

The Museum of Modern Art

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART CELEBRATES THE “LIVE EYE” OF LINCOLN KIRSTEIN AND HIS INFLUENCE AT MoMA AND BEYOND

NEW YORK, November 5, 2018—The Museum of Modern Art announces *Lincoln Kirstein’s Modern*, an exhibition exploring Lincoln Kirstein’s sweeping contributions to American cultural life in the 1930s and ’40s, on view from March 17 through June 30, 2019. Best known for co-founding the New York City Ballet, Kirstein (1907–1996), a polymathic writer, curator, editor, impresario, tastemaker, and patron, was also a key figure in MoMA’s early history. With his prescient belief in the role of dance within the museum, his championing of figuration in the face of prevailing abstraction, and his position at the center of a New York network of queer artists, intimates, and collaborators, the impact of this extraordinary individual remains profoundly resonant today. Seen through the lens of Kirstein, the works in the exhibition reveal an alternative and expansive view of modern art. *Lincoln Kirstein’s Modern* is organized by Jodi Hauptman, Senior Curator, and Samantha Friedman, Associate Curator, Department of Drawings and Prints, MoMA.

Kirstein proclaimed, “I have a live eye,” and the exhibition illuminates the influence of his vision, tastes, and efforts on the Museum’s collecting, exhibition, and publication history. *Lincoln Kirstein’s Modern* features more than 200 works from the Museum’s collection—set and costume designs for the ballet by Paul Cadmus and Jared French, photographs by Walker Evans and George Platt Lynes, realist and magic realist paintings by Honoré Sharrer and Pavel Tchelitchew, sculpture by Elie Nadelman and Gaston Lachaise, and the Latin American art that Kirstein acquired for the Museum by artists such as Antonio Berni and Raquel Forner—alongside material drawn from the Museum Archives.

Introducing Kirstein

The exhibition introduces Kirstein through his pioneering undertakings as an undergraduate at Harvard University in the 1920s, which were important precursors to his lifelong passions. Examples on view include archival materials relating to *Hound & Horn*, the literary quarterly (1927–34) he founded at age 20, with content ranging from the poetry of Ezra Pound and E. E. Cummings to the photography of Walker Evans. Other materials relate to the Harvard Society for Contemporary Art (1929–36), which was spearheaded by Kirstein and presented topics as diverse as Buckminster Fuller and the Bauhaus, Mexican modernism and photography. The Society’s exhibition program provided an important model for founding MoMA director Alfred Barr in the Museum’s nascent years. Additionally, *Lincoln Kirstein’s Modern* traces Kirstein’s social and professional circle through photographic and drawn portraits from the collection.

Dance

With the School of the American Ballet and the New York City Ballet, Kirstein and the Russian-born choreographer George Balanchine created a world-renowned ballet school and company. Less well known is the fact that he established a short-lived Dance Archives and subsequent curatorial department of theater and dance at MoMA. Kirstein's central role in the development of a uniquely American ballet and his belief in the place of dance at the Museum are key themes of the exhibition. His commitment to dance—which he regarded as the most complete of the arts for its integration of movement, music, and design—fueled his belief that it should be a central part of MoMA's activities. This section of the exhibition pays tribute to that important and prescient institutional history with material ranging from drawings by Vaslav Nijinsky to issues of *Dance Index*, this country's first scholarly dance journal, which was founded by Kirstein.

Kirstein persuaded Balanchine to come to America in 1933, and before establishing the New York City Ballet in 1948, Kirstein founded multiple precursor endeavors, such as the School of American Ballet (1934) and the American Ballet (1934); the traveling companies Ballet Caravan (1936) and American Ballet Caravan (1941); and Ballet Society (1946). *Lincoln Kirstein's Modern* includes designs by Jared French and Paul Cadmus (Kirstein's brother-in-law), which testify to Kirstein's commitment to exploring American themes and mythologies in ballets such as *Billy the Kid* and *Filling Station*. Reflecting the range of Kirstein's taste, the exhibition also highlights Neo-Romantic ballet designs by artists like Pavel Tchelitchew and Kurt Seligmann. Many of these ballets, such as *The Four Temperaments*, are still performed today, though stripped of these ornate costumes to accommodate the clean classicism that Balanchine preferred.

