

The New Criterion

Art

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Gallery chronicle

by James Panero

On "Walt Kuhn: American Modern" at DC Moore Gallery, New York, "Armory Week," Beat Nite, and more.



How should we mark the 100-year anniversary of the Armory Show? This question inspired several galleries to reflect on the historic exhibition that opened on February 17, 1913 and introduced the latest in European modernism to the American public. A century ago, hundreds of thousands of visitors came to see the Armory Show during its barnstorming tour of New York, Chicago, and Boston. We might say the national discussion about modern art that began in 1913 has never ended and now continues through these latest exhibitions.

Writing about “The Armory Show at 100” here in December, I mentioned two museum shows that will bookend this Armory year. This past month, the Montclair Art Museum opened “The New Spirit: American Art in the Armory Show, 1913,” an exhibit that examines for the first time the American artists whose work filled two-thirds of a show that is now almost exclusively remembered for its European component.

Montclair also features a display of primary materials from the Armory Show, including letters and journals from the show’s organizers—the American artists Arthur B. Davies, Walt Kuhn, and Walter Pach. This material, on loan from the Smithsonian’s Archives of American Art, coincides with the launch of the Archives’ new website for Armory source material, armoryshow.si.edu. (Now it’s time someone used this research to create a virtual tour, similar to Google Art Project, that might allow us to wander through a digital recreation of the original show.)

Then, this coming October, the New-York Historical Society will mount its own major Armory retrospective. This exhibition will look at both the art and times of 1913 New York. It also promises a substantial catalogue with over thirty essays examining the Armory Show, its historical context, and everything in between. By the end of this year, we might just come to feel like the Ashcan painter Jerome Myers. At the time of his death in 1940, Myers lamented how the Armory Show “had unlocked the door to foreign art and thrown the key away.”

A pleasant surprise to come out of all these commemorations has been the chance to see the paintings of the Armory’s greatest booster, Walt Kuhn (1877–1949). A revelatory exhibition of his work is now on view at DC Moore Gallery.¹

Arthur B. Davies, as the president of the Association of American Painters and Sculptors, was the heart of the Armory Show. With his knowledge of European modernism, which directly influenced the show’s selection, Walter Pach was the brains. As the young secretary of the AAPS, athletic and intense, Kuhn was the muscle of the operation. He was the one who first hustled through Germany, France, and England and pushed for an ever-expanding European showing. “We are going to feature Redon big. BIG!” he exclaimed after seeing the artist’s Paris studio.

Back in the United States, Kuhn also took to promoting and publicizing the Armory Show everywhere he could. “Walt wanted to make sure that this thing was an intensely popular sort of show,” remembered Kuhn’s student Wood Gaylor. “His instructions to us when we were distributing posters was to put them in every gin mill on Second, Third, and Ninth Avenues and to cover not only the part of the town that would normally be interested but to get into the parts of the town that would not

ordinarily think in terms of art exhibitions.”



Walt Kuhn, *Vera*, ca. 1918. Oil on canvas, 20 x 16 inches. Courtesy of DC Moore Gallery, New York.

Kuhn magnified the ambitions of the enterprise. Leading up to the opening, he organized a grand “beefsteak dinner” for the New York press that resulted in a run of advance articles. He also ensured that a great deal of favorable press was mixed in with the critical denunciations, making the Armory Show an unavoidable sensation. “Don’t disappoint me on this,” Kuhn exhorted. “Our show must be talked about all over the U.S. before the doors open. . . . We want this old show of ours to mark the starting point of the new spirit in art, at least as far as America is concerned.”

Like both Davies and Pach, Kuhn exhibited his own art in the Armory Show. His painting *Morning* (1912), a radiant, pointillist landscape that I hear is scheduled to travel later this year to the N-YHS, was reproduced on one of the Armory’s postcards and received its fair share of both praise and ridicule. One cartoonist mockingly called the work “Fourth of July in Egypt” and declared “the Mexican revolution has nothing on this painting.” (I await the dissertation on how the Armory affected America’s sense of humor.)

Born in Brooklyn, Kuhn wandered through both the American West and the academies of Europe in his early years, and his paintings similarly passed through several stages. Even by the time of the

