"I have a live eye," proclaimed Lincoln Kirstein (1907–1996), whose sweeping contributions to American cultural life shaped artists and institutions. A writer, critic, curator, impresario, and tastemaker, Kirstein cofounded New York City Ballet and the School of American Ballet with the choreographer George Balanchine, and played a key role in MoMA's early years. Organizing exhibitions, writing catalogue essays, donating works to the Museum, and making acquisitions on its behalf, Kirstein championed an alternative vision of modernism that favored figuration over abstraction, sought to connect with the past rather than break from it, and argued for crossing artistic boundaries.

Kirstein remains surprisingly behind the scenes of history for someone who has been called "the closest thing to a Renaissance man of culture that twentieth-century America has produced." Described as "a giant sequoia" for his imposing stature, he conveyed an intense energy and authority in the many worlds he occupied. "He invaded you," said the photographer Walker Evans. "You either had to throw him out or listen to him."

In *Lincoln Kirstein's Modern*, this remarkable man becomes a lens through which we can rediscover often overlooked currents in art from the 1930s and '40s. Some of the works here were given to MoMA by Kirstein or appeared in the shows or books he spearheaded, while others were created by members of his social and professional circles.

Showcasing his omnivorous interests are set and costume designs he commissioned for ballet enterprises; photographs either documentary or theatrical in spirit; sculpture that references both classicism and folk art; and paintings, drawings, and prints from North and South America, whose meticulous craftsmanship serves visions alternately realist and fantastic. Linking these endeavors was an approach scaled to the human: attentive to the body and interrogating identity, whether political, social, or sexual.

"Isn't art FASCINATING?" Kirstein once marveled in a letter to MoMA's founding director, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., revealing a sense of wonder rare for a seasoned professional. With his prescient belief in the role of dance in the museum, his commitment to interdisciplinary pursuits, and his expansive view of modern art, Kirstein's impact remains profoundly resonant today.

Organized by Jodi Hauptman, Senior Curator, and Samantha Friedman, Associate Curator, Department of Drawings and Prints.

Archival selections made in collaboration with Michelle Harvey, The Rona Roob Museum Archivist.

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MoMA Audio is supported by Bloomberg Philanthropies.

Unless otherwise indicated, all works in the exhibition are in the collection of The Museum of Modern Art. #LincolnKirstein

# HARVARD SOCIETY FOR CONTEMPORARY ART AND THE HOUND & HORN

As a precocious Harvard undergraduate, Kirstein established two enterprises that brought contemporary art to the then-conservative Boston scene. In 1927, he and classmate Varian Fry launched the literary magazine The Hound & Horn, inviting established poets like Ezra Pound and Marianne Moore to contribute works that would be published alongside photographs by Walker Evans and book and film reviews by members of their circle. In 1929, he cofounded the Harvard Society for Contemporary Art with peers Edward Warburg and John Walker III: "It's my brain, Eddie's money, and Johnny Walker's social contacts," Kirstein said of the collaboration. This pioneering organization presented exhibitions on topics as wide-ranging as modern Mexican art, American folk art, photography, theater design, the Bauhaus school, thevisionary architecture of Buckminster Fuller, and the gouaches of Ben Shahn. The roster points to many of the artists and interests Kirstein championed throughout his life, and it served as a multidisciplinary model for The Museum of Modern Art, influencing Alfred H. Barr, Jr., the Museum's founding director.

#### KIRSTEIN'S CIRCLE

This group of portraits presents the individuals who made up Kirstein's overlapping social and professional circles. Photographs by George Platt Lynes and drawings by Pavel Tchelitchew, Paul Cadmus, and Jean Cocteau trace a predominantly queer network of friends, lovers, and colleagues who depicted themselves and each other. Among those pictured here are the writer Glenway Wescott and MoMA's Director of Exhibitions and Publications at the time, Monroe Wheeler, who were in a romantic triad with Lynes, and their friend, the writer Katherine Anne Porter, whose stories appeared in Kirstein's journal *The Hound & Horn*. Kirstein collected similar portraits and lived with them hung side by side on the walls of his East 19th Street townhouse.



Interior of Kirstein's townhouse at 128 East 19th Street, New York. Photo: Jerry Thompson

### "A REALLY AMERICAN BALLET"

Kirstein once defined dance as "ordered bodily movement accompanied by a regulating percussive or rhythmic beat." This deceptively simple classification belies the expansive and innovative vision he had for the medium's possibilities especially in ballet, and particularly in America. In 1934, he cofounded the School of American Ballet with the Russian-born choreographer George Balanchine, whom he had invited to the United States from Paris the year before. Together, they established New York City Ballet in 1948, and several precursor companies—American Ballet, Ballet Caravan, American Ballet Caravan, and Ballet Society—launched a ballet language and fostered an audience unique to this country. Kirstein also founded and coedited Dance Index, the first scholarly publication in the United States devoted to dance, which considered the art form across history and geography. Throughout these endeavors, he enlisted the contributions of visual artists, fueling his belief that "the arts of the Theatre are visual arts and have legitimate subjects for study, research, and encouragement . . . [at] the Museum of Modern Art." His efforts resulted in the creation of a Dance Archives and the subsequent curatorial department of Dance and Theatre Design at MoMA, which directly reflected the activities of his production companies and journal. Though short-lived, these initiatives anticipated the current role of dance at the Museum by decades.

