



Walt Kuhn  
American, 1877 - 1949

## *Zinnias*

1933

oil on canvas

overall: 63.6 x 76.5 cm (25 1/16 x 30 1/8 in.)

framed: 83.8 x 96.5 x 7.6 cm (33 x 38 x 3 in.)

Inscription: lower right: Walt Kuhn / 1933

Gift of the W. Averell Harriman Foundation in memory of Marie N. Harriman 1972.9.17

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### ENTRY

Walt Kuhn's interest in still life painting intensified throughout his career. Influenced by synthetic cubism, *Flower and Forms* (1915) was his first floral subject and the lone still life among his many figurative paintings and landscapes of that year. [1] But in 1933, the date of *Zinnias*, more than half of Kuhn's output were still lifes. [2] During an extended stay in Paris in the summer of 1933, Kuhn wrote to his wife and daughter, Vera and Brenda, about plans for his return: "Personally I feel the thing to do is to buy a second hand car and go to Ogunquit, [Maine,] and go strong on the still life idea, (I want to do some outdoors) lay in a big stock of still lifes, so as to have a big selection, and give a bang-up still life show next winter." [3] He painted *Zinnias* once he was back stateside, at his studio in Ogunquit. The Kuhns kept meticulous records and recorded that the "models" for this work were purchased in town. They described the painting matter-of-factly: "Bunch of multi-colored zinnias in earthen pot in center of canvas. Black background behind flowers. Red cloth draped across foreground in front of pot." [4]

The brilliantly colored zinnias are painted in profile, three-quarter view, and frontally, as if Kuhn was indeed treating each as a model. Softly formed petals

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*American Paintings, 1900–1945*

contrast with sharp, spiky green leaves. The flowers are tightly arranged with a few outliers, three orange and yellow zinnias that protrude from the group, and the small, squat pot appears ill-equipped to hold such a plentiful bouquet. The ripples of the folded cloth in the foreground of the composition mimic the organic shapes of the flowers and the undefined edge of the table or backdrop, which the artist has obscured in shadow. This dark background allows the zinnias to stand out, their abbreviated forms built up with thickly applied paint. Kuhn's style has been compared to that of the Spanish 17th-century master of still life Francisco de Zurbarán (Spanish, 1598 - 1664), as both artists shared a penchant for austere, powerful compositions characterized by strong contrasts of light and dark. [5] Kuhn continued painting zinnias in the 1940s, experimenting with different arrangements, vessels, and backdrops.

Catherine Southwick, Robert Torchia

July 24, 2024

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### NOTES

- [1] *Flower and Forms* is now in a private collection. It sold at Christie's in 2011. See <https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-5477492>.
  - [2] The exhibition *Walt Kuhn: Still Life Paintings* at the Kennedy Galleries in New York in 1980 included 43 still lifes, which were illustrated in the accompanying catalog.
  - [3] Walt Kuhn to Vera and Brenda Kuhn ("Dear Girls"), Paris, June 19, 1933, Kuhn family papers, and Armory Show records, box 4, folder 17, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, [https://edan.si.edu/slideshow/slideshowViewer.htm?damspath=/Collections/Online/kuhnwalt/Box\\_0004/Folder\\_017](https://edan.si.edu/slideshow/slideshowViewer.htm?damspath=/Collections/Online/kuhnwalt/Box_0004/Folder_017).
  - [4] Walt Kuhn, Kuhn family papers, and Armory Show records, box 13, folder 7, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, [https://edan.si.edu/slideshow/slideshowViewer.htm?damspath=/Collections/Online/kuhnwalt/Box\\_0013/Folder\\_007](https://edan.si.edu/slideshow/slideshowViewer.htm?damspath=/Collections/Online/kuhnwalt/Box_0013/Folder_007).
  - [5] Texts linking Kuhn and Zurbarán include Duncan Phillips's statement in "Walt Kuhn, Karl Knaths," exhibition pamphlet (Washington, DC, 1944), and Philip Rhys Adams, *Walt Kuhn, Painter: His Life and Work* (Columbus, OH, 1978), 154.
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## TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The painting is executed on a fine plain-weave canvas that is lined with a wax adhesive onto a more heavily woven fabric. The tacking margins are damaged, but it appears that the canvas was commercially primed with an off-white ground. [1] Extra pinholes around the tacking margins and an artist-applied pencil line marking out the dimensions of the area to be painted suggest that the painting was executed while the canvas was pinned to a board and stretched after its completion. Infrared reflectography confirmed that Kuhn used dark strokes of black paint to outline his forms in the process of laying in his composition. A muted red-brown wash was then used to block in the vase, flowers, and table, while thin black washes were applied to the background. More opaque, thick touches of paint were added on top of the washes to execute the finer details of the flowers and leaves. The whites of the flowers fluoresce quite strongly under longwave ultraviolet light, suggesting the use of zinc white in these areas. The ultraviolet examination also showed that the uneven layer of varnish coating the painting is composed of a natural resin. The infrared examination did not reveal artist changes; there was no examination with x-radiography conducted. Lining has imparted a stronger impression of the canvas weave to the painting. It has also flattened some of the areas of higher impasto. There is scattered inpainting throughout much of the background and a substantial amount of old retouching in the tabletop.

Michael Swicklik

July 24, 2024

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## TECHNICAL NOTES

[1] Even though the tacking margins are damaged, the priming covers all of them, indicating that the canvas was primed before painting. This type of priming was usually commercially prepared rather than artist applied.

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## PROVENANCE

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*American Paintings, 1900–1945*

The artist [1877-1949]; his estate; (Maynard Walker Gallery, New York); purchased 20 December 1957 by W. Averell [1891-1986] and Marie N. [1903-1970] Harriman, New York; W. Averell Harriman Foundation, New York; gift 1972 to NGA.

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### EXHIBITION HISTORY

1942 Walt Kuhn, Willard Straight Hall, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, 1942.

1944 Walt Kuhn, Karl Knaths, Phillips Memorial Gallery, Washington, D.C., 1944, no. 1.

1948 An American Show, Cincinnati Art Museum, 1948, no. 32.

1958 Walt Kuhn, Albany Institute of History and Art, 1958, no. 9.

1960 Walt Kuhn 1877-1949: A Memorial Exhibition, Cincinnati Art Museum, 1960, no. 60, repro.

1961 Exhibition of the Marie and Averell Harriman Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1961, unnumbered catalogue, repro. 46.

1964 Walt Kuhn: Paintings, Drawings, Carvings, Nason College, Springvale, Maine, 1964, no. 8.

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. 23.

1985 Extended loan for use by Ambassador Stuart, U.S. Embassy residence, Oslo, Norway, 1985-1989.

1990 Extended loan for use by Secretary Jack Kemp, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Washington, D.C., 1990-1993.

1993 Extended loan for use by Secretary Henry G. Cisneros, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Washington, D.C., 1993-1997.

2009 Extended loan for use by Vice President and Mrs. Joseph Biden, Vice President's House, Washington, D.C., 2009-2015.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- 1978 Adams, Philip Rhys. *Walt Kuhn, Painter: His Life and Work*. Columbus, OH, 1978: 156, 261, no. 312, pl. 90.
- 1980 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1980: 191, repro.
- 1992 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1992: 223, repro.
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