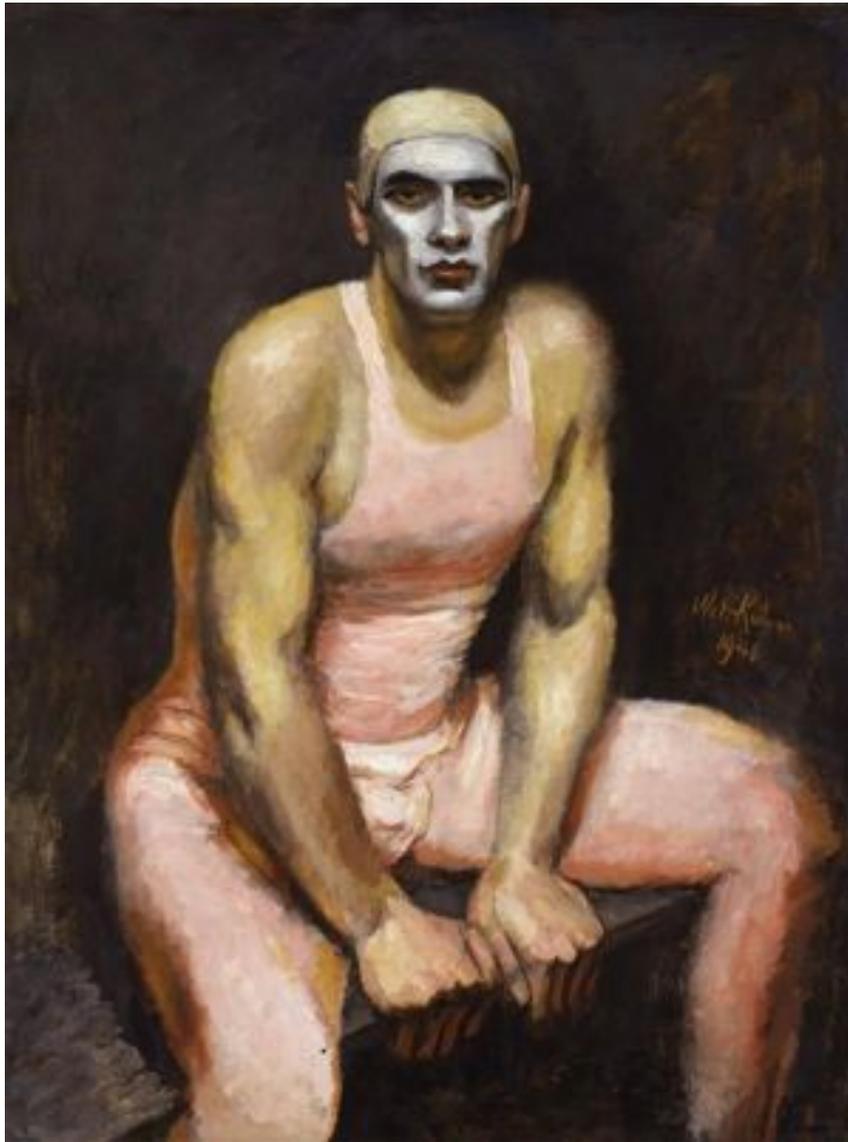
Armory Show, Kuhn had yet to settle on a signature style, and he kept little of his work from the period.

In the years after the show, Kuhn's role in the exhibition came to overshadow his own artistic accomplishments, just as its influence also confounded his own direction. Through the exhibition that he helped create, Kuhn suffered the fate of many American artists after being exposed to the latest innovations from Europe. Even in 1924, critics still lamented how Kuhn "does not appear to have recovered from that visitation" of 1913.

"How is all this going to influence your painting and mine?," the American modernist Maurice Prendergast wondered to Kuhn at the time of the show. For Kuhn this question wasn't answered until the second half of the 1920s. The great irony for the man who exposed us all to European modernism is that he eventually found his own artistic strength in the American vernacular and the influences of the Ashcan school rather than the pictorial innovations of Europe.

Like the American Scene painters who developed a native style in the 1930s, Kuhn turned to depicting circus performers, vaudeville actors, and other stock figures from American demotic culture. In the Armory Show, Kuhn had already proven his affinity for showmanship. Through the early 1920s, he even devoted himself to writing and producing vaudeville sketches. After a serious illness in 1925, which encouraged him to reevaluate his achievements, Kuhn finally discovered his own painterly voice in the theater.

The exhibition at DC Moore begins with *Vera (The Artist's Wife)* (ca. 1918), a Matisse-like portrait, and quickly follows Kuhn through Cubist assemblies (*Man with Ship Model*, 1918) and Braque-like still lifes (*Adventure*, 1924). Then in *Superba* (1926), Kuhn arrives at something different. Here he depicts a sturdy brunette with silverfish skin in a blue leotard, hands on hips, staring back with "superba" confidence. The composition, paint handling, and attitude is what Kuhn carries over to his other figures in the show, like *Show Girl in Armor* (1943) and *Woman in Majorette Costume* (1944).



Walt Kuhn, Roberto, 1946. Oil on canvas, 40 x 30 inches. Curtis Galleries, Minneapolis, Minnesota. Courtesy of DC Moore Gallery, New York.

