



Walt Kuhn
American, 1877 - 1949

The White Clown

1929

oil on canvas

overall: 102.3 x 76.9 cm (40 1/4 x 30 1/4 in.)

framed: 130.8 x 105.4 x 7.6 cm (51 1/2 x 41 1/2 x 3 in.)

Inscription: lower center: Walt Kuhn / 1929

Gift of the W. Averell Harriman Foundation in memory of Marie N. Harriman 1972.9.16

ENTRY

The White Clown was an instant success when it made its debut at the Museum of Modern Art exhibition *Paintings by Nineteen Living Americans* in December 1929. Arguably Walt Kuhn's best-known painting and the work that firmly established his reputation at the age of 51, it was reproduced numerous times during his life. [1] Philip Rhys Adams noted that it was "a symbol intensely personal to Kuhn," and his "passport to immortality." [2] When the artist's friends and patrons W. Averell and Marie Harriman immediately offered to buy the painting for \$10,000 the artist refused, saying that it was his "ace in the hole" and that it was "not for sale until I'm gone." When the Harrimans finally purchased *The White Clown* for \$25,000 from his widow in 1957, the event was a national news item. *Life* magazine noted the sum was "an unparalleled amount of cash for a contemporary American painting," and allotted it a full-page color illustration. [3]

In his study of Kuhn, Paul Bird described *The White Clown* as "peak performance in bulk, weight and substance. Like an animal crouched for the kill, he might instantly charge into his routine. Action strains at the bit. With the simplest colors—virtually black and white—the figure is modeled into a throbbing arabesque, fitted exactly to

the canvas. Monumentality in a 30" x 40" area." [4] The clown's athletic physique fills the large, monochromatic composition. He leans forward and looks directly at the viewer, resting his elbows on his thighs and clasping his large, powerful hands between his knees.

Throughout his career Kuhn was noted for his sympathetic, searching representations of circus, vaudeville, burlesque, and nightclub entertainers. Rather than representing glamorous, spectacular circus acts, as John Steuart Curry did in *The Flying Codonas* (1932, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York), Kuhn instead turned his attention to the rank and file performers, especially clowns. Commenting on Kuhn's *Clown with Black Wig* [fig. 1], Bird noted that "clowning is an ancient, legitimate profession with relatively as many master performers, apprentices, and pretenders as any other profession." [5] In addition to clowning, there was another layer of performance and masquerade at play in *The White Clown*. Kuhn recorded that the model was in fact an actor named Teddy Bergman (1907–1977), who at that time was engaged at the Provincetown Playhouse and in 1929 also posed for *Athlete* (Jewett Art Gallery, Wellesley College, MA) and *Performer Resting* (The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC). [6]

Kuhn drew upon many sources to create *The White Clown*. His interest in ancient Greek sculpture is reflected in the figure's angular, geometric, and monumental form. Like the subject of the famous *Le Grand Gilles* by Antoine Watteau (French, 1684 - 1721) [fig. 2], the melancholy expression of Kuhn's clown invites the spectator to muse over the inherent contradiction between public performance and private angst. *The White Clown* invites further comparison with the many images of clowns and circus performers by Pablo Picasso (Spanish, 1881 - 1973), and the painting is reminiscent of the Spanish artist's classicizing period of the early 1920s. Kuhn met Picasso while attending the Exposition Trinationale at Durand-Ruel Galleries in Paris during the summer of 1925, just four years before he executed this work.

Kuhn continued to return to the clown theme for the rest of his career, perhaps most successfully with *The Blue Clown* [fig. 3]. He identified with his subjects, and his many images of clowns may have autobiographical implications. He specified that *Kansas* (1932, Ebsworth Collection) be posthumously renamed *Portrait of the Artist as a Clown*. [7] It has also been suggested that the intense, manic facial expression of *Chico in a Top Hat* (1948, Kennedy Galleries, Inc., New York) was a portent of his mental breakdown that year. [8] However, Kuhn would never again paint a psychological portrait so imposing, poignant, and sublimely balanced between physical strength and dignified pathos as *The White Clown*.

