

# BOOKS

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## MY BACK PAGES

Books read years ago and half-forgotten, observes **Mary Catherine Bateson**, can surface in our memories, linked in new and surprising ways. Page B24.

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## The eloquent idiosyncrasy of Lincoln Kirstein

#### MOSAIC

By Lincoln Kirstein. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 270 pp. Illustrated. \$25.

By Nicholas Fox Weber

Lincoln Kirstein, now 86, is among the most brilliant and original Americans of this century. For all his reputed prickliness and crankiness, he has had a profound effect on modern culture. He brought George Balanchine to this country; he launched the New York City Ballet; he created the splendid literary periodical *The Hound & the Horn*; and he gave a range of important artists and art movements the advocacy and support that was their lifeblood.

Not only has Kirstein been a patron and impresario, but he has also been an important and prolific writer — of fiction, poetry, essays and books on art and dance. Passionate, eloquent, capable of unique connections, he is never like anyone else. His commentary on our civilization and its cultural institutions is sometimes ardent, sometimes vituperative and always his own.

In "Mosaic," his memoirs of the first 26 years of his life, Kirstein is true to form: extraordinarily intelligent but idiosyncratic, adventurous but old-fashioned. As always, he seems more motivated by his private agenda than by any abiding concern for what we will make of him. Yet there are incredible riches for us to glean when we are allowed to penetrate his complexity. "Mosaic" is by no means his first reminiscence — a

lot of this material has already appeared in his book "Quarry" and in some essays he wrote for the periodical *Raritan* — but it covers familiar territory in a new way.

When Kirstein articulates his response to the arts, he has few equals for intensity or insight. He feels art and dance to the bones, and — in some of the best passages of "Mosaic" — vividly describes his pleasure and its sources. When he was 14, his mother took him and his brother to Chartres because of their love for Henry Adams; the trip inspired a stunning commentary on the effect of stained glass:

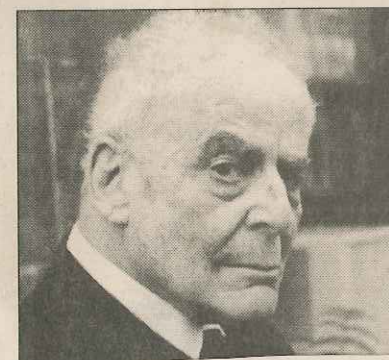
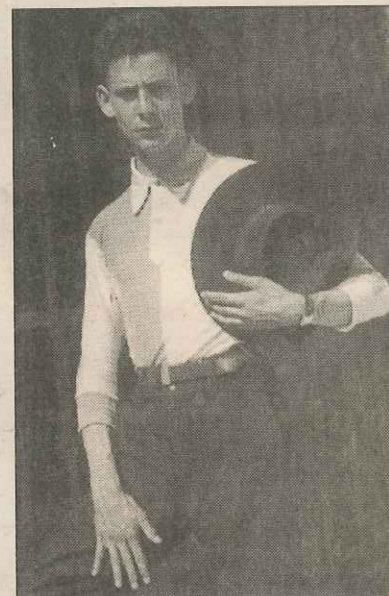
"The impressions of the miracle of light as a vibrating presence were almost more magical to me than oil paint on canvas. In Chartres, and perhaps more in the Sainte-Chapelle in Paris, color glowed thick as honey, not as a cloak for plastic imagery, but as vibrant energy itself, arterial and electric."

Kirstein's depiction of the life that revolved around the Dunster House Bookshop in Cambridge is equally exultant. He refers half-mockingly to the way he makes his subsequent years at Harvard sound like "an Edenic golden age" in these memoirs, but indeed they do. He emphasizes, however, that this was because of his own courage and tenacity more than the great institution to which his father paid tuition.

