Lincoln Kirstein’s Modern
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Samantha Friedman
Jodi Hauptman

with contributions by
Samantha Friedman, Lynn Garafola,
Michele Greet, Michelle Harvey,
Richard Meyer, and Kevin Moore

The Museum of Modern Art
New York
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Lincoln Kirstein’s datebook for the week of April 20, 1942, reveals a typical agenda for the busy polymath (fig. 1). Names penned in ink—one struck through for rescheduling, two annotated with the hour—provide a map of the reach of this key connector and indefatigable catalyst who shaped and supported American artists and institutions in the 1930s and ’40s.

Starting off the week was a meeting with George Root, who had welcomed Kirstein’s American Ballet Caravan to the University of Oregon’s “greater artist series” in October 1939. Several figures associated with American Ballet Caravan and the other fledgling companies Kirstein spearheaded in advance of founding the New York City Ballet with George Balanchine in 1948, also make appearances on the week’s itinerary. On Tuesday, Kirstein saw Eugene Loring, the dancer and choreographer with whom he had collaborated on ballets such as Harlequin for President (1930) (plates 64, 65), Yankee Clipper (1936) (plates 64, 68), and Billy the Kid (1938) (plates 54–57). Perhaps they were discussing “Billy the Kid,” the ballet Kirstein would attend on Friday, April 24, presented by the Dance Players, the “all-American company offering dance plays on American themes” (plates 39–48, see checklist pp. 203–4). The composer of the ballet Massine would premiere in Mexico City “Domingo” is an indication, the topic at hand was to be Don Domingo de Don Blas, the ballet Massine would premiere in Mexico City the following September.

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where Kirstein attended the opening of the Wartime Housing exhibition that Tuesday. Appearing on the show’s entrance wall, and like Kirstein, a Jewish man from Massachusetts.8 Wartime Housing was one of two exhibitions Kirstein saw that Tuesday; the other was Pavel (“Pavlik”) Tchelitchew’s show at the Julien Levy Gallery. An issue of the Journal of View (founded by Tchelitchew’s partner, Charles Henri Ford), to which Kirstein had contributed an essay, served as the exhibition’s catalogue (fig. 2).9 As the diminutive nickname implies, Tchelitchew was an intimate of Kirstein’s, a member of a circle of predominantly queer artists and aesthetes, dancers and dancers, whose connections can be seen in a series of portraits, both drawn and—and thanks largely to George Platt Lynes, whom Kirstein saw that Thursday at 5.30—photographed (plates 12–28). Many of the artists in this cohort worked in the manner of magic realism, an artistic mode combining fantastic content and precise form that Kirstein championed, whether under that name or as the related “Symbolic Realism.” Kirstein would use the latter term in the titles of shows he organized at Edwin Hewitt’s gallery, the Wannamaker, where he circulated (ballet, visual arts, film, literature, patronage, politics) and would tend to associate him with whichever distinct worlds in which he circulated (ballet, visual arts, literature, patronage, politics).10

The swifl associatings that emerge from this calendar page is dizzying, yet there is nothing remarkable about this particular week in Kirstein’s life. Any number of other spreads in his datebooks, or entries from his densely scrawled journals,11 would present an equally intimate waltz of figures from the myriad worlds in which he circulated (ballet, visual arts, film, literature, patronage, politics) and would reflect the complex identities (American, Jewish, married, queer) that shaped his pursuits. Yet 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.”12 Those who know him tend to associate him with whichever distinct context most closely matches their interests. But as this peak into a typical week’s activities demonstrates, Kirstein’s innumerable roles—writer, critic, curator, editor, libertist, impresario, tastemaker, patron, institution builder—were never discrete but always overlapping, more simultaneous than successive. If Kirstein’s datebooks serve as a cultural who’s who of mid-twentieth-century America, the inverse is also true: that Kirstein (as his literary executor Nicholas Jenkins explains) is “a denizen of countless memoirs and chronicles.”13 Indeed, our man’s appearances—whether central roles or cameos—in the reflections of a diverse network of individuals have inspired some vivid locutions. There are the references to his appearance—“a giant sequoia,”14 or a Roman senator in a black suit15—which call out his imposing stature, his closely cropped hair, and his habitual attire. There are the testimonialisms that inhale the same breath, convey the intensity of his energy and the authority of his expertise. “He invaded you; you either had to throw him out or listen to him;” the photographer Walker Evans remembered, describing “a typical Kirstein switcheroo, all permeated with tremendous spirit, flash, dazzle, a king of seeming high jinks that covered a really penetrating intelligence about an articulation of all esthetic matters and the history of the human condition.”5 So, the dancer Jacques d’Amboise’s characterizations reveal the extent to which Kirstein’s ambition and his anguish were two sides of the same coin: he was “a flawed genius who aspired to be the supreme arbiter of all the arts in the twentieth century” and “a wounded giant full of holes in his soul.”31 That double disposition led to Kirstein’s ultimately breaking almost as many friendships and associations as he established—never for lack of commitment on his part, but on principle. “With Lincoln—well, you know what the signs of the Declaration of Independence are?” Edward M. Warburg, Kirstein’s Harvard classmate and fellow patron, quipped. “Lincoln is a re-signer; he likes to resign from things.”31

