

Adaline Kent: The Click of Authenticity

The midcentury artist Adaline Dutton Kent (1900–1957) was an energetic innovator who hailed from the town of Kentfield in Marin County, California—named after her grandfather, Albert E. Kent. She came from a legendary family of early environmentalists who donated land to the U.S. government to preserve the areas now known as Muir Woods National Monument, Mount Tamalpais State Park, and the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. She was also a member of the San Francisco Bay Area’s most productive modern artistic clan, which included Charles Howard, Madge Knight, John Langley Howard, Robert B. Howard, Henry Temple Howard, and Jane Berlandina. This exhibition is the first comprehensive examination of Kent’s artistic contributions since 1958.

While Kent considered herself primarily a sculptor, she applied her aesthetic skills to a wide variety of media, including drawings, paintings, design, and even jewelry, so that each endeavor was a newly formed idea and expression. Merging formal dynamism and inventiveness, her stylistic approach was personal and yet also connected to and informed by antiquity, as well as such contemporaries as Gordon Onslow Ford, Charles Howard, Roberto Matta, Isamu Noguchi, and Jeanne Reynal. Beginning in 1949, Kent showed with the Betty Parsons Gallery in New York, a dealer known for supporting exceptional talent such as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Clyfford Still.

Kent was a devout explorer, both aesthetically and recreationally. She and her husband, Robert B. Howard, spent months at a time each summer venturing into the craggy terrains and higher elevations of the Sierra Nevada mountains, with their experiences and discoveries informing the objects they produced. Guided by her love for the natural environment, Kent made inventive abstract sculptures, drawings, and uniquely incised paintings that merged her deep interest in the organic world with her steadfast pursuit of authenticity. She wrote down many of her ideas on art and nature, filling notebooks and scraps of paper with her thoughts. In part of a poetic note entitled “Classic Romantic Mystic,” she wrote, “I want to hear the click of authenticity.” The title of the exhibition takes its inspiration from this quote, underscoring the creative drive that propelled Kent in life.

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Early Figurative Work [Room 1]

From the outset, Adaline Kent infused her work with her interest in the natural world. From the 1920s through the 1930s she made endearing sculptures of animals and elegant human figures, typically of young women, out of diverse materials such as granite, terracotta, brass, and bronze. Pared of detail, her sculptures from this period were reduced to their essential form and simplified gestures. Similarly, her surfaces were smooth, reflecting a classical sense of elegance. After graduating from Vassar College in 1923, Kent attended the California School of Fine Arts (later renamed the San Francisco Art Institute) for a year, studying with the great Bay Area social realist Ralph Stackpole, who taught her direct carving techniques. She then went to Paris in 1924, where she would live for several years (while making trips back to the Bay Area) and study briefly at the Grand Chaumière Academy with Antoine Bourdelle, who was a former student of Auguste Rodin and also taught artists such as Henri Matisse and Alberto Giacometti. Bourdelle was known for his dynamic sculptures that relied on opposing planes to establish a sense of rhythmic tension and balance and to keep the eye moving around static forms carved in stone or cast in bronze. Kent applied this strategy in many of her sculptures, especially later in life. The effects of movement, especially its relation to time and space, are something that would continue to interest and engage Kent in her later abstract work.

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Golden Gate International Exhibition [Room 1]

From 1939 to 1940, the Golden Gate International Exposition on San Francisco's Treasure Island opened its gates to visitors under the theme Pacific Unity. Initially organized to mark the openings of the Golden Gate and Bay Bridges, this exposition mobilized scores of architects, engineers, landscapists, and artists during the Depression in the creation of a yearlong cultural showcase that hailed San Francisco as a gateway to the Pacific. Architect Timothy Pflueger advocated for artists' engagement with the fair. The Court of Pacifica, with its *Pacific Unity* sculptures, served as the centerpiece for the exposition, with Ralph Stackpole's eighty-foot-tall *Pacifica* statue (pictured here) overlooking a relief mural by sisters Esther, Margaret, and Helen Bruton. The sculptures surrounding the fountain at the Court of Pacifica were crafted by Kent, Helen Phillips, Jacques Schnier, Carl George, Brents Carlton, Sargent Johnson, Cecilia Graham, and Ruth Cravath.