Robert Torchia

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 Walt Kuhn, *Clown with Black Wig*, 1930, oil on canvas, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. George A. Hearn Fund, 1956. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image: Art Resource, NY



fig. 2 Jean-Antoine Watteau, *Pierrot*, formerly known as *Gilles*, c. 1718–1719, oil on canvas, Musée du Louvre, Paris. © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY. Image: Franck Raux



fig. 3 Walt Kuhn, *The Blue Clown*, 1931, oil on canvas, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase 31.182

NOTES

- [1] In just the 10 years after its initial exhibition, the work was illustrated in Samuel Kootz, *Modern American Painters* (New York, 1930), pl. 31; M. Rose Collins and Olive L. Riley, *Art Appreciation*, (New York, 1931), no. 150, 126; Sheldon Cheney, *A Primer of Modern Art* (New York, 1932), 236; and Forbes Watson, *American Painting Today* (Washington, DC, 1939), 87.
- [2] Philip Rhys Adams, *Walt Kuhn, Painter: His Life and Work* (Columbus, OH, 1978), 117.
- [3] See Sanka Knox, “Art Masterpiece Goes to Harriman,” *New York Times*, Aug. 22, 1957, and “High Cost of a Clown,” *Life*, Feb. 3, 1958. For a brief discussion of Kuhn’s relationship with the Harrimans, see Nancy Yeide, “The Marie Harriman Gallery, 1930–1942,” *Archives of American Art Journal* 39 (1999): 4.

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS

American Paintings, 1900–1945

- [4] Paul Bird, *Fifty Paintings by Walt Kuhn* (New York and London, 1940), 8.
- [5] Paul Bird, *Fifty Paintings by Walt Kuhn* (New York and London, 1940), 11.
- [6] Bergman later changed his name to Alan Reed, and is best remembered as the original voice of the character Fred Flintstone in the television series *The Flintstones*; Walt Kuhn Papers, Archives of American Art, reel D242B, frame 868. After *The White Clown* became so successful Kuhn “heard that model Bergman was talking around that he felt entitled to percentage of sales price.” For additional biographical information on Bergman, see Alan Reed, *The Alan Reed Story* (Albany, GA, 2009).
- [7] For a discussion of the autobiographical aspect of Kuhn’s clown subjects, see Franklin Kelly’s entry on *Kansas* in Bruce Robertson et al., *Twentieth-Century American Art: The Ebsworth Collection* (Washington, DC, 2000), 159–161.
<https://www.nga.gov/content/dam/ngaweb/research/publications/pdfs/twentieth-century-american-art-ebsworth.pdf>
- [8] Frank Getlein, *Walt Kuhn 1877–1949* (New York, 1967), n.p.
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TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The plain-weave, loosely woven, highly textured support is unlined. It has been removed from a previous stretcher and remounted. The current stretcher includes wood shims on both the bottom and right sides, but it is not clear whether these were added to enlarge the original stretcher or a later one. The tacking margins are intact, and a selvage edge is present on the left margin. The creamy white ground was toned with a dark brown, transparent imprimatura; an additional layer of more opaque brown imprimatura blocks out the background. The artist first sketched out the composition with diluted paint in dark earth tones and then applied paint with a pastelike consistency in a range of thicknesses. Shadows were indicated in the initial sketch as hard-edged forms that were later softened by the wet-into-wet application of white paint. [1] The broad areas of highlights were thickly painted with vigorous wet-into-wet brushwork to emphasize the volume of the sitter’s body. Facial details were outlined with a small pointed brush and fluid dark paint. The painting is in excellent condition. The surface is coated with a very thin layer of varnish, on top of which a thin layer of grime has accumulated. Old, discolored varnish residues from a past cleaning remain in the low points of the thickly painted white areas.

TECHNICAL NOTES

[1] As seen with infrared reflectography in the 1.5–2 micron spectral band.

PROVENANCE

The artist [1877-1949]; his estate; (Maynard Walker Gallery, New York); purchased 27 May 1957 by W. Averell [1891-1986] and Marie N. [1903-1970] Harriman, New York; [1] W. Averell Harriman Foundation, New York; gift 1972 to NGA.

[1] According to Harriman collection records in NGA curatorial files.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1929 *Paintings by Nineteen Living Americans*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1929-1930, no. 50 (two catalogues, one with repro.).

1930 *Exhibition of Paintings by Walt Kuhn*, Marie Harriman Gallery, New York, 1930, no. 1, repro.

1931 *Paintings by Contemporary American Artists*, Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts, 1931, no. 29.

1933 *Paintings by Walt Kuhn*, City Art Museum, St. Louis, 1933, no catalogue.

1934 *Eleven Contemporary American Painters*, William Rockhill Nelson Gallery of Art and Atkins Museum of Fine Arts [now The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art], Kansas City, Missouri, 1934, no catalogue.

1935 *Walt Kuhn*, Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts, Ohio, April 1935, no catalogue.

1935 *Walt Kuhn Paintings*, Dayton Art Institute, Ohio, May 1935, no catalogue.

1953 *Clowns*, travelling exhibition organized by the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 14 venues, 1953-1955, no catalogue.

