

**Lincoln Kirstein's Americana**

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**Contents**

Introduction- Pg. 3

Chapter 1— Pg. 11

Chapter 2— Pg. 16

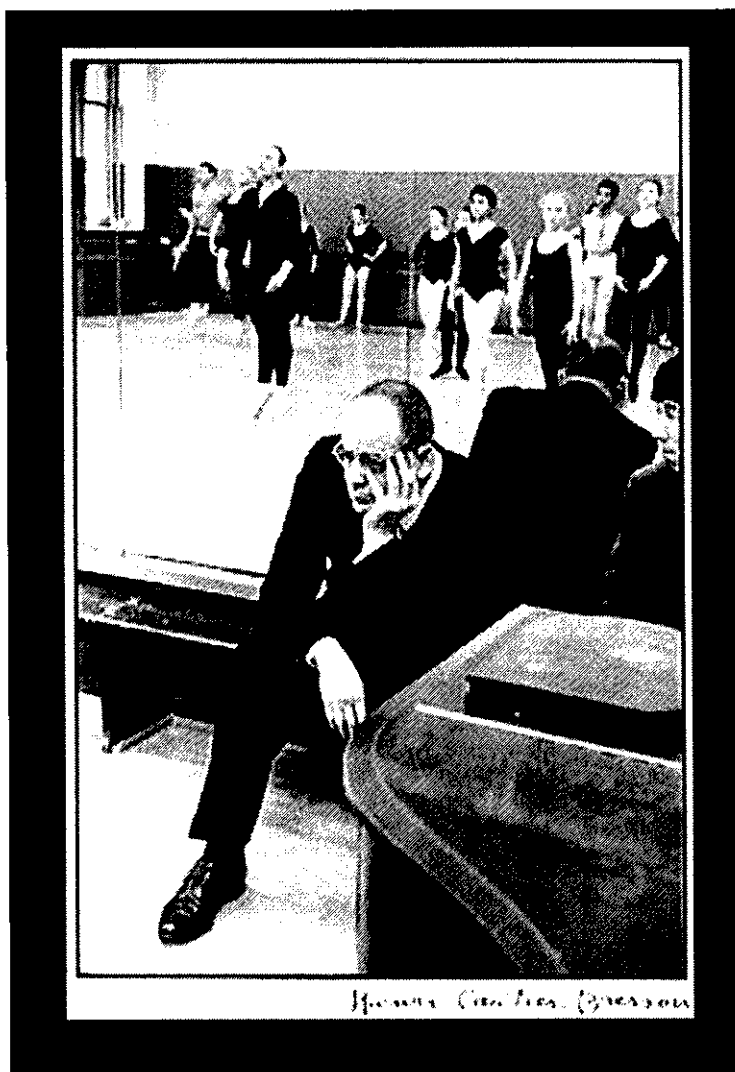
Conclusion—Pg. 32

Endnotes— Pg. 36

Bibliography— Pg. 37

Bibliographic Note— Pg. 41

Acknowledgements— Pg. 42



### Lincoln Kirstein's Americana

*The dance in dramatic ballets based on life in the United States as we live it today, and as today we imagine it has been lived through our long history. The steps they dance are based on rhythms that this land brought into being, the hauling Chantey of clipper ships, the pulse of Indian drums, the cowboy's nasal lilt, down to the rhumba, tango and the jazz steps of contemporary swing music.*— Lincoln Kirstein, 1939<sup>1</sup>

The life of Lincoln Kirstein looms large over many of the most prestigious New York City cultural institutions. As it should. He claimed art as American and enabled Americans to produce art that was their own. In the years between 1930 and 1963 he changed the American conception of high art. It was no longer something to be consigned to dusty museum hallways and consisting of homages to a lost Europe. Art could celebrate what it meant to be a contemporary American, not just through the music hall or popular novel but through bastions of high art such as literary journals, dance companies and art galleries.

Kirstein was a polymath. At times painter, musician, dancer, poet, theatrical impresario. He is, however, remembered most as being the latter day American Serge Diaghilev (founder and impresario of the Ballets Russes). The story of Kirstein as the modern-day Diaghilev, the bringer of the prodigal son of American ballet to America, George Balanchine, is a more complicated one than is espoused in the annals of cultural history.

In 1933 when Kirstein approached a choreographer with the idea of co-founding an American ballet, George Balanchine was not the first, Serge Lifar was. Balanchine and Kirstein had a most mercurial relationship.

### Introduction

*Horn and Hound* the literary miscellany that Kirstein co-founded at Harvard and financed through his father's fortune did not have the literary clout at the time that it has come to have in

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<sup>1</sup> Kirstein, Lincoln *Program Notes* (New York: Easkins Press Foundation Alliance for the Arts, 2009) 66.

retrospect. At the time Ezra Pound frequently referred to it as the “Bitch and Bugle”<sup>2</sup>. Not a lot of respect there.

Kirstein was also part of the predecessor to the Museum of Modern Art, the Harvard Society for Contemporary Art. Although the marble floors and Matisse lined galleries makes one think that MoMA came into this world with all the prestige it has now, one would be much mistaken. Many of their first shows Kirstein curated to little critical acclaim at the time.

Who was Kirstein? How did the young boy from Boston who arrived at Harvard two years behind his peers<sup>3</sup> come to shape American culture in the latter half of the Twentieth Century? Was it luck? Was it determination? Was it sheer talent? Was it connections that he made? Most likely it was a mixture of all of these factors.

At the end of his life Kirstein had had a marginally successful magazine and contemporary art society. He also had the funds, education and connections to patronize any art form he wanted, and he ultimately chose the ballet. The ballet and the Americanization of the ballet is key to understanding Kirstein as an artist in and of his own right. Although, it sometimes strikes me as disappointing that he did not have wider range to create art of his own; for his poetry is not bad and his early murals most promising. It is facile to say that he was only an administrator. Kirstein was the American Diaghilev. He united artists and championed the young. Kirstein should not be remembered as anything other than a greatly important figure in cultural history of the Twentieth Century.

### Brief Biography

Lincoln Kirstein was born on the 4th of May, 1907, in Rochester, New York. His grandfather was the owner of a lucrative Rochester clothing manufacturer and his father, Louis Kirstein, in later years became the president of Filene’s Department Store. For the most part, Kirstein’s early life was typical of an upper class, Jewish, Bostonian childhood. His recountings of this time are remarkably mundane.

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<sup>2</sup> Kirstein, Lincoln, *Mosaic* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1994) 104.

<sup>3</sup> Kirstein, Lincoln, *Mosaic* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1994) 79.  
*Most boys entered college at sixteen: I was already two years older. I’d weathered storms at two prep schools and still aimed to be some sort of artist.*

Lincoln Kirstein first became interested in the visual arts at Camp Timanous in Maine when he was ten years old. It was then he decided he would become a dancer<sup>4</sup>. Even when he graduated from Harvard and had his portrait painted he did not think of himself as anything but a dancer. The physique, not the face, was what was important<sup>5</sup>. He never became a dancer but he did co-found the best known American ballet company, the New York City Ballet. So in hindsight perhaps he actually did more than if he had been a dancer.

The teenager Kirstein was a complex child in both ways usual and unusual. He was politely asked to leave a number of elite boarding schools. He also was an apprentice at a stained glass factory.

As with Kirstein's desire to be a dancer, he was seized by a love for literature at a young age. He credits a teacher, a certain Mr. Howard who taught him at Exeter (for the brief spell in which he attended) for introducing Romantic poetry to him as well as contemporary poetry such as Hausman's *A Shropshire Lad*<sup>6</sup>. The young Kirstein was especially impressed by Oscar Wilde and he would remain throughout his life. One wonders where the poetry of the Americans were at this time and why Kirstein was not taught any.

Kirstein lived a fairly unremarkable student life at Harvard. From his writings of the time one could suggest that he was not primarily interested in his studies. He regarded his move to New York in 1930 as a "second university"<sup>7</sup>.

### Kirstein and Interest in Americana

Kirstein was to become a great champion of Americanized art forms from esoteric ballets to the widest range of popular cultural passions.