### BALLET CARAVAN AND AMERICAN BALLET CARAVAN

"It is not easy to find efficient subjects from American sources which are suitable for presentation in the idiom of the classic traditional theatrical dance," Kirstein noted. Yet this was precisely his goal for Ballet Caravan and American Ballet Caravan, touring companies he founded and cofounded in 1936 and 1941, respectively. Traveling across the United States and throughout South America, these companies performed such ballets as Billy the Kid and Yankee Clipper, tapping national mythologies to find "American themes of today and every day," just as the Ballets Russes—a key model for Kirstein had relied on Russian folktales. Referring to this uniquely American content, Kirstein—who wrote many of the ballets' scenarios—enthused, "Ours is a style bred from basketball courts, track and swimming meets and junior proms. . . . The Russians keep their audience at arm's length. We almost invite ours to dance with us." Kirstein knew that building an audience was crucial to creating an American ballet and believed he could achieve this by taking these homegrown narratives on the road.

### THE FOUR TEMPERAMENTS

Today New York City Ballet performs *The Four Temperaments* in practice clothes, keeping with the stripped-down classicism that its choreographer, George Balanchine, favored. But the ballet went through multiple incarnations before settling on this convention. In 1941, Kirstein commissioned Pavel Tchelitchew to design a ballet called The Cave of Sleep, set to a Paul Hindemith score. Tchelitchew boasted that "no one would listen to the music or look at the dancers, since everyone would be astounded by his écorchés" (flayed representations of the body), but this ballet was never realized. Several years later, Hindemith's score was taken up for *The Four Temperaments*. The ballet's theme and variations are based on the ancient medical notion that human personalities are determined by four humors—Melancholic, Sanguine, Phlegmatic, and Choleric. Although the 1946 designs by Kurt Seligmann channel these elements, film footage from the period shows Ballet Society, a pre-New York City Ballet enterprise, rehearsing the ballet without costumes, anticipating the way it would soon look in performance.

#### DANCE AT MoMA

After he invited the Russian-born choreographer George Balanchine to the US from Paris in 1933, Kirstein wondered if MoMA—an institution with which he already had a relationship—might be a home for their American ballet. Ultimately, Kirstein helped the Museum become a home for dance research instead. In 1937, he submitted a proposal for a "Department of Theatrical Arts & Technics," which imagined a permanent site for research enlivened by exhibitions, publications, and performance commissions. In 1939, he donated his private collection of rare dance books, which resulted in the establishment of MoMA's Dance Archives in 1940. In the ensuing years, the Archives would be promoted to, and then demoted from, a curatorial department of Dance and Theatre Design, whose existence was "based on the assumption that the art of the theatre is a valid and significant expression of the creative spirit of our time." Most of the set and costume designs on view in this gallery were given to MoMA by Kirstein and reflect the repertories of his ballet companies as well as the contributions of the visual artists he enlisted as their designers.

### THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF GEORGE PLATT LYNES

"Lynes has thought of some new ways of making people look fine," wrote Glenway Wescott in the exhibition pamphlet for his lover George Platt Lynes's 1934 exhibition at New York's Julien Levy Gallery. Whether making commercial photographs for such magazines as *Harper's Bazaar*, promotional shots for Kirstein and Balanchine's ballet companies, or private images of male nudes of and for members of his social circle, Lynes focused on the figure. Against shadowy studio backdrops, subjects are treated theatrically with costumes and props, or appear naked—solo or in erotic couplings—with an eye toward idealized classicism. By employing what Kirstein described as "fantasy in arrangement and lighting," Lynes achieved in these images "the element of the dramatic."

# "AMPLIFICATION OF THE HUMAN BODY"

Both born in 1882, and both European émigrés to the United States, the sculptors Elie Nadelman and Gaston Lachaise benefited from Kirstein's steadfast promotional efforts. He organized retrospective exhibitions at MoMA following each of their deaths and urged the Museum to acquire their work. Though he outlined the differences between the two—"Nadelman was a neo-classicist; Lachaise a romantic expressionist"—he found similarities in their respective treatments of the figure. "Nadelman suggested a maximum of rounded, three-dimensional plasticity," Kirstein observed of this artist, who was deeply influenced by American folk art, and Lachaise's "subject-matter is the glorification, revivification and amplification of the human body."

# "THE TRANSLUCENT AIR OF HISTORY"

"The real photographer's . . . services, which take the greatest advantage of his particular medium and invoke its more powerful effect, are social," Kirstein declared, adding that such images show "the facts of our homes and times." While directed at Walker Evans's series American Photographs, Kirstein's endorsement of photography as a "social document" might equally be applied to Evans's earlier series of Victorian houses, to the photographs Frances Benjamin Johnston took of the students and classrooms of Virginia's Hampton Institute, or to Richard Benson's photographs of Augustus Saint-Gaudens's memorial to the Union army's first black regiment in the Civil War. In each of these projects, portraits of American places and people are represented through a directness of form, cast with an elegiac tone, as if disappearing into the past. All of them, as Kirstein wrote of those by Johnston, appear "locked in the suspension of time, like flies in amber, but nevertheless alive in the translucent air of history."