All these characteristics colored Kirstein’s sustained association with The Museum of Modern Art: a complex relationship that is the subject of Lincoln Kirstein’s Modern. Over many friends and associates’ association with MoMA, Alfred Barr acknowledged him in ways that ranged from heartfelt admiration—”I know you realize wondering at your prodigious—”32 to the euphemistic dig, Writing to Richard Griffin, curator of the Museum’s Film Library, in May 1949, Barr quipped, “Lincoln is an enthusiast, as you know,” before going on to concede that his idea—a Sergei Eisenstein exhibition—“would be of very great interest to people concerned with movies, the theatre and Russian art.”33 That tenor—adoration tinged with a jab—is characteristic of Kirstein’s fruitful yet fraught relations not only with Barr, but with the Museum, where the ostensibly limited scope of his official roles, from 1939 until the late 1940s, belies the expansiveness of his involvement. The first official MoMA post was as a member of the Junior Advisory Committee, established in 1939 (four months after the Museum’s opening), and “composed for the most part of younger people, organized to serve in an advisory capacity to the trustees, to express the expanding influence of the Museum, etc.”34 An article in the Harvard Crimson quoted that among the “25 young persons” on the committee were “four Harvard undergraduates, three of whom were founders of the Harvard Society of Contemporary Art,”52 the ambitious exhibiting body founded by Kirstein, Warburg, and John Walker III, that provided a crucial interdisciplinary model for MoMA’s own activities (fig. 3; see plates 31–3 for a selection of the kind of works they showed). Despite numerous engagements over the next twelve

Samantha Friedman

12 Introduction

13 Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 3: Walker Evans, Lincoln Kirstein, c. 1937. Gelatin silver print, 6 3/4 x 5 1/2 in. (16.2 x 14.9 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the artist. This work is on loan to the Museum from the collection of Mr. and Mrs. John Walker III. (c) 2015 The John Walker III Foundation/ Image copyright 2015 The John Walker III Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. © 2015 J. Paul Getty Trust. Used with permission from the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, 2015 IR.12.402205.

Figure 3: Walker Evans, Lincoln Kirstein, c. 1937. Gelatin silver print, 6 3/4 x 5 1/2 in. (16.2 x 14.9 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the artist. This work is on loan to the Museum from the collection of Mr. and Mrs. John Walker III. (c) 2015 The John Walker III Foundation/ Image copyright 2015 The John Walker III Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. © 2015 J. Paul Getty Trust. Used with permission from the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, 2015 IR.12.402205.
1. The Lincoln Kirstein Tower, New Canaan, Connecticut, c. 1984–85. Rigid polyurethane foam and Remco action figures with alkyd enamel, 23 ¼ × 7 ¼ × 7 ¼ in. (60.3 × 18.4 × 18.4 cm)

2. Portrait of Lincoln Kirstein. 1950. Oil on canvas, 19 ½ × 15 ½ in. (50.2 × 39.4 cm)


Kirstein’s taste in photography—as it came to be expressed across the 1930s, his most active period of involvement with the medium—operated as much in the verb form as the noun. While the polymath impresario made several serious and well-placed pronouncements on the medium, wielding impressive amounts of photographic history in each case, his support for specific projects and artists was driven not by a simple recognition of talent, but rather by an impulse to shape and promote talent through the creation of showcases for talent. He invested in talent by building entire arenas for it, which he often populated with his friends. And he was strategic, identifying the fields where the opportunities lay, such as photography, ballet, and, more generally, American art.