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<sup>4</sup>Kirstein, Lincoln, *Mosaic* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1994) 39.  
*I wished to become a dancer... I would be a dancer.*

<sup>5</sup> Kirstein, Lincoln, *Mosaic* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1994) 168.  
On having his portrait painted: *I didn't worry about my face, which was the least of me. I thought myself as a dancer in mufti, masker or sportsman, rather than an interesting character.*

<sup>6</sup> Latent and misunderstood homosexual urges would later become a hallmark of Kirstein's own poetry.

<sup>77</sup> Kirstein, Lincoln, *Mosaic* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1994) 176.

Kirstein idolized many aspects of the American experience, from the outlaw life of Billy the Kid to the charismatic charm of James Cagney. Over the course of his career he would come to celebrate the American in multitudinous forms of art. He was not a happy man but he was a passionate man and he poured himself into transporting the crumbling esoterica of European art and re-enlivening artistic forms in America in such a way that they could show a national character of their own.

Kirstein had three public idols of what it meant to be the modern American: the first was James Cagney; then Marilyn Monroe; and finally, Ernest Hemingway. Tragedy adhered to all three. Two of them committed suicide, Hemingway in a particularly violent manner. To Kirstein, what made them paragons of the modern American artist was how relatable they were to people coast to coast and how human the stories they told were as well as how fallibly they lived their lives.

Kirstein personified Cagney as not just the filmic, handsome hero, but as the “silent man.<sup>8</sup> The strong silent man means America, just as a hunting squire means England, a man in a silk hat and waxed mustache means France, and a bullfighter Spain”<sup>9</sup>. Cagney was to Kirstein a representative modern American hero as he had the ability to be understood whether by the truck stop worker in Arkansas or the farm hand in Wyoming<sup>10</sup>. Kirstein’s final expression on why Cagney is the apotheosis of the American Adonis lies in his almost violent sex appeal<sup>11</sup>.

This violence inherent in the actions of Cagney is similar to what made Kirstein so admire the writing of Hemingway. Kirstein sees in Hemingway’s writing constantly explores the

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<sup>8</sup> Kirstein, Lincoln, *By With To & From* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1991) 276.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 277

*When Cagney gets down off a truck, or deals a hand at cards or curses, or slaps his girl, or even when he affords himself and her the mockery of sweetness, he is, for the time being, the American hero whom ordinary men and boys recognize as themselves.*

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 277

*No one expresses more clearly in terms of pictorial action the delights of violence, the overtones of a semi-conscious sadism, the tendency towards anarchy, which is the basis of American sex appeal.*

fine line separating life from death<sup>12</sup>. Kirstein so admires the work of Hemingway that he compares it to that of Herman Melville. One can imagine the young Kirstein as a young Ishmael, searching across the seas for something he is not quite sure of<sup>13</sup>. It is the structure of Hemingway's work that so underpins Kirstein's admiration for him; "one thinks of Melville's chapter on the "Whiteness of the Whale," of Byron's bad rhymes [such as the jokes over Don Juan]"<sup>14</sup>. Hemingway was a wild man of the west, but a wild man of the west who could imbue economic prose with modern hopes and contemporary losses.

One suspects that Kirstein is giving Marilyn Monroe the ultimate exaltation as he compares her to: Stanislavsky, Brecht, Barrault, or Oliver, but even more remarkably compares her to his own personal hero, Oscar Wilde<sup>15</sup>. Kirstein's final assessment of Monroe and why she was in a way archetypically and beautifully American goes:

She, perhaps even consciously, exemplified a philosophy which had come to her pragmatically, and which a lot of American women don't like very much—a philosophy at once hedonistic, full of uncommon sense, and even to some intellectuals deeply disturbing. Her performances indicated that while sex is certainly fun, and often funny, it is only one of many games.

Others include the use of intelligence.<sup>16</sup>

If the reader did not know better this could be a very cognizant autobiographical statement by Kirstein himself.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 289

*Hemingway knows how separate and inert our contemporary existences are from the elements of living, from a more primitive and unconditional sensibility, and he has almost erected a canon of death to restore us to the capacity of life.*

<sup>13</sup> Kirstein, *Lincoln Mosaic* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1994) 255

*At Magg's bookshop in London I found the two-volume first edition of Moby Dick, the epic of deranged American searching.*

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 287

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 305

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 307

As many fingers that Kirstein kept in differing pies the one that today still bears his mark most consistently is that of American ballet.

Kirstein set up American ballet companies when the notion was almost farcical. The only other American scion of the ballet at the time was Lucia Chase who championed American ballet and was an heir to the Chase banking fortune.

Kirstein took ballet off the vaudeville stage and into the realm of modern art. From the beginning of Kirstein's thoughts on ballet the ideas of American ballets greatly appealed to him. When he first encountered Balanchine in 1933 he suggested ballets on the subjects of "Yankee Clipper", "Billy Budd", "Benito Cerino" and "Pocahontas"<sup>17</sup>. Balanchine did not receive any of these suggestions with great enthusiasm. In fact, the only ballet that ever came into fruition from this group was "Pocahontas", which was not choreographed by Balanchine but remained a pet project of Kirstein's.

Kirstein was lucky in finding Balanchine. In whom he found a collaborator and choreographer who had a deep want to make contemporary ballets in the style of Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* and had just escaped the Victorian traditions of the Royal Danish Ballet. Kirstein claims in his memoirs that Balanchine dreamt of American before he even left Russia in 1924<sup>18</sup>. As Balanchine recalled in 1983:

I never felt I was a stranger here, you know. I always wanted to be American. I couldn't speak English at that time, but I really wanted to be American. Somehow in Russia we read about America— about the parties...<sup>19</sup>

One wonders if an American audience ever dreamt of Balanchine before Kirstein introduced them to his work.

To Kirstein perseverance in the arts was inherently American. He thought of Modern American dance as in the same tradition of creating art in a thoroughly American way that would

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 131

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 151

<sup>19</sup> Lowry, W. McNeil "Conversations with Balanchine" Ed. Robert Gottlieb *Reading Dance* (New York: Pantheon, 2008) 88.



not attempt to ape the art of Europe but reflect themes present in the work of: Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman and William James<sup>20</sup>. With Balanchine on board, the innovator of neoclassical ballet, American ballet could sail forth.

Kirstein, not Balanchine, was the main driver behind this Americanization of ballet. Without the help of Balanchine, Kirstein and Ballet Theatre in collaboration with Jerome Robbins and Leonard Bernstein made *Fancy Free*<sup>21</sup>. A wartime story of the temporary freedom of young sailors while on leave in New York City. Taking advantage of cheap liquor and free women.

This was a far cry from Kirstein's and hopeful imagination of Balanchine's first American ballet which never came to fruition, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*<sup>22</sup>. This is a far more traditional view of American culture than young sailors frolicking around 11th Avenue. But the impetus for the two was the same: an American ballet, telling and dancing an American story, featuring American music and American dancers. Kirstein was adamant in his early writings on that Americans had no disadvantage compared to their European peers but were every bit as physically able:

Can Americans make good ballet dancers? This is a question which is equivalent to whether or not Americans make good violinists, good painters, good poets. Physically speaking Americans make the best dancers in the world, with the possible exception of the Russians.<sup>23</sup>

This may have been the case in 1936 but it would still be nearly 30 years before the New York City Ballet took up residence in Philip Johnson's specially designed *New York State*

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<sup>20</sup>Kirstein, Lincoln, *By With To & From* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1991) 201

<sup>21</sup> Josephs, Charles M. *Stravinsky and Balanchine* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002) 175

<sup>22</sup> Kirstein, Lincoln *Mosaic* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1994) 230.

<sup>23</sup> Kirstein, Lincoln "The American Ballet, Introduction to the 1936-7 Souvenir Program" *Program Notes* (New York: Easkins Press Foundation Alliance for the Arts, 2009) 33

*Theatre*<sup>24</sup>. Kirstein would have to wade through endless waves of opposition until the ballet could be thought of as a thoroughly American art form.

### Hound and Horn

Kirstein began his work on *Hound and Horn* first at Harvard although the magazine would flounder in New York City for four further years. It began as a “Harvard Miscellany” before Kirstein judged this as juvenile a subject and became in its original iteration a journal of contemporary literature after T.S. Eliot’s *Criterion*<sup>25</sup>.