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS

American Paintings, 1900–1945

1958 Walt Kuhn, 1880-1949, Albany Institute of History and Art, 1958, no. 4, repro. on cover.

1959 American Painting and Sculpture [American National Exhibition], Sokolinski Park, Moscow, July-September 1959, no. 5, repro.

1959 Paintings and Sculpture from the American National Exhibition in Moscow, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, October-November 1959, unnumbered catalogue.

1960 Paintings, Drawings and Sculpture Collected by Yale Alumni: An Exhibition, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut, May-June 1960, no. 135, repro.

1960 Walt Kuhn 1877-1949: A Memorial Exhibition, Cincinnati Art Museum, October-November 1960, no. 40, color repro.

1961 Exhibition of the Marie and Averell Harriman Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1961, unnumbered catalogue, repro. 45.

1966 125 Years of New York Painting and Sculpture, New York State Fair Exposition, Syracuse, August-September 1966 [according to donor collection records].

1966 Art of the United States: 1670-1966, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, September-November 1966, no. 164.

1966 Painter of Vision: A Retrospective Exhibition of Oils, Watercolors and Drawings by Walt Kuhn, 1877-1949, The University of Arizona Art Gallery, Tucson, February-March 1966: no. 53, repro.

1966 Seven Decades 1895-1965: Crosscurrents in Modern Art, Public Education Association, New York, April-May 1966, no. 155, repro.

1967 Walt Kuhn 1877-1949, Kennedy Galleries, Inc., New York, 1967, unnumbered, frontispiece.

1969 Spring Exhibition, National Art Museum of Sport, Madison Square Garden Center, Gallery of Art, New York, 1969 [according to donor collection records].

1974 Selected American Paintings from the National Gallery of Art, University Center Gallery, University of Tennessee, Chattanooga, 1974, no catalogue.

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS

American Paintings, 1900–1945

1978 Walt Kuhn: A Classic Revival, Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, Fort Worth; Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha; Wichita Art Museum; Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, 1978-1979, no. 10, repro.

1980 La Pintura de Los Estados Unidos de Museos de la Ciudad de Washington, Museo del Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico City, 1980-1981, no. 54, color repro.

1981 Center Ring: The Artist, Two Centuries of Circus Art, Milwaukee Art Museum; Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio; New York State Museum, Albany; The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1981-1982, no. 55, repro.

1992 Walt Kuhn: American Master, The Museum of Art of Ogunquit, Maine, 1992, no. D-31, repro.


1993 Extended loan for use by Ambassador Pamela Harriman, U.S. Embassy residence, Paris, France, 1993-1997.

1997 Extended loan for use by Ambassador Felix Rohatyn, U.S. Embassy residence, Paris, 1997-1998.

2001 Images from the World Between: The Circus in Twentieth-Century American Art, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford; The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota; Austin Museum of Art, 2001-2002, fig. 31.

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- 1930 Kootz, Samuel. *Modern American Painters*. New York, 1930: pl. 31.
- 1931 Collins, M. Rose, and Olive L. Riley. *Art Appreciation*. New York, 1930: 126, no. 150.
- 1932 Cheney, Sheldon. *A Primer of Modern Art*. 7th ed. revised and enlarged. New York, 1932: 236.
- 1939 Watson, Forbes. *American Painting Today*. Washington, 1939: 87.
- 1940 Bird, Paul. *Fifty Paintings by Walt Kuhn*. New York, 1940: 8, repro.
- 1978 Adams, Philip Rhys. *Walt Kuhn, Painter: His Life and Work*. Columbus, OH, 1978: 117-119, 255, no. 249, repro.
- 1980 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1980: 191, repro.
- 1981 Williams, William James. *A Heritage of American Paintings from the National Gallery of Art*. New York, 1981: 225, repro. 228.
- 1983 Brown, Milton W. *One Hundred Masterpieces of American Painting from Public Collections in Washington, D.C.* Washington, D.C., 1983: 124-125,

 NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS

American Paintings, 1900–1945

color repro.

- 1984 Walker, John. *National Gallery of Art, Washington*. Rev. ed. New York, 1984: 574, no. 877, color repro.
- 1992 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1992: 222, repro.
- 1992 *Walt Kuhn, American Master*. Exh. cat. The Museum of Art of Ogunquit, Ogunquit, Maine, 1992: 30, 35, no. D31, repro. 30.
- 1999 Yeide, Nancy H. "The Marie Harriman Gallery." *Archives of American Art Journal* 39, nos. 1-2 (1999): 2-11, repro.
- 2001 Gustafson, Donna. *Images from the World Between: The Circus in Twentieth-Century Art*. Exh. cat. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford; John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota; Austin Museum of Art, Cambridge, MA, 2001-2002. Cambridge, MA, 2001: 29, repro., 37, fig. 31.
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