

Rockwell Kent's 'Mosher Book' Reformulation

Back in May I acquired a book for the Mosher Press Collection for which I have been searching over twenty-four years. Mind you, I never expected to own it. I was mostly just trying to uncover the whereabouts of this unique book, whether at an institution, in a private collection, or with a member of the extended family. In the Mosher bibliography, *Thomas Bird Mosher—Pirate Prince of Publishers* (Oak Knoll Press & The British Library, 1998), I simply had to record that the present location of the actual volume was unknown (see Bishop 327.2 and p. 439). Ever since 1988 when I first read about Kent's "reformulation" of a Mosher book, and then long after the publication of the Mosher bibliography, I continued the search. My privately distributed, and sometimes publicly posted, 'MOSHER PRESS WANTS LIST' urged anyone who found it to let me know. The wording on that list was:

Kent, Rockwell, substituted a new title page with an original illustration for none other than a Mosher book. Find the copy of the Old World Series: *Tristan and Iseult*, 1923. Small octavo, the Mosher Press edition of 1922, with title page and binding removed, an inserted title page or colophon saying printed at the Lakeside Press under the supervision of Wm A. Kittredge, and bound there in full maroon niger and binding design by Kent stamped in gold.

Actually my 'Wants List' didn't quite do the job I had intended, even in the hands of one of the booksellers from whom I've purchased a number of Mosher books in the past, but it nevertheless did come in useful in another way. I got a call on May 4th from a dealer who had found the Rockwell Kent item in question. While describing it over the phone I interrupted and told him I already knew a good bit about it, and that it had been on my 'Wants List' for years. At this point he wasn't quite sure if he'd keep the book for himself, offer it as a Rockwell Kent item to Kent collectors, or offer it to me. After our initial discussion I emailed him the "Wants List" entry and encouraged him to look at my list he had on file. My hope was that it would perhaps persuade him that I sort of marked a claim on the book, even though I obviously had no *rights* to it whatsoever. Showing that I had been looking for it was more of a psychological thing. I was hoping to persuade that it belonged here in the Mosher Collection. The next day I received an iPhone picture with no text and for the first time saw the cover of the little book. At that point my gut feeling was that I perhaps wouldn't be offered a chance to purchase. Don't know exactly why. The decision process was totally in his hands and after seeing that image I thought to myself that I could kiss that one goodbye (I said exactly that to my wife)—although I was glad to know about its whereabouts. All was quiet the following day. I left matters alone and certainly wasn't going to press the point. Then it happened. One can imagine my shock to receive a May 6th email offering me first right of refusal after receiving the book for inspection.

Following my May 6th "provisional acceptance" email, receipt of which the dealer confirmed, I immediately went into my research mode in preparation for its arrival. I fired off one email after another to Rockwell Kent scholars/collectors. What could they

tell me about the design and its meaning? Did they ever know such a book existed? I got responses back from everyone, even from one scholar on a working trip in England. The amount of useful information was mounting and I made great strides in nailing down some of the particulars. Actually when writing to these folks I went out on a limb as though I owned the book, yet didn't even have the book in hand, nor had I agreed to accept it at the price the dealer was asking. However, I knew what my answer would be, even though the little book had some "condition issues." I was notified the package was shipped and then FedEx had tried to deliver but we weren't home at the time. Drats! I had waited all day for the expected delivery but gave up after 6 PM only to find out that they made their attempt around 7 PM, so I had to make provisions to pick it up at the FedEx Store. On May 14th I sent off an email indicating: "received the FedEx shipment of the Rockwell Kent book. Looks OK to me so will accept. I'm expecting a payment on a binding I sold last week. When that comes in I'll send you a check." Ah the story of my life--bookselling to help out with some of the bills, perpetuate the business, and to finance the "needs" of a collector. Payment went out in a few weeks and so all was locked, sealed and delivered. Phew! So now not only is its whereabouts known, but I'm just pleased as punch to have it residing here at Acorn Cottage. Upon sharing the good news with a few colleagues, one of my closest book collecting friends wrote back "Whoa! This is most cool. What a wonderful addition to the Bishop Collection. Bravo amigo." In a world full of couldn't-care-less folks, it's nice to have at least some congratulations. As book collectors we all thrive on that, at least to some small degree, don't we?

The first time I actually ran across a record of this book's existence was way back in 1988 when I consulted the following Rockwell Kent issue of the *American Book Collector* as recorded in the Mosher bio-bibliography:

(Jones, Dan Burne). *American Book Collector*. Vol. XIV, No. 10. (Special Rockwell Kent Number) Summer 1964, p. 41. This entry appears along with several others appending an article by Rockwell Kent on the Asgaard Press, but this portion is clearly by Dan Burne Jones who follows with a list of books illustrated by Kent. The specific entry is worded: "Tristan and Iseult, 1923. Small octavo, the Mosher edition of 1922, title p. and binding removed, new title p. with wood engraving by Kent, printed at the Lakeside Press under the supervision of Wm. A. Kittredge, and bound there in full maroon niger with binding design by Kent stamped in gold. Given as a gift to Frances Lee Kent [Kent's second wife]."

Jones doesn't tell us when the book was given to Frances Lee Higgins, but he does suggest that the new title page was printed and dated in 1923. That he would give this book to Frances Lee, his new love (divorced first wife in 1925, married Frances Lee in 1926), seems pretty obvious. *The Romance of Tristan and Iseult* is an ancient and compelling love story which held a commanding position in Western literature until Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Just think of it, Kent designing a little wood engraving for the newly added title page substituted for Mosher's original one, his drafting a design for the cover, after which all was printed and bound to specifications at the Lakeside Press under Kittredge. Believe me, there's much more to this story though, and I'm eager to write about the specific design on the binding which was later used on a Rockwell Kent designed publisher's binding. I want to discuss Kent's wood engraving and how it relates to the cover design. There is also some mystery surrounding the date Kent had

printed on the title page (not 1923 as told by Dan Burne Jones) along with a clearly stated re-identification of the book as a Mosher Press production. All this and quite a bit more I'd like to herein divulge, but unfortunately have to hold in abeyance until I've completed more necessary research. Eventually I hope to have an illustrated article --possibly to be co-written with a Kent scholar, but certainly with his cooperation-- submitted to a publication like *The Rockwell Kent Collector*. Time will tell, and my apologies for not wishing to reveal more at present.

Suffice it to say, matters have become even more exciting in that I have uncovered the location of (1) the original Rockwell Kent pen-on-paper cover design with his instructions, (2) the original Mosher Press cover that was taken off the 1922 book, including the bookplate of Frances Lee on the inside pastedown (amazing that this was saved!), and (3) a proof of the title page. Incidentally, the owner of these materials had never seen the actual binding until we swapped jpg images. It will be great fun re-uniting everything in an article and who knows, perhaps in some future exhibition. Beyond the excitement, however, there remains the slow process of consulting several necessary resources, one being the letters to/from Kent now in the Kent Archives of the Archives of American Art in Washington. Kent gave this material to the AAA in 1969 (followed by more of his papers given by his third wife in 1971 and lastly in 1996). Another obvious source is Kent's voluminous autobiography, *It's Me O Lord* (NY: Dodd Mead, 1955), which I have yet to procure. Hopefully in the end this work will add a little something to the field of Rockwell Kent studies. Meanwhile, it certainly has already added something to the collection.

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