Kirstein finally gave up his youthful interest in *Hound and Horn* when it became a mouthpiece for Southern Proto-Agrarian supporters<sup>26</sup>.

Although this project was not what Kirstein would have dreamed it to be at the time it had a fairly long run for a magazine run by amateurs and is the first instance in which one can see Kirstein’s almost unique talent for organizational collaboration of the great artists.

### Harvard Society for Contemporary Art and Kirstein’s Later Interest in the Visual Arts

Kirstein grew up steeped in the world of visual arts. His father was not only a successful businessman but also a patron of the arts. He was chairman of the board for many years of the Boston Public Library,<sup>27</sup> itself an amazing visual site. One could view Kirstein’s later work as the continuation of his father’s philanthropy on a much larger scale. The youthful Kirstein’s

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<sup>24</sup> Now called the Koch Theatre.

<sup>25</sup> Kirstein, *Lincoln Mosaic* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1994) 101.  
*We ourselves strove manfully to borrow from Britain’s literary tradition, which still not seemed last by electrically present.*

<sup>26</sup> Kirstein, *Lincoln By With To & From— A Lincoln Kirstein Reader* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1991) 21.  
*I abandoned the magazine after seven years, not entirely as my interests has altered and I was otherwise magnetized (by ballet). The real reason I did not fight to continue Hound & Horn and made only feeble efforts to have several interested parties pick i up is that I didn’t give a damn for politico-philosophical tendencies which I felt were devouring the magazine’s space, and I was neither equipped to deal nor interested in dealing with them.*

<sup>27</sup> Kirstein, *Lincoln By With To & From— A Lincoln Kirstein Reader* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1991) 23.  
*as far as I was concerned it came from an intimacy with the magnificent palace that was the Boston Public Library, of which my father was, for many years, president.*

involvement with contemporary art began with a happenstance meeting with John Singer Sargent. He advised Kirstein to apprentice himself to a prestigious Boston stained glass manufacturer in the neighborhood.

When Kirstein started at Harvard he was not the devotee of contemporary art that he would later come to be. He thought of portraiture as the true sign of an artistic master<sup>28</sup> and was enraptured by the work of the Pre-Raphaelites<sup>29</sup>.

As Kirstein had earlier in life wanted to be a dancer, his aim in his late teens was to be a painter. Yet, in retrospect he had little admiration for his own talents, saying of them: “My fingers were all thumbs, nowhere near as nimble as mind or eye”<sup>30</sup>. This seems too self-critical; some of his murals remain exemplars of painting at the time.

Kirstein in reminiscence credited the Harvard Society for Contemporary Art for his interest in the contemporary visual arts and more importantly his ability to step away from the Victorian and into the contemporary world of art. He says of them he “learned, no single code for depiction”<sup>31</sup>. He fully embraced this by the time he was 22, having staged shows in Cambridge that included works of: Berenice Abbott, Walker Evans, Paul Strand and Tina Modetti<sup>32</sup>. Kirstein was also beginning to be interested in the discourse surrounding modern art and credits that to the Columbia art historian Meyer Schapiro, the critic who championed modern art whilst also placing an onus upon the style of the piece and how that style may reflect the surroundings, whether political or personal that the artwork came out of. Kirstein said of Schapiro that he was “the first critic of modern art who made sense to me”<sup>33</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> Kirstein, *Lincoln Mosaic* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1994) 63  
*My ultimate criterion has always been portraiture, not only for its mirror imagery but for psychological anatomy. If a picture could not tell me much about a person, its painter, I thought, was no artist. I could never credit abstraction as anything past an admission of failed skill.*

<sup>29</sup>Kirstein, *Lincoln Mosaic* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1994) 62.  
*Any free-thinking, avant-garde preferences I might have had was smothered by devotion to Burne-Jones, Beardsley, and academic figurative rendering.*

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 79

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 160

<sup>32</sup> Duberman, Martin *The Worlds of Lincoln Kirstein* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007) 81.

<sup>33</sup> Kirstein, *Lincoln Mosaic* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1994) 165.

### The Harvard Society for Contemporary Art

When one considers cultural behemoth that it became the Harvard Society for Contemporary Art it is hard to imagine it as a modest student-run gallery and membership society, New York's Museum of Modern Art. Yet in its infancy it was a project of Kirstein's and three fellow undergraduates: Edward Warburg; Agnes Mongan and John Walker III. They entered their place in history due to the help of two graduate students, Alfred Barr and Jere Abbott, who three years after the conception the Harvard Society for Contemporary Art, would found the Museum of Modern Art<sup>34</sup>.

Kirstein in his memoirs reminisces that the Harvard Society of Contemporary Art was an infantile laboratory for experimentation.<sup>35</sup> It also served to forward the influence and importance of American contemporary art. The introductory statement in the catalogue to the February 1929 show states:

An assertion of the importance of American Art. It represents the work of men no longer young who have helped to create a national tradition in emergence, stemming from Europe but nationally independent.

This was going to become one of the motifs of Kirstein's artistic preferences. The deliberate stance he held on the debt that American art did indeed owe to its European predecessors but its own national identity that would be uniquely and recognizably American.

### Walker Evans

Kirstein's personal ability to champion the cause of an American artist comes across most readily in his work with the photographer Walker Evans and his erstwhile literary collaborator,

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<sup>34</sup> Kirstein, *Lincoln Mosaic* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1994) 169.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* 169

*The Harvard Society was to prove a luxurious playpen or laboratory in which I could make up my heated, but as yet still shouldering, sense about the differences between "originality," "personality," and "quality," and whatever connected these in the present context.*

James Agee. Kirstein and Evans met through the Harvard Society of Contemporary Art and their artistic relationship ended with Evans' death in 1975<sup>36</sup>.

With Evans, Kirstein championed contemporary American visual arts as a tool of social democracy by bringing his photographs of starved rural Americans to New York galleries where politicians and other people of influence would see those desperate unemployed Americans. Kirstein believed that Evans' art was fulfilling a civic and moral duty in capturing Americans in crisis<sup>37</sup>.

Kirstein saw Evans' work as singular but also timeless as a force of quotidian documentation much "as Atget gave us Paris before the war and as Brady gave us the War between the States"<sup>38</sup>. From the beginning of his career, Kirstein recognized the singular talent of Evans and placed him in the company of the photographic greats. Kirstein prophetically perceived that Evans' photographs would sustain the test of time. Kirstein credits this to the purity inherent in the work. Evans<sup>39</sup> made serious American art with a distinctly American theme.

Kirstein links Evans to the established artistic geniuses of the time, those who saw America as a safe haven for art after the collapse of Europe and a country in which a new national artistic tradition could be formed. Kirstein included: Henry James, T.S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein and Ezra Pound in the group of pre war artists who were made in America but not necessarily on American themes or American intents. This group he contrasted with, "others, like Dos Pasos, Hemingway and William Carlos Williams, and Walker Evans, [who] armed with the

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<sup>36</sup> This lasting friendship was somewhat unordinary for Kirstein. He had trouble retaining friends and would often cut ties after petty squabbles. His correspondence with E.M. Forester, who he was in admiration of, stops suddenly and without any written record as to why.

<sup>37</sup> Kirstein, *Lincoln By With To & From— A Lincoln Kirstein Reader* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1991) 227  
*The use of visual art to show us our own moral and economic situation has almost completely fallen into the hands of the photographer.*

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 228

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 232  
*The most characteristic single feature of Evans's work is its purity, or even its Puritanism... Every object is regarded head-on with the unsparing frankness of a Russian icon or a Flemish portrait.*

weapons of their spiritual ancestors, have turned from the breakup on the continent of Europe to attack the subject matter of their own country in their own time.”<sup>40</sup>

For Kirstein, America was always a country with its own artistic tradition and not just one in which European exports were mirrored by American similitudes .

