Karrat house. . . . With this couch planted to its belly in the snow, my canvas propped up at the arm-embellished end, my palette flat in front of it, I sat next morning on the hill and worked. My theme was mountains, and its foreground . . . the snow plain of the frozen fiord. . . . It must have been near noon when, looking up, I saw that there had crept into my foreground plane a minute sledge propelled by insect dogs. They *did* look small in that immense environment. [8]

Alternately, Kent may have executed *Citadel* while passing by the island in early April: “I broke camp and drove out of the fiord. I stopped to paint Karrat Island from the south. The day was gray but clear: the fog seemed only to linger in the fiord. After painting Karrat from the south, I drove out and painted its fine mountain from the west.” [9] On this occasion, Kent would have simply repurposed his sled as an outdoor studio [fig. 1]:

I would attach a large canvas to the stanchion of my sledge as upon an easel; I’d hang my bag of paints and brushes from the crossbar, lay my palette on the sledge. I’d catch my dogs and harness them. And then, after the mad stampede downhill and over the shore ice . . . I’d recline upon my reindeer skin with the indolence of a sultan and drive off. . . . Arrived, I’d halt my dogs . . . lay out my paints and brushes, get to work. To keep my brush hand warm I used a down-stuffed thumbless mitten through a hole in which I would insert the brush, and hold it in my warm bare fingers. I found it sometimes cold work . . . my blood seemed not to circulate. [10]

Regarding his arctic painting methods, Kent even went so far as to make the rather implausible claim that “nowhere else in all my travels, nor at home, have I been enabled to get about with all my painter’s paraphernalia with such ease, and paint in such comfort, as in Greenland.” [11]

Kent identified the location of *Citadel* when he published a reproduction of the painting bearing the handwritten caption “Karrat Island” in 1933. [12] In a description of the island in *Salamina*, he also alluded to the painting’s title: “about five miles from Nugatsiak is the island of Karrat, which, though one of the smaller islands of that archipelago, is an imposing landmark by reason of its comparative isolation and the noble architecture of its mountain mass. With towers and buttressed walls reared high upon a steep escarpment, it has the dignity of a great citadel.” [13]

Notably, the sled with figures seen at the foot of the mountain in *Citadel* was missing from Kent’s 1933 reproduction [fig. 2]. He must therefore have incorporated it sometime between 1933 and 1950, the year it was acquired by his major patron, J. J. Ryan. That this element was added at a later date is a reminder that, while Kent may have painted for long stretches outdoors, he also often worked on his Greenland oils, sometimes with the aid of photographs, in a more conventional indoor studio setting. More significantly, the addition suggests how the objective, documentary aspects of Kent’s Greenland paintings, whether experienced directly or reconsidered in the studio, were always at the service of a much grander romantic, mythical, and philosophical vision of the area. Kent discussed the import of such seemingly incidental details: “And of the drama endlessly deployed there, the theme is the inconsequence of human life to God. Yet *that*, brought home by the unfeeling immensity of the scene, only deepens in men their sense of the vast consequence of man to man. Despite man’s littleness out there, let him just *be* there, enter on that scene, and as far as eye can reach all eyes have found him. The speck is an event.” [14]

Beyond the significance of small, visual motifs such as the sled, the vast mountainous terrain of Greenland held an even wider and more intense range of meanings for Kent. Seeing the natural world in spiritual terms as “God’s countenance,” not “all that rehash of man’s experience which he terms art, but the eternal fountainhead of all that is beautiful in art and man, the virgin universe,” Kent wondered: “Why don’t men in a godless age go to worship mountains?” [15] Kent’s time in Greenland also compelled him to reflect upon the shortcomings of American society. He wrote that life in Greenland “somehow came to have a

bearing . . . on life at home,” where he believed Americans “yearn for freedom from the pretence [*sic*] that has come to dominate their lives.” [16] The mountain for Kent was a particularly potent symbol of American ideals of liberty and independence: “If we accept the torch-bearing, star-tiaraed Statue of Liberty in New York harbor as a . . . symbol of democracy, we mountain dwellers may allow ourselves the star-crowned, eagle-nested mountain peak.” [17] Just as Kent elevated his direct relationship with nature over his artistic production, he also believed that nature ultimately trumped national politics and culture, concluding that Greenland and “all solitudes, no matter how forlorn, are the only abiding-place on earth of liberty.” [18] More than simply a spokesman for his country, Kent viewed himself, rather grandiosely at times, as “a spokesman for mankind,” declaring that “it is as such a spokesman that I . . . defend the preservation for us all of mountains . . . a symbol of immutability.” [19]

Given its iconic qualities *Citadel* might finally be understood as a type of self-portrait. Like Karrat Mountain, Kent—painter, illustrator, adventurer, writer, builder, graphic designer, and activist—projected a roughhewn, complex, multifaceted surface toward the world that could be viewed multiple ways from multiple angles. Simultaneously, like a citadel or stronghold, Kent was a self-reliant and self-contained man, a supreme egotist working in distant lands who steadfastly protected his own creative independence and whose inner core remained locked away and off limits. One measure of that independence is the difficulty of assigning a secure place to Kent in the canon of American modernism. Controversial and contradictory, Kent, like another lifelong painter of mountains, Marsden Hartley, was too elusive a personality and too talented an artist to be definitively categorized.