For *Roberto* (1946), Kuhn painted a well-known clown performer, but in other portraits he developed his own figures, designing the costumes for his models and even meticulously applying their makeup. The work moves between the particular and the universal. In *Trio* (1937), he both depicts three real-life clowns posing, arms folded, in a line and references the characters of *commedia dell'arte* and the performers who populated the *fêtes galantes* of Watteau.

And then there's Kuhn's powerful self-portrait. In 1932, Kuhn painted himself not as the square-jawed and brooding young man we see in earlier photographs but as a stern-faced clown. In 1937, one critic remarked how Kuhn's realism "has survived all the varied forms of influence of the Post-Impressionists, the Fauves, and Cubists who were the shock troops of Modern Art and the Armory Show which Kuhn, himself, helped organize." In *Portrait of the Artist As a Clown (Kansas)* (1932), we see a figure, road-weary, who has nevertheless survived. As one critic put it at the time, after all his wandering, Kuhn finally came back home to convey "a remarkable serenity and authority of expression."



Installation view at Sideshow Nation; image by James Panero

This month the Armory Show inspires not only shows that look back but also exhibitions that consider its contemporary legacy. Francis M. Naumann Fine Art, which helped rediscover the archives of Walter Pach, has commissioned several contemporary artists to develop work based on the Armory's most infamous painting, *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912) by Marcel Duchamp. A show called "Decenter Armory," at the Abrons Art Center of the Henry Street Settlement, aims to connect the influence of the Armory's cubist paintings with contemporary digital art.

It also happens that the centenary of the Armory Show overlaps with what's known as "Armory Week," the time each March when several contemporary art fairs open in New York and are anchored by a big one on the Hudson, also called "The Armory Show." This "Armory Show" has tried to make much of its connection to the 1913 Armory Show, even leading some to believe it is the same organization one hundred years on. "The Armory Show" of 2013 only encourages this false succession, just as it cleverly appropriated the 1913 name a few years back for what was then known as the Gramercy International Art Fair (at the time an underground initiative that started out in hotel rooms in 1994).



Exterior view, Schema Projects; image by James Panero

There is much that is good in some of the smaller satellite fairs that have been drawn into the orbit of "Armory Week." Fountain Art Fair promises interesting artists and will go on view in the original venue of the 1913 Armory Show on Lexington Avenue and Twenty-fifth Street, which itself is worth a visit. Regarding the headline fair, as the trade show of our contemporary salon aesthetic, "The Armory Show" may borrow the name from 1913 but shares none of its independent spirit. The same goes for

events like the Whitney Biennial, institutional endeavors that push a simulacrum of sensation and scandal without any of the 1913 Armory's artist-led charge.

Art's pioneering spirit has therefore again been pushed to the margins. For his annual group show in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, this year known as "Sideshow Nation," the gallery owner Richard Timperio proved just how vital it is by lining his gallery with the work of over five-hundred contemporary artists. The contributors are all connected in one way or another, with the SoHo painters who came of age in the 1970s forming the core of the group. The show, now held over until March 24, looks especially strong and is a *Wunderkammer* of independent art, even if the selection would benefit by including more young artists and dropping its photographic entries.



Installation view of "Giacometti and a Selection of Contemporary Drawings" at Norte Maar

I have written several times in this space about the small galleries of Bushwick. This neighborhood in north Brooklyn undoubtedly sends many readers looking for their compass and trail map. The area hosted an open gallery evening on the Friday of the Armory's centennial weekend that again confirmed how central this peripheral neighborhood is to the arts of New York. The event known as Beat Nite, hosted by the curator Jason Andrew of the gallery Norte Maar, included ten small new galleries scattered across the neighborhood. A standout was Schema Projects, a new storefront created by the artist Mary Judge that focuses on works on paper. Another was Projekt 722—a nearby space that was off the official Beat Nite circuit but featured an astonishing solo show by the painter Amy Lincoln, whose meticulous landscapes and still lifes mix Henri Rousseau and American folk art with a hallucinatory palette.

Norte Maar offered a focal point for Beat Nite with its exhibition “Giacometti and a Selection of Contemporary Drawings.” Here Andrew secured the loan of Giacometti’s *Double Sided Drawing Featuring Double Portrait of Diego and Standing Man Arms Outstretched*, (ca. 1947–1950), which he suspended in the middle of the gallery, and smartly placed the work of ten contemporary artists around in counterpoint. The brooding portrait by Matthew Miller and the tense nude by Thomas Micchelli accentuated the agitated lines of Giacometti’s own work and brought out their formal similarities.

A new spirit of art is in the air. Like Davies, Kuhn, and Pach, one just has to go find it.



Amy Lincoln, Jungle with Zebras, acrylic on panel, 2012, 24 x 37 inches

1 “Walt Kuhn: American Modern” opened at DC Moore Gallery, New York, on February 7 and remains on view through March 16, 2013.

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