### Visual Arts and the Ballet

Kirstein’s personal inspiration and hero, Diaghilev approached the visual arts within the art of ballet in a visionary manner. He sought to make ballet a completely collaborative and contemporary art form, working with the greatest visual artists, writers and musicians of the time, as well as the best choreographers and dancers. Diaghilev’s company was based in Monte Carlo but frequently performed in Paris and London and was a hotbed for innovation in the arts between 1909 and 1929. Kirstein’s views of the place of the visual arts in the ballet were not so different. He wrote of Diaghilev:

Revolutionary cubism hit ballet with its ton of bricks and horrified the old-guard ballet lovers, which was Diaghilev’s earnest intention. Social-satire, American jazz, the everyday continental vacation, and boulevard life of the 1920’s; dada, neo-classicism, the falsely naive, the falsely archaic, and decorative folklore no longer of Russia, but now of England, Italy, France or Spain were all exposed to the caprice of Diaghilev’s ingenious combinations.<sup>41</sup>

However, the majority of Diaghilev’s ballets were unable to survive. As it is not just the human component to the ballet that makes it such an ephemeral art form. The score can be copied endlessly as can the libretto. As with the the steps of the dance, the set design cannot be reset completely and in perfect synthesis with the original. For this reason a long time friend and

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 229

<sup>41</sup> Kirstein, Lincoln “Ballet in a Bad Time” Ed. Robert Gottlieb *Reading Dance* (New York: Pantheon, 2008) 330.

collaborator of Kirstein's, Pavel Tchelitchev, would only grudgingly design the set for *Orpheus et Eurydice*<sup>42</sup>

Although Kirstein's collaboration with Tchelitchev did not go as planned, Kirstein later proved that he could collaborate in a thoughtful and artistic manner. In 1935, when Balanchine and his founding company had their first permanent home as the ballet company for the Metropolitan Opera House, Kirstein himself would design some costumes<sup>43</sup>. With Kirstein's early artistic training and his group of friends he kept in New York at the time, it is not altogether surprising that he set artistic rather than administrative goals for himself. He spent most of his time in the 1930's in New York with a group of artists, including but not limited to: the artists Tchelitchev and George Hugnet; the surrealist, Charles Henri Ford; the photographer, George Platt-Lynes; the writers, Glenway Westcott and Gertrude Stein; the composer, Virgil Thompson and the prominent curators: Monroe Weeler and Kirk Askew.<sup>44</sup>

It is no wonder that with connections like these and his own personal talent and style, Kirstein was to become America's cultural impresario.

### Ballet

In Kirstein's own writings he is at his most effusive when writing of the ballet; the ballet that he enabled to be an American cultural institution.

Many of the best writers on the ballet are also poets. Consider, Kirstein himself; Edwin Denby; Mindy Aloff and Paul Valery. This is perhaps why Kirstein wrote, "the saga of ballet is real fit subject for an epic. Only with a poet's license may we obtain even the palest echo of the spirit and essence of a ballet company."<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Duberman, 422.

*As Lincoln paraphrased Pavlik's attitude "the score lasts and can be performed in concert [but] the stage designer's work is lost.*

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 307

<sup>44</sup> Duncan, Michael *High Drama, Eugene Berman and the Legacy of the Melancholic Sublime* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 2005) 96, 120

<sup>45</sup> Kirstein, *Lincoln By With To & From— A Lincoln Kirstein Reader* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1991) 109

Susan Sontag in her 1986 essay “Dancer and the Dance” makes clear Kirstein’s interpretation of the dance “Merce Cunningham and Lincoln Kirstein have both offered as a definition of dance: a spiritual activity in human form. No art lends itself so aptly as dance does to metaphors borrowed from the spiritual life”<sup>46</sup>. Kirstein routinely employed such metaphors, as did Balanchine himself. Kirstein wrote of ballet that it “is at once the most rigid and elastic bodily expression. It is the Catholic absolute dogma of the dance”<sup>47</sup>.

As was Kirstein’s habit, he flung himself into the world of the dance unreservedly. When he first went to Paris in 1933 with the aim of finding a choreographer he could bring back to America, he began consulting the archives at the Grand Opera Libraries and the Archive de la Danse in Passy<sup>48</sup>. He recalls the time:

I met historians and critics, survivors of a golden age... I knew I could not myself be a dancer, but there was a possibility as a scholar perhaps even as some sort of participant. I did not dare yet think myself as anything so unlikely as an impresario. But... maybe, perhaps... in time?<sup>49</sup>

With the arrogance that one can hold in hindsight it seems from the moment a youthful Kirstein stumbled upon the funeral procession of Serge Diaghilev he was intricately bound by fate to continue the work of the great impresario of the 20th Century.

Kirstein was determined to make this an American art no longer the preserve of touring companies but one with its own American trained dancers, choreographers who could collaborate with American writers, composers and artists. Kirstein in his American Ballet press release of 1935 is confident of this, “international in its scope, yet inimitably American in its portrayal of realistic, lyric, and graphic native scenes and subjects, it brings to the footlights a fresh

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<sup>46</sup> Sontag, Susan “Dancer and the Dance” Ed. Robert Gottlieb *Reading Dance* (New York: Pantheon, 2008) 338

<sup>47</sup> Kirstein, Lincoln *By With To & From— A Lincoln Kirstein Reader* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1991) 126

<sup>48</sup> Kirstein, Lincoln *Mosaic* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1994) 226.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.



impetus.”<sup>50</sup> Although Kirstein did not have to start completely from the beginning in this project by the 1930’s. There were a few American dancers dancing in Europe for various companies<sup>51</sup>. In 1933 Kirstein had an enormous project looming in front of him, that of creating a new American artistic tradition.

### Serge Diaghilev

Almost chimerically a twenty-two year old Kirstein in Venice researching his senior thesis on El Greco encountered the funeral barge carrying the body of Serge Diaghilev to the cemetery island of San Michele. Kirstein at the time did not realize the import of this fateful crossing of paths, but it was to become later a moment he referenced often.

One of Kirstein’s more youthful projects, his novel *Flesh Is Heir*, which is by modern standards unreadable, attributes great importance to the death of the man who he modeled after Diaghilev. “It was the end indeed, the end of youth for a distinguished company of human beings, the end of power and endeavor, the end of perhaps, of the first quarter of the twentieth century.”<sup>52</sup> He may not give himself enough credit in this statement. As Diaghilev had created a position for the stateless Balanchine in Monte Carlo, Kirstein would do so for him in America in the coming years. Arnold Haskell, a great collaborator of Kirstein’s and writer on the dance during the 1930’s and 1940’s, said in his obituary of Diaghilev: “The ballet could live perfectly well without Nijinsky, as events have proved, but without Diaghilev, it was aimless.”<sup>53</sup> The world of avant-garde ballet had most certainly lost its director and great organizer but Diaghilev had established too much of a tradition for the art form to languish. And, America was the place in which salvation might be found. A Broadway producer, E. Ray Goetz, bought all of the stock of the Ballets Russes, intending to recreate as many of the original works as possible in the

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<sup>50</sup> Kirstein, Lincoln *Program Notes* (New York: Easkins Press Foundation Alliance for the Arts, 2009) 23

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 88

<sup>52</sup> Joseph. 124.

<sup>53</sup>Haskell, Arnold L. “Sergei Diaghilev” Ed. Robert Gottlieb *Reading Dance* (New York: Pantheon, 2008) 493.

United States.<sup>54</sup> Diaghilev was an artistic force of huge importance and creativity, but he was not irreplaceable. When asked by journalists what he did, he would reply, “I arrange the lights”<sup>55</sup>. As magnificent dancers were to influence the next generation of dancers, administrators are so too able. Kirstein could champion the inclusive and collaborative nature of the ballet as Diaghilev had done before him. Diaghilev would have his place in history, but so would Kirstein.

### Americana Ballets Before Balanchine

Until Balanchine and Kirstein found success together, Kirstein sought out an American choreographer, so as to establish ballet as an American art form once and for all. One of his earliest proteges was a Mormon from Utah and child of the Vaudeville stage, Lew Christensen. Upon meeting Kirstein the young Christensen found his world suddenly and dramatically changed, through Kirstein he was introduced to the most prominent avant-garde artists of the time among them Aaron Copland, James Agee and e.e. cummings<sup>56</sup>.

