

Some Contributions of a Librarian to the American Museum Movement: Henry Watson Kent at the Metropolitan Museum of Art

By: Alma Patricia Sweeney

This article reviews part of the career of Henry Watson Kent (1867-1948), an outstanding figure in the American museum movement during the first half of the twentieth century. Kent was a librarian trained by Melvil Dewey in the first class ever given in "library economy" at Columbia University, 1884. Before embarking on his long career at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, he served as a librarian and curator for Norwich Free Academy in Norwich, Connecticut, and as a librarian for the Grolier Club in New York City. At the Metropolitan, Kent's contributions were in the areas of museum education; the relationship of art to industry; museum organization; cataloging and registration of art objects; museum photography; exhibition techniques; and museum printing and publications. His genius lay in his ability to translate the concepts of librarianship to the museum environment. An examination of his career at the Metropolitan Museum of Art serves to illuminate the interrelationship between libraries and museums in the first half of the twentieth century.

When Kent arrived to work for the Metropolitan in 1905, Sir Caspar Purdon Clark was the Director, having succeeded to the position upon the death of General Louis Cesnola in 1904. Cesnola had run a one-man show at the Museum without any attempt to define a coherent administrative system. Thus when Kent began work for the museum in 1905, he quickly realized that his first task was to learn to deal with Cesnola's remaining staff members, who were middle-aged men without training in museum work. In his autobiography, Kent illustrated the lack of organization and professionalism among the staff members with an account of his first days on the job:

There was no love lost among these gentlemen. I remember that, one day, one of them invited another to "come outside" which he did, but to argue, not fight. The one chased the other around the galleries. I called the policeman at the door, and he stopped the exciting performance.

The General's secretary, who was asked to turn over the records to me, regarded me as an interloper; he dumped all the Museum records and letters, which were docketed in the old-fashioned way and bound up with red tape, in a vault helter skelter. My first job was to sort these papers, flatten them out, and catalogue and file them in new-fashioned filing cases of Dewey's devising. The

Registrar was an Irishman, who carried a Latin Bible in his pocket, from which he would ask you to read passages, to test your scholarship. A room about as big as a closet was given me for my office. There was only one telephone in the place, in the Library, to which we had to run when we were called, and a typewriter was come by with great difficulty.¹

On the brighter side, Kent's arrival at the Metropolitan coincided with the beginning of more prosperous days for the institution. Money was beginning to come to the Museum in greater amounts, by bequests and gifts. The opportunity was at hand for improvements and expansion. Kent envisioned his duties as Assistant Secretary to comprise more than simply sending out notices of meetings to the Trustees and keeping the minutes at these meetings. Shrewdly, he studied the Museum's constitution. In it, as he wrote in his autobiography, "... I saw ways of being useful, even though not a curator or an authority on artistic subjects. What I had learned in the Columbia Library School, in the Norwich museum, in the Grolier Club, and in my study of European museums could be put to work here, and Mr. de Forest was complaisant and willing to let me try out new ideas."²

Developing a Card Catalogue

Kent recognized that libraries had generally abandoned the use of the large, ungainly accession volumes which the Metropolitan had imitated in accessioning art objects. A major priority for him became the development of a card catalogue system for the museum records. Photographically sensitized cardboard, guaranteed to last, was available. Kent devised a catalogue card which had the description of the object on the recto and a photograph of it on the verso. Copies of these cards were made for the accession clerk, the curatorial department concerned, the Sales and Information Desk, and the general catalogue. Kent organized a catalogue division to assume the responsibility for these duties, and worked out a set of rules for cataloguing art objects and a glossary of terms used in the various arts. For the benefit of the entire organization, he defined clear procedures for loans and all other movements of the art objects as well as methods of cooperation between the curatorial departments and the catalogue division. As a result, a measure of uniformity and consistency in cataloging became possible and the record of the Museum's possessions could be easily used by the public as well as by the Museum personnel.

This system of cataloguing necessitated the development of a photographic studio in the museum. Kent hired a photographer and had him set up shop in the basement. In a short time, the photographic studio became a thriving operation, turning out a variety of enlargements, publicity and sales photographs, and lantern slides for lectures, in addition to the cards for the registrar and the catalogue division.

Recording and Tracking Transactions By the Museum

Kent recognized another major priority as that of drawing up a system to make the Museum's business run smoothly and effectively:

The making of a kind of machine which should allow the museum to carry on its work easily and intelligently, which should automatically inform all the many

employees what was being done and what they should know of such things, at the least expense and labor — this was the task that fell to me as the entrepreneur between the initiators of all action, the Trustees, and their employees.³

Kent worked out a procedure for the museum which would ensure notification of a given action to all concerned — donor, vendor, curator, treasurer, registrar, photographer, sales department, and daily press. In a paper read before the American Association of Museums on May 23, 1911, Kent gave a detailed account of his system regarding bequests, gifts, and purchases.⁴

As a trained librarian, Kent recognized another use for his services in the Museum's library. Kent worked with the art librarian, William Clifford, in establishing a reference collection of photographs, a lending collection of lantern slides, and study rooms for students who desired to study objects which were not on exhibit. Kent was responsible, as well, for the establishment of an information and sales desk. His willingness to perform countless tedious but necessary duties quickly made Kent an indispensable man in the museum. In fact, so thoroughly had he entrenched himself in the Museum that, a year after he joined the staff, he was made Acting Director during a period when Sir Purdon Clark and his assistant director, Edward Robinson, were both away.

Kent's Achievements

Kent's innovations were often simply applications of Melvil Dewey's library methods to the museum environment. These methods proved so effective at the Metropolitan that they have continued in use there until the present day, and they were gradually adopted in various forms, not only by the new museums which were springing up around the country (forty-six art galleries were in the United States in 1905), but also by most of the established older museums in this country and in Europe. On June 6, 1916, at the opening ceremony of the Cleveland Museum of Art's new building, the president, Judge William Sanders, acknowledged Kent's advisory services: "From the outset your Building Committee has had the devoted assistance of Mr. Henry Kent, who has given most generously of his time and skill and wide museum experience in assisting in what has here been accomplished. On behalf of the trustees I wish to publicly acknowledge our very grateful appreciation of all Mr. Kent has done."⁵ Kent was the guest speaker at the opening ceremony and in presenting Kent to the audience, Judge Sanders stated: "It is quite a strain upon our affections to treat Mr. Kent as of the Metropolitan Museum. We know him so well and prize him so highly, and appreciate so much all that he has done for us, that we think of him rather as one of us than a guest."⁶

Henry Watson Kent, then, was an outstanding figure in the American museum movement of the first half of the twentieth century. His genius lay in his ability to transfer the concepts and experiences of his training in librarianship to the museum environment. The development of Kent's career at the Metropolitan Museum of Art exemplified the close relationship between the

library world and the museum world in America during this period. Through the efforts of Henry Watson Kent, American librarianship contributed to the growth of the American museum.

At the Metropolitan Kent was well on his way to earning Calvin Tompkins' appraisal, in 1976, as "without doubt, the greatest American museum man of his generation."⁷

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¹Henry Watson Kent, *What I Am Pleased to Call My Education*, (New York: The Grolier Club, 1949), p. 114.

²*Ibid.*, p. 138.

³*Ibid.*, p. 141.

⁴Henry Watson Kent, "Some Business Methods in The Metropolitan Museum of Art," *Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, VI (May 23, 1911), 169-170.

⁵"Inauguration," *Cleveland Museum of Art Bulletin*, III (June 1916), 2.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁷Calvin Tompkins, *Merchants and Masterpieces* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1973), p. 115.

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