Adaline Kent produced a three-piece sculpture group, *Islands of the Pacific* (1938; pictured here) that adorned the Fountain of Western Waters in the Court of Pacifica. Two female figures, *Young Girls Resting in Sun Listening*, recline and take in the music emanating from the third sculpture, *Young Man Improvising Music*, positioned on one of the fountain's upper tiers. In her *Young Girls Resting in Sun Listening*, one sees how Kent applied the ideas concerning movement she had learned in Paris from Antoine Bourdelle. The strong horizontal of the young girl's outstretched left arm on the lower left contrasts with the flowing lines of her legs below, which intersect at various angles. In notes for a lecture that Kent delivered at the Legion of Honor museum on June 7, 1944, she observed, "Bourdelle . . . consciously found formal movement shifting planes—arranging forms so the angles are ever-changing." Kent, too, achieved movement through the application of shifting planes, or thrust and counterthrust, in her sculptures. In addition, Kent created *Air* and *Water* (also picture here), two bas-relief sculptures that presided over the west arches of the Court of Honor, which were destroyed after the exhibition ended. *Young Girls Resting in Sun Listening* can be viewed today at the entrance to the Treasure Island Museum in San Francisco.

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[Pull-quote for room:]

There is underlying meaning to the world. We catch and follow the clues we can find in nature, in ourselves, and in the manifestation of other artists. We work in truth within the limits of our personalities but these limits are infinitely expandable. —Adaline Kent

Infinity and the High Sierra [Room 2]

The mountains were a place Adaline Kent visited regularly for artistic inspiration and rejuvenation. In fact, she referred to herself as “an addict of the High Sierra.” Kent’s trademark signature, more symbol than script, even resembles the shape of a mountain, embedded with her initials “AK” that she transformed into a flickering star. From her trips to the higher elevations, Kent typically brought back many items she had collected: striated rocks, scraps of metal, rusty nails, shells, weathered branches, fungus, and fragments of obsidian. Kent was not interested, however, in reproducing these objects literally; she was more intrigued by the organic effects they could inspire, in their capacity to yield original ideas and abstract patterns, textures, and forms for her art.

Kent was referred to as an “infinity-conscious artist” by those who knew her well. In her work, the infinity symbol aligns with representations of alpine lakes, waterfalls, and ski slopes. It can be understood as a fusion of her interests in time, space, and nature. Kent did a suite of drawings in 1944 that focus on the synthesis of time, waterfalls, and mountaintops. In these works, a lemniscate (figure-eight shaped curve) appears above, as if resting atop two summits, and then continues downward vertically in a line that flows to the base, like water streaming down frozen elevations and into lush valleys. Kent applied this infinity symbol to many different works after that series, from her sculpture to her incised paintings with tempera. For Kent, the infinite was the wellspring of the growth and knowledge that led her to the discovery of her truth. It was what she experienced in the mountains and was what she hoped to express in her art. Through her artwork, she transcended earthly experience and ventured into the infinite.

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For a long time, both summer and winter, I have gotten health and strength in the high mountains. Lately I have gotten ideas of a forcefulness to preclude all others. —Adaline Kent

Movement and Balance [Room 3]

Movement was something Adaline Kent appreciated in sculpture, and realizing the rhythms of her own body in space and time was likewise an important dimension of her artistic practice. She kept gymnastic rings hanging in her studio that she used skillfully, and often for inspiration. Physical movement—whether skiing or hiking in the mountains, dancing, biking across France, or practicing on her rings—was something she thought about in relation to her art. She likened movement to an expression of time in both two- and three-dimensional forms. She sought to make work that visually and aesthetically “vibrated.” Kent believed, however, that movement must be tempered by balance. The fusion of movement and balance produced a timeless quality in art. In a lecture she gave on sculpture in 1944 at San Francisco’s Legion of Honor museum, Kent noted: “From a purely physical point of view, a thing in three dimensions must have balance—equilibrium so that it holds its place in space. In a mobile it is balance that defines forms in space (traces movements)....Sculpture must balance aesthetically too so that the whole is interesting, not just a spot here or there.”