### "A LYRIC ASPECT OF THE COUNTRY"

"For an American thing one needs a lyric aspect of the country which is *inédit*," Kirstein wrote in his diary in 1933, ironically using the French word for "original" to contemplate possible themes for a uniquely American ballet. He sought the same original lyric aspect of the country in the many guises of American visual art he championed, from photography to painting to works on paper. Through his engagement with the activities of the political Left in the 1930s, Kirstein spearheaded projects that reflected social conditions in the United States. And in the work of artists known as realists and magic realists—or what Kirstein termed symbolic realism he identified and lauded meticulous craftsmanship that manifested something distinctively homegrown. "Our elegance," he wrote in the catalogue for his 1950 exhibition Symbolic Realism in American Painting: 1940-1950, is "functional, meagre, thin, tight, but strong, delicate and austere."

### MURALS BY AMERICAN PAINTERS AND PHOTOGRAPHERS

In 1932, Kirstein—as a member of MoMA's Junior Advisory Committee—organized Murals by American Painters and Photographers, his first exhibition for the Museum. Intending to "stimulate interest in the decoration of walls all over this country" (such as those in the nearby and soon-to-open Rockefeller Center and Radio City Music Hall), he commissioned mural designs from such artists as Stuart Davis and Georgia O'Keeffe. He also enlisted the gallerist Julien Levy to arrange a call for photomurals, examples of which are on view here. Several submissions created an uproar: Hugo Gellert (whose illustrated books are nearby) depicted philanthropists and politicians consorting with gangsters, and (as in the gouache study at right) Ben Shahn addressed the controversial Sacco and Vanzetti murder trial. While Kirstein never joined the Communist party, his engagement with progressive issues and leftist activities persisted throughout his life, from writing for such liberal periodicals as *The Nation* and The New Republic to marching for civil rights.





Installation views of the exhibition *Murals by American Painters and Photographers*, May 3–31, 1932. Photographic Archive, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York

#### REALISM AND MAGIC REALISM

Although MoMA's exhibition *Americans 1943: Realists and Magic Realists* was organized by Dorothy Miller, then a Curator of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum, Kirstein was central to the project in several ways. He suggested artists and works to Miller, and he wrote the essay for the exhibition catalogue, calling out the "combination of crisp hard edges, tightly indicated forms and the counterfeiting of material surfaces," and the way "our eyes are deceived into believing in the reality of what is rendered, whether factual or imaginary." This technically detailed figuration—which Kirstein favored—was employed by left-leaning "realists" to represent everyday scenes of labor or leisure, and by "magic realists" to make fantastic compositions convincing.

### **PaJaMa**

During vacations in Cape Cod and Fire Island, Paul Cadmus, Jared French, and Margaret French photographed each other on the beach and indoors, donning makeshift costumes and building sets and props out of found architecture and objects. They passed the camera around, becoming subjects and makers in turn. This collaborative authorship was reflected in the name they chose, which fuses the first two letters of their first names: PaJaMa. The three were intimately connected to each other, and to Kirstein: Cadmus and Jared French were lovers, and the latter was also married to Margaret French, while Kirstein was married to Cadmus's sister, Fidelma. The isolated beach settings they chose provided a haven for the performance of desire. Rhapsodizing to Kirstein about one such vacation, Cadmus revealed the playful spirit that formed the backdrop of these sessions: "Our activities: Putting up screens, cooking, washing dishes, cleaning toilets . . . getting sunburnt . . . picking up periwinkles, listening to *That Old Black Magic* . . . and doting and laughing."

# "MORE PIONEER THAN PROVINCIAL"

In 1942, Kirstein traveled for almost five months across seven South American countries, acquiring approximately 140 works for MoMA's collection. Nelson Rockefeller, formerly the president of the Museum's Board of Directors, and at that time the Coordinator of Commercial and Cultural Relations for Latin America at the US government's Office of Inter-American Affairs (OIAA), anonymously established the Inter-American Fund to support these acquisitions. Enlisting Kirstein to be the Museum's "Consultant on Latin-American Art," Rockefeller also engaged him to covertly gauge those nations' World War II allegiances. The works Kirstein acquired in Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, Peru, Ecuador, and Colombia reflected his taste for meticulous craftsmanship and emphasized local expression. Those artists who "tried to assert their feeling for their time and place" interested Kirstein the most, "artists who in fact have attempted to declare independence from traditional European expression or who, on whatever base or roots, express what they have known best by virtue of their birth or bringing-up."



Stephen C. Clark, Betsy Cushing Roosevelt Whitney, Pvt. Lincoln Kirstein, and John E. Abbott in front of Antonio Berni's New Chicago Athletic Club at the opening of the exhibition The Latin-American Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, March 30, 1943. Photographic Archive, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York