Photography

Kirstein's commitment to photography is another important area of focus. His relationship with Walker Evans dates to 1930, when he published Evans's early writings on photography in *Hound & Horn* and included him in a Harvard Society for Contemporary Art exhibition. The following year, Kirstein invited Evans to New England to photograph Victorian houses for a book project that never came to fruition. Kirstein subsequently donated the series to MoMA in 1933, resulting in the Museum's first monographic presentation of photography, and a selection of these works return to view in the exhibition. Representing a very different aesthetic, the photographer George Platt Lynes ran in the same social circle of queer artists, writers, and dancers as Kirstein, and the exhibition includes a selection of works by Platt Lynes. Newly acquired examples of the collaborative photography of PaJaMa—the moniker Paul Cadmus, Jared French, and Margaret French adopted from the first two letters of their first names—further illuminate this network. Finally, selections from Frances Benjamin Johnston's *Hampton Album* (1899–1900) show scenes from the Hampton Institute (now Hampton University), the Virginia institution founded in 1868 to provide educational and vocational training to former slaves and Native Americans. Kirstein donated the album to MoMA the same year he went to march for civil rights in Selma, Alabama, noting in his essay for the 1966 exhibition catalogue the album's importance in light of “present events.”

Realism, Magic Realism, and Classicism

Just as Kirstein championed the idea of a uniquely American ballet and engaged American photographers, the painters, sculptors, and draftsmen for whom he advocated most fervently engaged with ideas of what it meant to be American. The first exhibition Kirstein organized for the Museum, *Murals by American Painters and Photographers* (1932), was intended “to stimulate interest in the decoration of walls all over the country.” *Lincoln Kirstein’s Modern* features works by artists who were included in that show, such as Ben Shahn and Hugo Gellert, that Kirstein later gave to the Museum, testifying to his engagement with the political left in 1930s and early ’40s.

While Dorothy Miller curated the exhibition *Americans 1943: American Realists and Magic Realists*, Kirstein wrote the important catalogue essay for that exhibition, describing an aesthetic coincident with his own overarching taste. Whether it was the socially relevant “realists” like Ben Shahn or the stranger compositions of such “magic realists” as Peter Blume, Kirstein championed these artists’ shared commitment to the kind of technical craftsmanship that produces illusionistic precision. Tchelitchev’s *Hide-and-Seek*, an audience favorite, is featured prominently in the exhibition, along with several of the many studies for it in the Museum’s collection.

Lincoln Kirstein’s Modern also includes works by Gaston Lachaise and Elie Nadelman, two of the figures on whom he lavished monographic attention, having organized MoMA exhibitions for each in 1935 and 1948, respectively.

Latin American Art

One of the few official posts Kirstein held at MoMA was as the Museum’s Consultant on Latin American Art. He traveled to South America in 1942, acquiring works for the Museum under the auspices of the Inter-American Fund. His acquisitions include examples of now-canonized modernism (Joaquín Torres-García’s *The Port*, 1942), and the vast majority align with his overarching aesthetic preferences, whether for meticulously rendered realism with social content (Antonio Berni’s *New Chicago Athletic Club*, 1937), or for surreal expressionism that reflected the climate of the Second World War (Raquel Forner’s *Desolation*, 1942).

Lincoln Kirstein’s Modern is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue edited by Jodi Hauptman and Samantha Friedman, with contributions by Lynn Garafola, Michele Greet, Richard Meyer, and Kevin Moore, and a chronology by Michelle Harvey. It will also be accompanied by film series organized by Thomas Beard.

SPONSORSHIP:

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