For Kirstein, having an American choreographer was not quite enough to Americanize the art form. The subject of the ballet must also be American. He commissioned Agee and cummings to write librettos for ballets as well as writing a few himself. His were undoubtedly traditionally American and called upon national folk tales such as Pocahontas. He said of American folklore being integrated into the dance: “Our history is rich with epic subjects for film, opera, or play, but the lyric myth, so necessary to the dance, the national folk-tale resists discovery.”<sup>57</sup> These are not the words of a man who is content with American folk tale to be left languishing never to enter the world of the ballet. This is Kirstein’s personal artistic cry to action.

The ballet that is most American and best remembered created by Lew Christensen was *Filling Station*. It remained a ballet close to Kirstein’s heart. He commissioned the set designs from the brother of his future wife, the painter Paul Cadmus. Kirstein imagining the ballet having a long lifetime, he considered that viewers in 2037 would be able to recognize the Cadmus

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<sup>54</sup> Duberman. 130.

<sup>55</sup> Kirstein, Lincoln *Mosaic* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1994) 127.

<sup>56</sup> Homans, Jennifer *Apollo’s Angels* (London: Granta, 2010) 461.

<sup>57</sup> Kirstein, Lincoln *Program Notes* (New York: Easkins Press Foundation Alliance for the Arts, 2009) 58.

designed for the 1930's<sup>58</sup>. In his introductory note to the ballet when first presented in January of 1938 at the Avery Memorial Auditorium in Hartford, Connecticut, is wonderfully descriptive on the charms of the ballet:

In using as its background one of the most familiar landmarks of modern American life, the ballet is seen as not a continual revival of past epochs or styles, but rather as a heightening of our immediate lives around us. The hum and swell of cars and trucks in their ceaseless flow along our highways provide the undertone for a drama which occurs to the routine of a mechanic's life, a violent and exciting day, but no more unreal than those experienced by millions of other motorists and mechanics.<sup>59</sup>

Again at play is Kirstein's romanticization of the American working class hero. In much the same way that James Cagney becomes his idol, so does the workaday life that is free of arts and secretaries and tail coats. One wonders if Kirstein without his father's financial backing would have found the life of the poor been quite so alluring.

*Filling Station* is today occasionally performed and it persists as an important work in the way that outdated romantic novels on westward migration are important. No longer a profound statement on what it means to be American, it conveys what it meant to be American through art to Kirstein in another time.

Christensen continued making American themed ballets for Kirstein into the 1950's, at which point he was the artistic director of the San Francisco Ballet. In 1952 he choreographed a ballet set to Donhanyi's *Variation of a Nursery Tune* and based on the Mark Twain story *The Five Boons of Life*<sup>60</sup>.

William Dollar's 1941 ballet *Juke Box* was created for the State-Department-sponsored trip of Kirstein's ballet company to South America to show good faith. Nancy Reynolds remarks

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>60</sup> Kirstein, *Lincoln Program Notes* (New York: Easkins Press Foundation Alliance for the Arts, 2009) 123.

that the ballet was “full of corny touches— the college widow, the football hero, a rocket sequence.”<sup>61</sup> It is not entirely surprising that *Juke Box* was never performed in America.

The next American ballet that Kirstein commissioned was Ruthana Boris’ *Cakewalk*. A step up from *Juke Box* but to modern audiences would be crude— the ballet was based on a minstrel show. However, *The New York Herald Tribune* dance critic, Walter Terry, praised the piece; “Breezy and witty— a really fine bit of Americana, a lusty folk ballet which translates something of the form, the characteristics, the general boisterousness of the old minstrel shows into into the dance language of contemporary theater.”<sup>62</sup> With the benefit of hindsight it seems not an awfully bad thing that these ballets do not exist today. One advantage of the ephemeral nature of ballet is that not very good productions can be readily forgotten.

Kirstein writing in 1952 reflects that Balanchine “did “American” choreography for Diaghilev, in which one could see the syncopated material beat, extreme athleticism, an inversion of academic ideas of what was “beautiful.”<sup>63</sup> This was less typically “American” in the 1920’s than it was modern. Precisely, in Kirstein’s writing on dance, “modern” is synonymous with American.

### George Balanchine Divinized

George Balanchine looms over this essay with unbelievable presence and an inescapable authority. Although *Hound and Horn* has been posthumously glorified, and the Harvard Society of Contemporary Art became the Museum of Modern Art. Yet, the strongest claim that one can hold for Kirstein turns on his collaboration with the greatest American choreographer of the 20th century and founder of neo-classical ballet, George Balanchine.

Kirstein knew of Balanchine’s dances before he met him. Along with Lenoide Massine and Michel Fokine, the Russian emigre choreographer belonged to the group of choreographers

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<sup>61</sup> Reynolds, 71.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>63</sup> Kirstein, *Lincoln Program Notes* (New York: Easkins Press Foundation Alliance for the Arts, 2009) 143.

that Diaghilev was to champion before his untimely death<sup>64</sup>. Balanchine was a student at the Imperial Ballet School when the revolutions of 1917 turned his and his fellow student's worlds upside down. He escaped Russia in 1924 and was immediately invited by Diaghilev to join the Ballet Russes.

From the mid 1920's onward, Kirstein was impressed by the new stylizations in dance that the young Balanchine was creating. In an early diary he says Balanchine's "dances have the spareness, the lack of decoration which is by no means a lack of refinement, the splendid capacity to display individual gesture."<sup>65</sup> He also at one point commented that the program of the evening contained too many ballets by Balanchine, Kirstein was not without his well developed critical capacities when it came to Balanchine, but we readily forgive him as he was hardly much of a critic, when describing Balanchine's 1928 ballet *Apollo*:

There is no plot. The inspiring of the Muses is a sufficient subject for dances in the old style, with all the emphasis on easy formal transition, a delicacy in extended line of the body that is by no means a reversion to nineteenth-century choreography, for just as Stravinsky's music transcended Delibes and Tchaikovsky, through the *Sacre* of no matter what, Balanchine has transcended *Petipa*, by the way of *Prince Igor*, *Les Matelots* and *La Boutique Fantasque*.<sup>66</sup>

This is far from a mundane claim. Kirstein ranks the young Balanchine higher than *Petipa*, the choreographer who is remembered as being the father of the Russian tradition of nineteenth century classical ballets. Kirstein, unequivocal as ever, is confident about his choice of the next important choreographer.

Balanchine, as presented by the New York City Ballet and the Balanchine Trust today, is an untouchable, beatific figure in the world of dance. He is no longer Balanchine the small boy

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<sup>64</sup> One cannot help but wonder why he did not seek treatment for the diagnosed diabetes that ultimately killed him.

<sup>65</sup> Kirstein, *Lincoln By With To & From— A Lincoln Kirstein Reader* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1991) 123.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

who got into trouble, Balanchine the rakish dandy living in Paris, Balanchine the womanizing choreographer, but Balanchine the God. There can be no criticizing the work of the New York City Ballet today as to do so is to implicitly criticize the company that has to be faultless as it was started by the God of American dance. This is not a healthy intellectual environment for ballet criticism to exist. Nor for a ballet company.

Balanchine is no longer remembered as a man, a man as full of fault as all are but as a series of epithets on the dance. Some of these are indeed beautiful and to use a word Balanchine liked, transcendent. On being asked by the mother of a young student whether her daughter would grow to be a ballerina he answered: “La danse madame, c’est un question morale.”<sup>67</sup> Much of the Balanchine mythologism has linked him inextricably with his Russian Orthodox beliefs. It is not a surprise that the thoroughly secular Kirstein liked this, harkening to an old world that he could only imagine, in much the same way that in his youth he was inspired by the devotional paintings of El Greco.

Kirstein connects Balanchine’s “most quoted apothegm was “to make audiences see the music and hear dancing.” St. Paul has it: “Eye hath nor seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him.””<sup>68</sup> Kirstein took this metaphor further when he wrote: “Our modern theatre assumes the frame for an atmosphere of ritual. We sit in big balconied rooms, brightly lit, in expectation of magic... What has been seen and absorbed is commonly agreed to have been of the “Divine.”<sup>69</sup>

Kirstein replaces the devotional setting of the church with a new altar to worship, that of art. This is a very American idea, redolent of the separation of Church and State, an American ideal. The permanent home of the New York City Ballet after 1963 was even called The New York State Theatre. Yet, unlike many sects of formalized religion this was not open to all. One had to be educated, liberal and intellectually curious and wealthy enough to make a trip to The New York State Theatre. Kirstein’s great success in American ballet cannot be denied but one must keep in mind that his championed art form is not one that can carry with it the

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 203.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 219.

egalitarianism of popular publications, television and radio. This was an altar which was certainly worthy of praise, but, an altar for the minority, the rarified minority. This leads one to wonder whether Kirstein's American ballets really could be thought of as American due to the ingrained elitism in the system of the arts. However, to Kirstein and those who viewed his companies these ballets were undoubtedly more American than the vast majority of ballets being performed at the time.