Kirstein’s arena building began in earnest when he was a student at Harvard University, where, in 1927, at the age of twenty, he and classmate Varian Fry created the literary journal *Hound & Horn*. The journal published the writings of T. S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, and Katherine Anne Porter, as well as an early essay and photographs by Walker Evans. A year later, Kirstein founded the Harvard Society for Contemporary Art with fellow young people, John Walker III and Edward M. M. Warburg. Among the Society’s earliest shows was *Photography 1930*, which included works representing both the American and the European avant-gardes (fig. 1). This set the stage for Kirstein’s biggest visual arts arena, The Museum of Modern Art, where he became a founding member of the Junior Advisory Committee in 1930. There he joined ranks with other Harvard men, many of them openly homosexual or at least sexually open-minded, seizing opportunities to support—through donation, curation, diplomacy, and sheer enthusiasm—some of the first important museum exhibitions of photography in the United States. Kirstein solicited and often acquired work he found compelling, donated it to the Museum, curated the related...
homosexual young men, “3 and her salon served statues. She was experimenting with abstraction. Levy was lucky to have been born in this all-hands-on-deck moment, which he in turn shaped considerably through his actions and personality.

A major social and emotional locus for the young Kirstein was Muriel Draper, a free-spirited socialite who hosted a salon on Manhattan’s East 40th Street. Draper specialized in “molding young men . . . particularly homosexual young men,” and her salon served as a private club offering exclusivity and discretion for both gay and straight attendees. Here Kirstein encountered many of the people who would come to play significant roles in his professional life, including A. Everett “Chick” Austin, Alfred Barr, Hart Crane, Walker Evans, Philip Johnson, and the photographer George Platt Lynes, among many others. Kirstein had known Lynes in prep school but thought poorly of him at the time. They became reacquainted, partly through Draper’s salon, and found that they now had several things in common: Paris, where they both had intellectual ties of their own; art, particularly figurative art; and the gallerist Julien Levy, whom Lynes had met on the ship to France in 1931 and Kirstein knew through Harvard circles. Lynes had just turned to photography that year—In France he made portraits of acquaintances such as Gertrude Stein, Jean Cocteau, and René Crevel—and was experimenting with abstraction. Levy was to become a champion of both Surrealism and photography in the United States, through his New York gallery, which he opened in 1931, and as a commissioned agent for art museums worldwide (his role similar to Kirstein’s). In early 1932 Levy’s gallery presented an improbable pairing of Lynes and Walker Evans, photographers with little in common except what Levy at the time saw in both bodies of work: a Surrealist-erotic male nude, often shown in images of dance. Kirstein would champion both artists on their divergent paths.

Kirstein suffered an early career setback involving a 1932 mural exhibition, organized for MoMA and conceived as a quasi-competition for struggling painters vis-à-vis the then-under-construction Rockefeller Center, whose forthcoming cavernous spaces seemed to cry out for art. At a late point in the organization process, it was decided that photography would be added to the exhibition. Kirstein tapped Levy to head that component because of his gallery representation of current photographers. Murals by American Painters and Photographers seemed from the start to be marked for trouble. Many of the artists approached declined. Moreover, problems erupted among MoMA’s trustees, who were outraged by the “Communist” political content of some of the work—Ben Shahn’s Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti in particular (see plate 146 for a related work).11 But the show and catalogue elicited scathing reviews on their own. Reviewers reacted to the political content, as was to be expected—“communism does some screaming,” “loud and melodramatic protests in paint”—but also hammered the works for their aesthetic deficiencies, calling them “big sloppy easel paintings.”12