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[Pull-quote for room:]

To me, skiers, dancers, trapeze artists provide pleasure comparable to that of sculpture—an idea of form in space, space in form, movement controlled in space, free yet disciplined in composition. The feeling of space and movement seems to be of the essence of our time. Whether movement is physical or implied, I think it is the same. —Adaline Kent

Films [room 4]

Kent often visited the High Sierra with her husband for inspiration and rejuvenation. They frequently brought along a 16mm film camera to record their adventures. The many natural wonders they encountered and reveled in—hummingbirds drinking from flowers, gnarled branches embedded in rock, exquisite mountain blossoms, cantilevered ice formations, frogs, melting ice, gushing fountains, wide-open vistas—and the couple's ease and comfort in the rugged, extreme environs are captured in lush Kodachrome film. In this gallery a selection of some of the films they made have been transferred to video.

An agile Kent can be seen climbing the craggy terrains, happily guiding horses along narrow paths and steep inclines, and otherwise relishing the numerous natural wonders of the mountains. She typically brought back many items she had collected on these trips: striated rocks, scraps of metal, rusty nails, shells, weathered branches, fungus, and fragments of obsidian. These discoveries were then displayed at the family home in Kentfield in "exhibitions" where she and her husband would tell stories about the objects and share them with relatives. In the first film, we see glimpses of their wedding, on August 5, 1930, and then their honeymoon, which was spent experiencing wonders of the natural landscape, from Mono Lake and Devil's Pile to Death Valley. These films and the photographs from their travels were often used later by Kent as source material, and she kept various objects she had collected on display in her studio.

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Abstraction and Antiquity [Room 5]

After returning in early 1954 from a three-month trip to Paris, Rome, Egypt, and Greece, Adaline Kent began working in a new vein, creating terracotta sculptures that drew inspiration from the ancient structures and landscapes she had absorbed on these travels. About this body of work, she stated: “The forms are the outcome of a recent trip to the Mediterranean. Reflections of geographical, architectural, mythological and other aspects of the voyage constitute something of a journal.” She had used terracotta early on, making naturalistic sculptures of women, children, and animals, but this later work was entirely abstract. Many of the pieces on view in this gallery were shown in Kent’s solo exhibition at the Legion of Honor museum in San Francisco in 1955.

In the inventive forms Kent created, one can see that she was drawn to the interactions of light and shadows staged by her encounters with archaic ritual objects, architecture carved into rocky hillsides, lamps hanging in mosques, acoustic grottoes, and pylons in the Nile Valley. Some were made as lanterns, to hold a flickering candle within, as a sacred object. These sculptures demonstrate how she processed the mysteries she perceived in antiquity, resulting in sculptures that simultaneously recall vessels and prehistoric architecture and yet remain expressions of her present. Kent did not have her own kiln, but she often took her ceramic sculptures to Edith Heath to fire in her Sausalito studio, which became Heath Ceramics.

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I want the power of Stonehenge and the magic of the South Pacific in language of the Wide Present. —Adaline Kent

Classic Romantic Mystic: Mind, Heart, and Soul [Room 6]

There is
The order within, the rhythm of the mind,
beating of time in the heart.
A Thing is nothing without its own existence
to make things that are beings
ideas which are beings.
To find the way leading to the disclosure of beings.
The disclosure (presentation) of fresh beings.
Don't say creation because
there must be about them an air of inevitable presence.
Timeless existence around the present.
A revelation.
The capture of a living idea.
Beings independent of their deceptive ordinary frequent appearance.
Freed from trappings of convention—of the flat eye.
Things across Time.
I want to hear the click of authenticity.

Adaline Kent, April 17, 1945

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[Pull-quote for room:]

Sculpture is adventure into the unknown. —Adaline Kent