The passage of Balanchine to America is largely written about in a simplistic manner that glosses over the difficulties of orchestrating an American ballet company on an unprecedented scale. From most of the literature on the subject one presumes that Kirstein and Balanchine became fast friends on meeting in 1933 and with only a few minor hitches along the way the New York City Ballet became the preeminent avant-garde ballet company in the United States. Yet, Balanchine was who Kirstein had in mind when he made his trip to Europe in 1933 in search of an experienced choreographer to bring to America. Massine was his first choice but he declined Kirstein's offer. Balanchine spoke only broken French when he met Kirstein at a party given by Lady Emerald Cunard and Kirstein spoke little more than schoolboy French. They did not readily understand each other, and were not the perfect partners from the beginning that they are portrayed to be. Even so, they both had similar goals. Balanchine was bored of shuffling around Europe looking for odd jobs after the collapse of the Ballets Russes. Neither had he stayed long at the Royal Danish Ballet (one cannot imagine its Victorian traditions were to his liking) nor the Paris Opera Ballet. Kirstein hired him after brief trials.

Kirstein was dissatisfied with the plight of American Ballet and wanted to find an already established choreographer who he could direct in his American ideals and not have to train.

From the beginning the relationship was mercurial. As Kirstein says of his first few interactions with Balanchine in 1933: "although Balanchine had delivered an overwhelming bounty of suggestive indications— including hints that he might like to come to America, maybe with a group of twenty girls and five men, in a repertory of his own developed "modern classicism" — he had made no sign he cared to see me again."<sup>70</sup> Kirstein alone had to make the executive decision to hunt down Balanchine and convince him to come to America as this could

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<sup>70</sup> Kirstein, *Lincoln Mosaic* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1994) 245.

be an overwhelming artistically important chance. As Kirstein wrote to his friend Chick Austin at the Hartford Atheneum “we have a chance to have an American ballet within 3 years.” Kirstein charts his admiration and understanding for Balanchine as the man and not as just the choreographic genius during this first meeting in 1933. Kirstein says of it: “when he spoke, I began to have a large and growing sympathy for Balanchine himself, not as a historical figure but as an individual, who, like others, depended on factors beyond his own extraordinary capacities, and whom I might have a real role in supporting.”<sup>71</sup> Kirstein writes this with the knowledge that Balanchine was to be hugely successful in the formation of dance and not just as perhaps a failed, fledgling choreographer. This makes one question how Kirstein may have historicized the event had it turned out to be an insipid disappointment. When Kirstein and Balanchine first met, the idea of the New York City Ballet was also one which had not even been imagined. The company was expected to reside at the Hartford Atheneum which was, according to Martin Duberman, “an important center of cultural ferment, acquiring works by such radical figures as Balthus, Piet Mondrian and Alexander Calder.”<sup>72</sup> In theory the perfect place for Balanchine to start building a school and company, but on arrival he found Hartford old-fashioned and the theatre too small. Balanchine demanded relocation to New York.

Balanchine had strong ideas of what America was and Hartford was not it, New York was. When describing New York to his friend the poet W. McNeil Lowry<sup>73</sup> in 1983 just before his death, he said: “New York still looks the way I see it. This cylinder and stars, you know—all that. Striped pants and people. And black negroes dressed for the cake-walk.”<sup>74</sup> The words of Balanchine are an invaluable historical source in understanding his role in the creation of American ballet. It is hard to decipher to what extent these are his actual words and not his words as polished by Kirstein. If one looks at letters that Balanchine wrote to friends his English is

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<sup>71</sup>Kirstein, Lincoln “Meeting Balanchine” Ed. Gottlieb, Robert *Reading Dance* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2008) Pg. 135

<sup>72</sup> Duberman, 178.

<sup>73</sup> Lowry was a key figure in the development of the New York City Ballet and School of American Ballet — he aided the company by way of an endowment through the Ford Foundation.

<sup>74</sup> Lowry, W. McNeil “Conversations with Balanchine” Ed. Robert Gottlieb *Reading Dance* (New York: Pantheon, 2008) 89.



clearly not that of an advanced writer and speaker. Friends of his also recall how he was always more comfortable speaking Russian than English. This leads one to imagine that his more sculpted ideas and writings on dance were in close collaboration with Kirstein. However much the style may have been changed there are certain sentiments that occur over and over again. Consider Balanchine's claim that "two dancers on stage are enough material for a story; for me, they are already a story in themselves."<sup>75</sup> As charming an apothegm as this might be, it is not one that I can believe. In the years leading up to his death Balanchine became more and more preoccupied with the specter of death appearing onstage. Some of his ballets refer to historical moments that were important to his formation such as *Opus 34* (World War Two) and *La Valse* (the crumbling of fin de siecle Vienna), to say that these ballets contain no stories is to unfairly relegate them to the realm of the pictorial. Even Balanchine's earliest and most abstract ballets allow the audience to intuit a story of some kind. This abstraction in Balanchine's work is what for Duberman in his official biography of Kirstein links his patronage of the ballet with his other artistic causes: "[Kirstein] was after all, the champion of Balanchine's "abstract" choreography, of Lachaise's "distorted" female torsos, of Tchelitchev's painterly experiments with wax, sand and coffee grinds: he would invite the uncategorizable artist Joseph Cornell to design decor for a ballet."<sup>76</sup>

Duberman is without a doubt an eminent historian, a skilled writer and thinker on matters political, biographical, homosexual, but he is not particularly adept in the world of dance history. He correspondingly downplays Kirstein's role as a patron and organizer, primarily within the world of American ballet. This does not render Duberman's points on Kirstein's political and sexual life as well as biographical details irrelevant. But he misses the point of Kirstein's life that was played out within artistic realms. Kirstein was interested in the visual arts and writing but it was to the New York City Ballet and the furthering of American ballet that he gave his life. He frequently visited the School of American Ballet, observing classes until his death. In the School

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<sup>75</sup> Balanchine, George "Marginal Notes on the Dance" Ed. Robert Gottlieb *Reading Dance* (New York: Pantheon, 2008) 82.

<sup>76</sup> Duberman. 429.

and the Company he had created a family. In understanding Kirstein's historical artistic impact most of the picture is left uncolored unless one with an adequate dance background examines it.

Kirstein was much more than just a passive organizer of Balanchine and the New York City Ballet. As Kirstein said: "Balanchine did not attribute prophetic significance to his art. He hated snobbery. I recall when he spoke of the ballet, he readily used culinary metaphors. "I'm a chef," Balanchine often said, "making dishes for the audience to suit its taste. I only try to keep the menu varied." But it was real, healthful food—for the mind and for the heart."<sup>77</sup> But without Kirstein, Balanchine would not have any ingredients to cook with. To carry on the metaphor, Balanchine believed ballets to be easily spoiled. He said of his early ballets "ballets existed as a breath, a mere memory, and there were sure to be opinions that revivals were never as good as debuts."<sup>78</sup> Some ballets Balanchine kept in repertory, whether nascent classics (such as *Serenade*) or box office successes (such as *The Nutcracker*), while others failed to survive. Occasionally a dancer would pique Balanchine's interest and lead him to revive a ballet of old. This is particularly obvious from the performance of *Prodigal Son* which he created for Serge Lifar, Anton Dolin and Felia Doubrovskaya of the Ballets Russes in 1929 and was not revived until 1950 with Jerome Robbins as the prodigal son and Maria Tallchief as the siren. Balanchine would revive and revise this ballet once more for Mikhail Baryshnikov in 1981. Balanchine was constantly evolving as a choreographer and as an artist and to do that he needed to be in collaboration with someone whose artistic interests and devotions was as deep as his. That person was Kirstein. Although at many times far from perfect partners, they were indeed partners albeit imperfectly.

