

Lincoln Kirstein: A "Uniquely Daring" Visionary

When Lincoln Kirstein was eight years old, he created a club he called Tea for Three. He and his brother George and a friend pulled clothes out of their parents' closets as costumes for plays that Lincoln wrote, produced, and starred in. He became obsessed. When playing baseball with the friend, Lincoln was generally too busy planning the next production to notice when the ball came.

Lincoln performed again when he was 16 and he and George were visiting their sister Mina in London. The boys were asleep after a performance of Serge Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes*, when they were roused from their beds by Mina and told to put on her silk pajamas to dance a *pas de trois* improvised for them by the brilliant soubrette Lydia Lopokova. Lytton Strachey and Lopokova's fiancé, John Maynard Keynes, watched. A few days later, Keynes took Lincoln to a Gauguin exhibition that Lincoln found unforgettable. He relished these new ways of looking at life and the pioneering styles in which to write, dance, and paint.

Lincoln could be cranky and arrogant, but he was always vehement and had extraordinary energy. As a Harvard freshman, in 1927, he helped start the magazine *Hound & Horn*, which included work by James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, T. S. Eliot, and Wallace Stevens. Next he commandeered his chums Edward M. M. Warburg and John Walker into starting the Harvard Society for Contemporary Art. In 1929 the three college students rented two rooms over the Harvard Coop, where they presented shocking and splendid art exhibitions and paved the way for the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Because Lincoln was so prickly, Eddie Warburg was the main spokesperson and fund raiser, and John Walker served as a liaison to the right social set; but Lincoln was the genius behind it all. They opened with work by living American artists such as Edward Hopper and Georgia O'Keeffe, and over a thousand people trooped up in the first week. Then the society showed work by Braque, Miró, Modigliani, Man Ray, Brancusi, and others. The *Boston Globe* mocked it all, but Lincoln relished the diatribe.

He and his friends got the young Alexander Calder to make some wire



Lincoln Kirstein in 1959 with students at the School of American Ballet.

sculpture and perform his circus. Buckminster Fuller presented his Dymaxion House. The society showed Surrealism, modern Mexican art, and German Expressionism—all virtually unknown—and mounted the first Bauhaus exhibition in America.

Lincoln's greatest coup was to arrange for George Balanchine to come to America—which led to the formation of both the School of American Ballet and the New York City Ballet. But whatever he did, he applied himself with relentless intensity and ferocious passion.

A few years ago, when I was writing a book that focused on Kirstein and Warburg at the Harvard Society and the ballet, I knew that I should interview Lincoln but was terrified to do so. I had heard of a meeting Lincoln had with Berenice Abbott on a book project when he simply stormed out, announcing, "I'm a very rich man." And Warburg—who in the early years had seen Lincoln every day—told me about a lunch they had after a hiatus of many years. In the middle of the main course, Lincoln, without offering a word of explanation, put down his fork and walked out. Eddie ran after his old friend and asked what was going on. "It's only that you've become so boring," Lincoln exclaimed, without slackening his pace.

But when Philip Johnson, also in the original Harvard gang, arranged for Lincoln to receive me in his house on Manhattan's East 19th Street, I had no choice but to go. It was pouring, and I waited forever after ringing the bell. Then the door opened, and although I faced total darkness, I knew that the tall, bearish form before me—stoop-shouldered and with a noticeably large head—was Lincoln. He told me to come in and gesticulated as to where I should put down my umbrella and briefcase. I couldn't see a thing but quietly let them drop. Then I followed him—at a lumbering pace—down a pitch black corridor.

We reached a well-lit sitting room where Lincoln—who was squinting and wiping his eyes—lowered himself into an armchair that was directly in front of some very realistic paintings of well-formed naked men. In the next room I could see Gaston Lachaise's sculpture of the young Lincoln in the nude.

To my surprise, Lincoln was completely gentle. He patiently answered my questions. He gossiped freely—especially about everyone's sex life. When, after an hour, I suggested that I was taking too much of his time, he insisted that he had nothing better to do. We talked for two more hours—about Brancusi, John Quinn, the Warburgs, and a host of other subjects—and Lincoln said he would gladly help and that I should never hesitate to call or come see him again.

When I phoned him about two weeks later, however, he instantly exploded, said he didn't have a moment to spare, and hung up the phone.

Yet when my book appeared, he wrote me an extremely generous handwritten letter. In fountain-penned script, he was again the perfect gentleman.

Beholden to no one, Lincoln attacked as readily as he championed. In 1986 he publicly declared that "the museums have been taken over by dealers" and called the Museum of Modern Art "one of the worst influences in cultural history." He could be a curmudgeon, but he was courageous, imaginative, and uniquely daring. **NICHOLAS FOX WEBER**

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