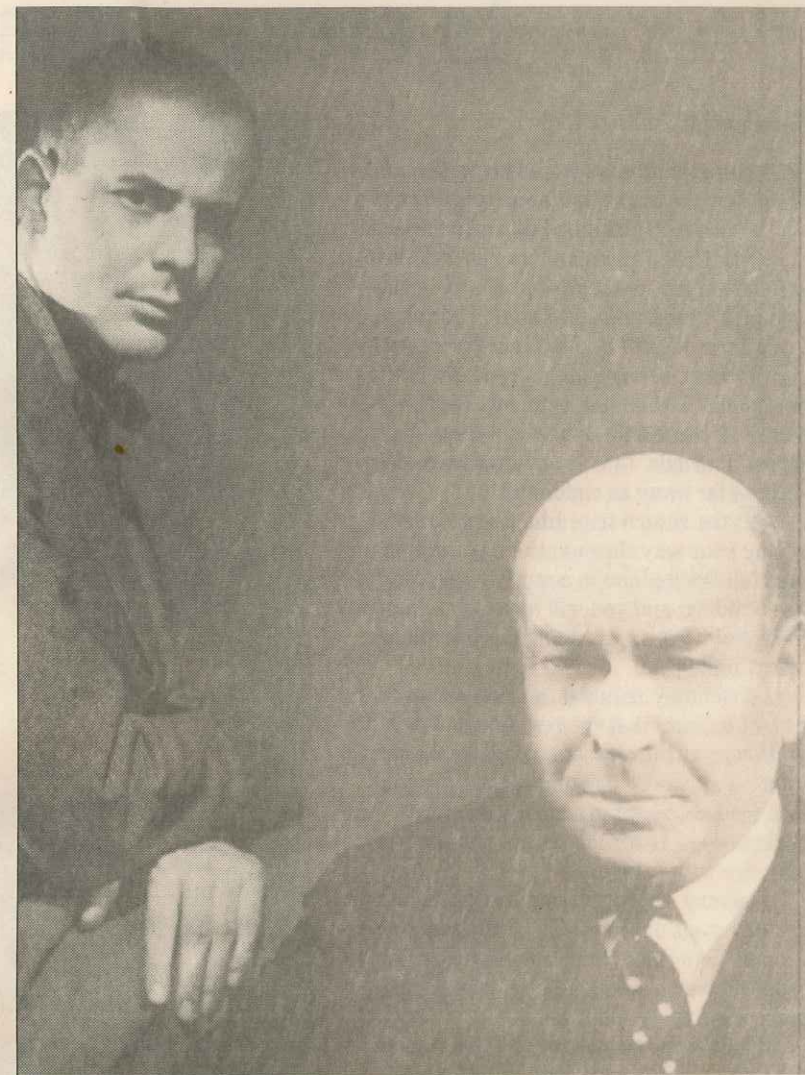
The university failed to recognize genius in its midst when people like Kirstein and his cohort Varian Fry did. So Kirstein's *The Hound & the Horn*, which he started as a freshman, drew in people such as Sean

O'Faolain and Conrad Aiken whom the "Harvard faculty let slip through kid gloves." And the Harvard Society for Contemporary Art provided pivotal early exposure for artists ranging from Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse and Edward Hopper to Alexander Calder, Buckminster Fuller and the painters and architects then working at the Bauhaus in Germany. Official Harvard tolerated and even gave some lackluster support to the fledgling society, but its accomplishments came about entirely from the efforts of Kirstein and the two other pioneering undergraduates he enlisted — Edward Warburg and John Walker. Together they rented rooms over the Harvard Coop and, starting in 1928, organized one inspired exhibition after another, laying much of the groundwork for the creation of the Museum of Modern Art.

Reminiscing about all of this, Kirstein vibrantly captures the richness of the human mind and the wealth of experiences open to an independent, well-educated person blessed with a supportive family and adequate funds. (In comparison with most silver spoon memoirs, "Mosaic" is refreshingly honest about money. Kirstein, whose father was an executive at Filene's, denigrates himself as a "rich idiot" — and periodically portrays himself and his friends in a way that calls to mind the Monty Python contest for "upper-class twit of the year" — but he is clearly grateful and realistic about the freedom his finances permitted.) Kirstein has been a tireless spiritual adventurer. When he was still in college, his ap-



petite for new experience led him, one summer in France, to "the Institute for Harmonious Development of Man" run by the renowned G. I. Gurdjieff. The visit resulted in an extraordinary steam bath (one of the subtly homoerotic scenes in the book; another revolves around a sailor friend of Hart Crane) and a banquet at which Kirstein was made to eat overcooked sheep's eyes. The encounter with Gurdjieff prompts a frank and gripping description of an episode of "manic-depressive psychosis."



PHOTOS / DAVID LANGRITT (LEFT) AND GEORGE PLATT LYNES (ABOVE)

Lincoln Kirstein with his father, L.E. Kirstein, in 1933 (above); in France in 1922 (top left) and today.

Some of Kirstein's recollections of encounters with artists — as when he notes that Constantin Brancusi, the sculptor, "looked and smelled like fresh-baked bread" — show his writing at its best. At other times, however, his language is so arcane as to leave the reader out in left field. How many of us know what he is talking about when he refers to events that "may as well serve as a basis (*intonico*) for the plaster-ground of these memorial tesseræ"? There are many such elusive sentences, such as "Metaphor, metric, rhyme — particularly rhyme — were for me clean of over-anthologized quotation."

Sometimes his arrogance can be truly irritating — such as when he voices a preference for John Singer Sargent's religious murals in the Boston Public Library over "those chapels decorated as holy cocktail lounges by Chagall or Matisse." Yet one senses that Kirstein probably makes such a statement in large part because he delights in getting our goat. He would rather be so acid (and silly) as to denigrate the magni-

ficent Matisse Chapel in Vence than be guilty of uttering a cliché.

At one point, Kirstein writes, "What I wished to say rushed far and fast ahead of what I could actually speak." One feels that this is always the case with Lincoln Kirstein. His mind is so fertile, his impressions so large, his opinions so original and plentiful, that he captures only a fraction of his own brilliance on paper. Sometimes what the author does manage to put into words works only for himself, not for outsiders, but mostly it is immediate and highly charged. And whatever his subject or viewpoint, the fragments that make up "Mosaic" shimmer with the luster of a man who has lived, and perceived, with titanic courage and indelible genius.

Nicholas Fox Weber, author of "Patron Saints: Five Rebels Who Opened America to a New Art," is writing a biography of Balhaus.