Balanchine's first ballet on an explicitly American theme was *Alma Mater*. It is hard to imagine Balanchine creating a ballet based on an Ivy League football game without the prompting of Kirstein. "*Alma Mater* was a great success with audiences. The real puzzle was how Balanchine, recently arrived from life in Paris, Monte Carlo, Copenhagen, and Leningrad,

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<sup>77</sup>Millstein, Nathan "My Friend George Balanchine" Ed. Robert Gottlieb *Reading Dance* (New York: Pantheon, 2008). 140

<sup>78</sup> Kirstein, Lincoln *Mosaic* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1994) 243.

had the vaguest idea of what he was doing.”<sup>79</sup> The tomfoolery of the Yale undergraduates must certainly come from a contemptuousness that only a Harvard man such as Kirstein could foster.

Balanchine’s American style of choreography can be seen in his 1950 ballet *Jones Beach*, inspired by the beach created an hour outside of New York City by the Commissioner of Parks, Robert Moses.<sup>80</sup>

Balanchine also delighted in Americana when making *Western Symphony* in 1954. Balanchine commissioned the score from Hershy Kay after visiting Wyoming.<sup>81</sup> As Nancy Reynolds says of Balanchine, his “enthusiasm for the west is known. He likes Westerns on TV. For years his work outfit consisted of bright shirts, often plaid, and frontier pants.”<sup>82</sup> Kirstein’s romanticism of the American west was shared with Balanchine.

Balanchine once again in 1959 returned to focus on America with his ballet *Native Dancers* loosely set around race horses and the racing track, in which the female dancers paraded as fillies<sup>83</sup>. Not surprisingly, this ballet has been dropped from repertory.

The 1958 ballet *Stars and Stripes* was more successful than *Native Dancers*. It is a ballet in which the feel is euphorically jingoistic. The acts are referred to as “Campaigns”. The music was also militant in style and based upon the famed marches of John Philip Sousa. The audience was left under no doubt that this was an American piece, the set is hung with a very large American flag. Although a popular success this was not a ballet that Kirstein could be proud of, he described it as nothing more than a “musical joke”<sup>84</sup>. This was not the incarnation of the American dream on stage that he had so hoped for.

### Ballet Society and Ballet Caravan

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<sup>79</sup> Reynolds, 39.

<sup>80</sup> Reynolds, 114.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. 188.

The conventional story of Kirstein, Balanchine and American Ballet presumes that the New York City Ballet abruptly sprung into full-blown existence upon Balanchine's arrival in America in 1933. That is far too simple a story.

For many years the ballet struggled until Kirstein and Balachine gained a permanent home in New York's City Center. It was then in 1948, when they adopted the name of the New York City Ballet. Many times in the fifteen years that separated Balanchine's arrival in America and the founding of the New York City Ballet the company skirted failure. Its survival was in the main due to Kirstein, who kept the dream of an American ballet alive and the school functioning while Balanchine was in Hollywood or choreographing for the Broadway stage. Kirstein had great aspirations for the school that he founded in 1934, for the occasion he wrote in a press release declaring it designed to establish in: "America a tradition of the dance equivalent to the great Russian school, which has produced the greatest dancers of our time: Pavlova, Nijinsky, Karasvina, and others."<sup>85</sup>

The School of American Ballet was the first constituent element of what we now recognize as the New York City Ballet. It was followed in 1935 by the American Ballet, then the Ballet Caravan of 1936, which merged with it to become American Ballet Caravan in 1941, the company's immediate predecessor was Ballet Society.

Charles M. Joseph, in his book on the collaboration between Stravinsky and Balanchine, highlights the importance of Kirstein's mission to form an American ballet company in the early years of Balanchine's time in America:

Without Kirstein's ministry, and without a company to visualize the principles of their shared devotion to classicism. Stravinsky and Balanchine could not advance their belief in a musical-balletic equilibrium. "Real" ballet had other ideas— mainstream ideas that worked for management, for company artists, for the audience, and most meaningfully for the powerful New York

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<sup>85</sup> Kirstein, *Lincoln Program Notes* (New York: Eakins Press Foundation Alliance for the Arts, 2009) 13.

critics. If Kirstein and Balanchine were to tackle their dream, they would have to tackle the competition head-on.<sup>86</sup>

Balanchine and Stravinsky were bound together by Balanchine's views on the dance that mirrored Stravinsky's on music: "much can be said in movement that cannot be expressed by words. Movement must be self-explanatory. If it isn't, it has failed."<sup>87</sup> Joseph rightly emphasizes the pragmatism necessary to form an artistic company.

The great nascent critic of American ballet, Edwin Denby, pointed out both the practical struggles that Kirstein and Balanchine faced but also the need to Americanize ballet as an art form:

Sensibly organized to produce dancing as art, which is a ballet company's proper function. Kirstein and Balanchine, together have — as Time pointed out in reviewing Ballet Society— worked since 1933 to de-Russianize our ballet as an art. Now they have begun the necessary organizational work to decommercialize it as a branch of our theatre. At the moment it is the most effective way of keeping it civilized, though the method is obviously a lot of trouble. But unless it stays civilized, ballet is no fun. Staying civilized is always everybody's trouble, so why not ballets?<sup>88</sup>

In less poetic phrasing, to de-Russianize ballet is to Americanize ballet. This was the mission of Kirstein and Balanchine.

Kirstein had a number of ballets on typically American subjects that never reached the stage, either through a lack of support from Balanchine or other such stumbling blocks. But ballets based in American folklore did not come into existence due to Kirstein's lack of trying. He commissioned e.e. cummings to write the libretto to a ballet of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for which

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<sup>86</sup> Joseph, 177.

<sup>87</sup> Balachine, George "Marginal Notes on the Dance" Ed. Robert Gottlieb *Reading Dance* (New York: Pantheon, 2008) 493.

<sup>88</sup> Denby, Edwin *Dance Writings* (London: Dance Books, 1986) 516.

he failed to convince the artist Ben Shahn to design the sets.<sup>89</sup> Not all of Kirstein's dreams of prototypically American ballets were to be dashed; some came to fruition. Who else could have had the panache and style as well as fervent belief in the importance of American arts, to organize a ballet based on *Moby Dick* and the great American tradition of seafaring<sup>90</sup>. As Kirstein did so with the mechanic and the characters that Cagney portrays he romanticizes the notion of the sailor: "the New England boys of the mid-nineteenth century who ran away to sea either from poor chances or farms, factories or the restriction of Puritan homesteads, found new lives in the South Seas."<sup>91</sup> Again one wonders whether if Kirstein had lived the life of a subsistence worker he would idealized it.

The notion of Americanization of ballet pervades Kirstein's writings in the '30's and '40's. He goes so far as to describe one of his presentations in 1938 at the 92nd Street Y to hold an "emphasis on American isolation."<sup>92</sup> His most revelatory statement on the subject comes later in the same piece of writing in which he condenses the ideals of Ballet Caravan:

The Caravan is unique in so much as all of its choreography is done by its own dancers for their best uses, and because it employs as collaborators not already recognized European designers, but only Americans of a generation parallel to the dancers— artists who, although primarily easel painters, have given special study to the problems of clothes to be used and seen in motion.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Kirstein, *Lincoln Mosaic* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1994) 183. *I asked him [Ben Shahn] to do decor for Cumming's ballet Tom, based on Uncle Tom's Cabin, but this, like other dreams came to nought.*

<sup>90</sup> Kirstein, *Lincoln Program Notes* (New York: Easkins Press Foundation Alliance for the Arts, 2009) 54. *Yankee Clipper, with music by Paul Bowles and choreography by Eugene Loring, derives its theme from that remarkable epoch in American maritime history who has been immortalized in Moby Dick.*

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

In, his published writings, Kirstein is always laudatory over the aim and realization of creating an American Ballet<sup>94</sup>, even though in his private writings he has doubts. Kirstein kept so many types of written accounts— from diaries, to articles, to poems to letters— that at times it is hard to pin down his actual thoughts on a matter. At the same time these primary source materials provide an essential tool for the scholar. There is certainly enough of it as Kirstein was an indefatigable worker<sup>95</sup> who wrote voraciously.