The photography section of the show, however, garnered kinder words, in part because the photo-murals were less sermonizing than the paintings, celebrating modern architecture and industry instead of condemning the exploitation of laborers. An exception was Lynes’s work, placed at the entrance of the building, featuring a symmetrical arrangement of nude male Greek statues with outstretched arms, both fig-leaped and camouflageed by an overlay of imagery: Nature on the left, Industry on the right (fig. 3). One perceptive critic acknowledged the “surrealist” attraction of that work but went on to dismiss it as “superficial novelty.”13 Paradoxically, the murals showing the most fantasy—in the form of bald manipulation—gained the most praise: Abbott’s montage of urban vignettes, framed by crisscrossing steel girders (plate 146), and Thurman Rorato’s “vertiginous mosaic” of stacked skyscrapers things to come—for Evans, rural America under the nationalizing forces of capitalism and, for Lynes, the human figure, in particular the erotic male nude, often shown in images of dance. Kirstein would champion both artists on their divergent paths.

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George Platt Lynes

This page, left:
115. Untitled (Herbert Bliss).
March 18, 1950. Gelatin silver print, 9 1/4 × 7 1/2 in. (23.5 × 19 cm)

Right:

Bottom:
117. Untitled (Tex Smutney and Buddy Steele). 1941. Gelatin silver print, 7 1/4 × 9 3/8 in. (19.2 × 24.4 cm)

Opposite:
118. Untitled. c. 1935–40. Gelatin silver print, 10 × 8 in. (25.3 × 20.5 cm)
Pavel Tchelitchew

Top left:
167. Leaf Children (study for Hide-and-Seek). 1939. Gouache and pencil on paper, 25 1/4 × 19 1/4 in. (64.1 × 50.3 cm)

Top right:
168. Head of Autumn (study for Hide-and-Seek). 1941. Watercolor and pencil on paper, 12 7/8 × 14 1/4 in. (32.9 × 36.7 cm)

Bottom left:
169. Leaf Children. 1940. Oil on canvas, 16 1/2 × 14 1/2 in. (41.7 × 36.7 cm)

Middle right:
170. Tree into Hand and Foot (study for Hide-and-Seek). 1939. Watercolor, ink, and gouache on colored paper, 13 1/4 × 9 3/4 in. (33.5 × 24.7 cm)

Opposite:
171. Hide-and-Seek (Cache-cache). June 1940–June 1942. Oil on canvas, 6 ft. 6 1/2 in. × 7 ft. 6 1/4 in. (199.3 × 215.3 cm)
Elie Nadelman
183. Standing Female Nude. c. 1940. Papier-mâché, 12 ⅞ × 5 ⅜ × 4 ⅞ in. (32.2 × 14 × 12.4 cm)
184. Standing Female Nude. c. 1909. Bronze, 21 ⅞ × 8 ⅜ × 7 ⅛ in. (55.3 × 22 × 18.4 cm)
Sergei Eisenstein
211. Eisenstein’s Mexican Film: Episodes for Study (still). 1955, from footage of 1930–32. 35mm film (black and white, silent)

Oswaldo Guayasamín
212. Untitled (study for Mother and Child), 1942. Ink on paper, 7 1/4 x 8 3/4 in. (19.4 x 21.3 cm)

Diógenes Paredes
213. Threshers (Segadores), 1942. Tempera on board, 20 1/2 x 19 1/4 in. (52.1 x 49.9 cm)
Pedro Figari
223. Creole Dance. c. 1925. Oil on board, 20 1/2 × 32 in. (52.1 × 81.3 cm)

Mario Urteaga
224. Burial of an Illustrious Man (Entierro del patriota). 1936. Oil on canvas, 35 × 32 1/4 in. (88.4 × 82.5 cm)
The following checklist of the exhibition Lincoln Kirstein’s Modern is arranged alphabetically by names of artists or artist’s group; multiple works by a single artist are arranged chronologically. Unless otherwise indicated, all works are in the collection of The Museum of Modern Art.


For the Ballet Caravan production (premiered Lincoln Center, Metropolitan, October 17, 1939) Choreography by Lincoln Kirstein. Music by Stephen Foster and Louis Gottschalk, arranged by Tracy Wimberly Scenic by Lincoln Kirstein.

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