

Undercurrents of Character

DC Moore Gallery honors the anniversary of The Armory Show with an exhibition of works by Walt Kuhn

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by John O'Hern

In 1910, a group of artists, including Walt Kuhn, Robert Henri, John French Sloan, William James Glackens, and Arthur Bowen Davies, put together an exhibition of American artists. The exhibition stressed individuality and was in opposition to the strictures of the Academy.

In an essay at the time, Henri wrote: "This is called an independent exhibition because it is a manifestation of independence in art and of the absolute necessity of such independence... What such an exhibition should show is the work of those who are pushing forward, who need and deserve recognition, who must have encouragement, who should receive praise for every step of their advance. They deserve it because they are thinking."

The following year Kuhn and others formed the Association of American Painters and Sculptors. The association's first exhibition changed the course of modern art in this country. The *1913 International Exhibition of Modern Art* became known as *The Armory Show* because it was staged in New York's 69th Regiment Armory. It featured 1,300 paintings, sculptures and decorative works by more than 300 avant-garde European and American artists. Kuhn



Walt Kuhn (1877-1949), *Showgirl in Armor*, 1943. Oil on linen, 30 x 25 in.

worked with Davies and Walter Pach to select the European artists who included Marcel Duchamp, Henri Matisse, and Pablo Picasso.

A clipping among the Walt Kuhn papers in the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art shows a page from *The Sun* with a lengthy article about the *International Exhibition of Modern Art* and a short squib about

the annual winter exhibition at the National Academy of Design. Along the edge Kuhn wrote, with obvious pride, "Note the difference in size of story." The article wasn't entirely positive, however. It commented, "Matisse has been seen and shuddered at in the little New York gallery of the Photo-Secession..." In 1908 Alfred Stieglitz had given Matisse his first



Walt Kuhn (1877-1949), *Exotic Dancer*, ca. 1926. Watercolor on paper, 15½ x 16½ in.

New York exhibition at the Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession, later known as 291.

Planned to coincide with the 100th anniversary of *The Armory Show*, *Walt Kuhn: American Modern* is currently on exhibition at the DC Moore Gallery in New York. The gallery notes "As both a painter and promoter of modern art, Kuhn played a major role in the multifaceted developments that transformed the American art world in the first half of the 20th century."

Kuhn sold his first drawings to a

magazine at the age of 15. "During his lifetime," the gallery continues, "Kuhn received great acclaim for the bold simplicity and psychological intensity of his modernist paintings of showgirls and circus performers. Since then, he has been given much less attention. This show is intended to bring his work back into the spotlight."

Kuhn's portraits depict his subjects far away from their fanciful performing milieu and isolate them against plain backgrounds revealing the individual personalities

behind the makeup with stunning psychological impact.

Duncan Phillips wrote in a 1944 catalog to an exhibition at The Phillips Collection, "Kuhn uses the language of design to aid him in suggesting these undercurrents of character beneath the makeup and the costume. Far from describing his models, in all their flamboyant or grotesque professional appearances, with the exaggerations of subjective fantasy, he imposes upon himself the challenge of confronting only the facts about some

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Walt Kuhn (1877-1949), *Woman in Majorette Costume*, 1944. Oil on linen, 30 x 25 in.



Walt Kuhn (1877-1949), *Portrait of the Artist as a Clown (Kansas)*, 1932. Oil on canvas, 32 x 22 in.



Walt Kuhn (1877-1949), *Clowns*, 1925. Oil on linen, 15 x 12 in.



Walt Kuhn (1877-1949), *Adventure*, 1924. Oil on canvas, 32 x 36 in.
Images courtesy DC Moore Gallery, New York.

very human personalities, conditioned to specialized jobs in burlesque, vaudeville and circus.”

Walt Kuhn: American Modern is the first exhibition of Kuhn’s work in several decades. It includes such icons as *Showgirl in Armor* (1943) and *Roberto* (1946). The gallery observes “As a measure of his success in these years, during his last exhibition at Durand-Ruel Galleries in New York in 1948, a Tennessee collector purchased *Roberto* sight unseen for a record sum.”

The fully-illustrated catalog to the exhibition includes an essay by Gail Stavitsky, chief curator of the Montclair Art Museum. Another essay on his involvement with theater and the circus was written by Ralph Sessions, one of the curators of the exhibition. ■