Kirstein continued the trend of American themes in ballets realized by Ballet Caravan. In 1938 the company presented *Billy the Kid*, whom Kirstein imbues with American exceptionalism even in the darkest sense, in much the same way that he likens Cagney to the prototypical American man hitting his wife. Kirstein says of Billy, “he was a heroic incident in that westward march which made a sprawling continent of the United States of America. The many fine qualities which he had were cancelled out by his terrible talent for murder, the ultimate expression of lonely individualism.”<sup>96</sup> In Kirstein’s writing here Billy the Kid does not seem quite so terrible and to a certain extent romanticized, as though perhaps for Kirstein the making of America was such a great accomplishment that it justifies the atrocities that came along with it. To Kirstein, America was so great that there was bound to be bloodshed along the way.

Kirstein worked diligently to further knowledge and interest in the history of the dance in America as well as the history of ballet. He wrote about ballet as a historical subject in an era when few others did. Books on ballet history published before 1960 number fewer than fifteen<sup>97</sup>.

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 57.

*In order to create this repertory, outstanding young American musicians and painters of an equivalent training and sympathy collaborated with the Caravan’s choreographers. Collaboration is the backbone of any ballet and the Caravan extends this method, employing sometimes the rich past and again the miraculous present for the invention of music which must specifically underline dancing.*

<sup>95</sup> Buckle, Richard “Lincoln Kirstein” Ed. Robert Gottlieb *Reading Dance* (New York: Pantheon, 2008) 1099

*Kirstein... can settle down at his typewriter, no matter what time of day or night. He will sit for a moment in thought, take his glasses off, pass a hand over his eyes, and then rattle away without pause for two hours. After a charge round the block, a rest on his bed, or a handful of raisins he is ready for more.*

<sup>96</sup> Kirstein, *Lincoln Program Notes* (New York: Easkins Press Foundation Alliance for the Arts, 2009) 65.

<sup>97</sup>See bibliographic note 1.

Kirstein charted the history of ballet not as the history of cumulative and finite event but one that was still rapidly evolving:

Classical ballet is not an old-fashioned dance form set in the time of Bach. It is a continuously developing idiom as broad as the language of music itself. It complements great music by dancing it, for the music itself generally sprang from the simple melodies sung and played at folk dances or social festivals.<sup>98</sup>

This is not to say that Kirstein did not consider ballet as a currently American art form. He did, but just as painting and music had begun in Europe so had ballet and the adoption of it as an American art form is something only to be proud of. It should also allow Americans ways to take the art form, embrace it, and Americanize it<sup>99</sup>. Just, thirteen years after Kirstein brought Balanchine to America he had succeeded. Ballet was now a wholly American art form, designed by Americans, performed by Americans, scored by Americans. He says in the 1946 Ballet Society prospectus:

Ballet in America has so developed over the last ten years that it is now acceptable as a major form of popular art and entertainment. Not only have we created first-rate touring companies, but Americans have demonstrated an inexhaustible power to create classic dancers who perform with a brilliance rivaling the most distinguished foreign artists.<sup>100</sup>

Kirstein is an unlikely figure to mention in conjunction with the American dream. He was independently wealthy, well educated, white, Jewish, gay and well connected. But above all he had a dream to Americanize ballet. And he did it. The American dream enabled America to

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<sup>98</sup> Kirstein, Lincoln *Program Notes* (New York: Easkins Press Foundation Alliance for the Arts, 2009) 64.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

*The dance in dramatic ballets based on life in the United States as we live it today, and as today we imagine it had been lived through our long history. The steps they dance are based on rhythms that this land brought into being, the hauling chantey of Clipper ships, the pulse of Indian drums, the cowboy's nasal lilt, down to rumba, tango and the jazz steps of contemporary swing music.*

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.



become the home of ballet, no longer Europe where after World War Two it floundered in obscurity and affectedness.

### New York City Ballet, 1946- 1963

As the Balanchine and Kirstein company that has come to be known as the New York City Ballet aged it leapt (or *chassed*) from strength to strength. The dancing became more precise, developed a style of its own, the dancers found their own artistry and the reviews reflected the promise of this company not just as a company for New York but an innovative company for the world. Kirstein noted this in the 1951 souvenir program:

New York City, port and metropolis of the Americas, and capital of the United Nations, now possesses the ballet company its vast public deserves.... The people of New York City who live ballet are partners in a project which provides them with the most satisfactory and provocative repertory, dancers, and dance-music in the free world.<sup>101</sup>

Kirstein noted the singularity of the accomplishment and seems proud, as he should be. For he created American ballet:

It is rare in the history of a nation's culture that a company of performers banded together more by the desire to appear in a certain quality of performance than by the mere need for employment, takes on the recognizable characteristics of a natural organization.

These great repertory organizations have the public responsibility for the preservation and presentation of the symphonic repertory of the past. They have the duty to produce master works of the present, thereby causing to come into being a repertory for the future.

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 104.

Its triumph lies in the fact that for twenty years, the directors of the New York City Ballet have insisted that the dance itself, the traditional, academic, classical theatrical dance—dominating all other elements of stagecraft, scenery, narrative pantomime— save alone the musical ground-basis, was paramount.

As the legitimate heir of the Diaghilev companies, and an amateur of art, George Balanchine has worked with some of the greatest living painters and stage designers for thirty years.

The American style of classic dancing, its supple sharpness or its metronomic rigidity, its richness of metrical invention, its insistent development of the most legible and persistent residue of the traditional, has invested the American dancer with a kind of

Olympic prestige, a secure aura of championship, the self-assurance of a working method which, in competition dominates, respectful of decor, acknowledging the uses of pantomime, always obedient to or inspired by the music, it is, nevertheless, the dance itself— *la danse de toujours dansait comme jamais*— the eternal dance performed as never before, that has brought the American doctrine of classicism revived, through the opera houses of the western world.<sup>102</sup>

By 1950 Lincoln Kirstein had enabled the ballet as an art form to find a home in America. He had not only saved ballet from the rubble of Europe but revitalized it with a wholly modern American flavor.

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 141.

### Parameters of This Paper

I will focus upon Kirstein's Americanization of avant garde American art until 1963 as by that point all of the endeavors that he threw himself into were either well established and accepted as canonical works of art or had petered out and lost to the annals of time.

By 1963 the New York City Ballet was residing at Lincoln Center along with the Metropolitan Opera and the Philharmonic. There is some irony in the fact that 32 prior to this Kirstein and George Balanchine and their fledgling ballet company was dismissed as the Metropolitan Opera ballet company for being too avant garde. Kirstein's magazine *Hound and Horn* had ceased to exist and he was no longer a prime mover in the Museum of Modern Art.

I have used primary research materials kindly made available to me through Columbia University, the New York Public Library, Merton College, Oxford and King's College, Cambridge. Many thanks to all of those who assisted me in the viewing of these materials.

I have reason to believe every source I cite as historically accurate even if I do disagree with the historiographical point. The only work I have come across that I doubt the authenticity of is Nicholas Fox Weber's *Patron Saints*. For more information on this issue please see end note one.

Endnotes

Nicholas Fox Weber in his book *Patron Saints* on page 10 writes:

In 1922, when he [Kirstein] was sixteen, he made his first art acquisition— an Ashanti moon-fan figure of tulipwood carved at the Wembley Empire Exhibition. The same year, he and George spent their summer holidays in London in the house their older sister Mina shared with Henrietta Bingham, of the Louisville publishing family. The boys were asleep after a performance of Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes when they were roused from their beds and told to put on Mina's orange-and-yellow silk pajamas to dance a pas de trios improvised for them by the brilliant soubrette Lydia Lopokova. Lytton Strachey was among those who viewed the Kirstein brothers' carrying on. Lopokova was there with her fiancé, Maynard Keynes.

I have reason to doubt the authority of this statement of the young Kirstein dancing as it neither occurs within the writings of Lopokova held at the Maynard Keynes archive at King's College, Cambridge, nor within the writings of Kirstein. With Kirstein's tendency to romanticize the past I cannot believe that he would not have done so over his youthful inclusion by the Ballets Russes.

Fox Weber does not indicate his source for this story and as I was unable to confirm its accuracy I have not used his writings in my own essay.

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