Charles Brock

September 29, 2016

COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 Rockwell Kent with sled dogs in Greenland, not before 1930, Rockwell Kent Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution



fig. 2 Peter A. Juley & Son, photographer, photograph of *Citadel*, without sled, not before 1930, Rockwell Kent Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

NOTES

- [1] Rockwell Kent, *Men and Mountains*, 1909, oil on canvas, Columbus Museum of Art, 1931.190; Rockwell Kent, *Of Men and Mountains* (Ausable Forks, New York, 1959). Kent also used the phrase as the title for chapter 26 in Rockwell Kent, *This Is My Own* (New York, 1940).
- [2] Kent also used the same profile of Karrat Mountain as the chapter heading for chapter 33, “Ice,” in *Salamina* (New York, 1935), 170. In this black-and-white graphic design element, Kent depicts the mountain under a clear, starry night sky.
- [3] The details of the first trip to Greenland are recounted in Rockwell Kent, *It’s Me O Lord* (New York, 1955), 439–444; and Rockwell Kent, *N by E* (New York, 1930).
- [4] In *Salamina* (New York, 1935), vi–vii, xi, Kent thanked the General Electric Company and Pan American Airways Corporation for supplying the expedition with cigarettes, a radio set, food, and “six dozen quarts of emasculated fruit juice,” and also proposed naming ice caps after the companies, in mock tribute, on the hand drawn map published with his account.
- [5] Rockwell Kent, *Salamina* (New York, 1935), *This is My Own* (New York, 1940), *It’s Me O Lord* (New York, 1955), *Greenland Journal* (New York, 1962),

and *Rockwell Kent Papers*, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

- [6] Rockwell Kent, *Greenland Journal* (New York, 1962), 133.
- [7] Rockwell Kent, *Greenland Journal* (New York, 1962), 216; Kent, *Salamina* (New York, 1935), 198–199.
- [8] Rockwell Kent, *Salamina* (New York, 1935), 200–201.
- [9] Rockwell Kent, *Greenland Journal* (New York, 1962), 251.
- [10] Rockwell Kent, *Salamina* (New York, 1935), 197.
- [11] Rockwell Kent, *It's Me O Lord* (New York, 1955), 459.
- [12] Rockwell Kent, *Rockwellkentiana* (New York, 1933), n.p.
- [13] Rockwell Kent, *Salamina* (New York, 1935), 198. In *Salamina*, 25, Kent also made an analogy to a medieval cathedral, when he referred to Karrat Island's "Gothic mass."
- [14] Rockwell Kent, *Salamina* (New York, 1935), 107.
- [15] Rockwell Kent, *Salamina* (New York, 1935), 305.
- [16] Rockwell Kent, *This Is My Own* (New York, 1940), 158–159; Kent, *It's Me O Lord* (New York, 1955), 475.
- [17] Rockwell Kent, *This Is My Own* (New York, 1940), 292.
- [18] Rockwell Kent, *Salamina* (New York, 1935), 22.
- [19] Rockwell Kent, *This Is My Own* (New York, 1935), 229.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The painting is executed on a medium-weight, plain-weave fabric that was pre-primed with a thick, off-white layer and is stretched over a piece of quarter-inch-thick plywood, then tacked to the reverse. Infrared examination [1] revealed no underdrawing, but examination with low magnification shows thin lines of painted sketching that served as the guide. The x-radiograph shows no artist's changes. The paint was applied broadly. The brown and purple tones were painted in first, roughly following the aforementioned guide. Thick, white paint was added on top of these colors to depict snow in the mountain crevices. The sky and the foreground were then brushed in broadly, up to the contours of the already depicted mountain. In infrared light it is clear that on several occasions the artist applied his sky and foreground paint over the top of the mountain paint, slightly changing its contour. The dogs, sled, and people were painted last, after the rest of

CE NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS
American Paintings, 1900–1945

the paint had dried. The condition of the painting is excellent, with only tiny inpainted losses scattered around the edges and a thin, inpainted, diagonal scrape in the snow at the left. There is a thin, unevenly glossy coating of synthetic resin varnish over the whole surface.

TECHNICAL NOTES

[1] The infrared examination was conducted using a Santa Barbara Focalplane InSb camera fitted with an H astronomy filter.

PROVENANCE

Purchased 1950 through (Macbeth Gallery, New York) by J.J. Ryan [d. 1970], Oak Ridge Estate, Arrington, Virginia; [1] his nephew, Peter H. Brady; purchased 2008 by Edward and Deborah Shein, Seekonk, Massachusetts; gift 2013 to NGA.

[1] Joseph James Ryan was the grandson of Thomas Fortune Ryan (1851-1928), a wealthy businessman and art collector whose bust by Auguste Rodin is in the NGA collection (NGA 1974.29.1).

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1937 Greenland Paintings and Prints: Rockwell Kent, Gallery of Modern Masters, Washington, 1937, no. 13.

1940 Paintings, Lithographs, Wood Cuts by Rockwell Kent, Meinhard-Taylor Galleries, Houston, 1940, no. 7.

1940 [Rockwell Kent], Dayton Art Institute, 1940, unpublished checklist.

1969 Rockwell Kent: The Early Years, Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine, 1969, no. 55, repro., as Citadel, Greenland.

 NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS
American Paintings, 1900–1945

1985 "An Enkindled Eye": The Paintings of Rockwell Kent, Santa Barbara Museum of Art; Columbus (Ohio) Museum of Art; Portland (Maine) Museum of Art; Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, 1985-1986, no. 61, repro., as Citadel, Greenland.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1933 Kent, Rockwell, and Carl Zigrosser. *Rockwellkentiana: Few Words and Many Pictures by R.K. and, by Carl Zigrosser, A Bibliography and List of Prints*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1933, n.p., repro.
- 1955 Kent, Rockwell. *It's Me O Lord*. New York, 1955: color repro. 240.
-

To cite: Charles Brock, "Rockwell Kent/*Citadel*/1932-1933," *American Paintings, 1900–1945*, NGA Online Editions, <https://purl.org/nga/collection/artobject/164038> (accessed April 26, 2024).