**Kirstein, Lincoln Edward (b. 4 May 1907, Rochester, NY; d. 5 January 1996, New York, NY)**

**Summary**

Lincoln Kirstein was an American impresario, writer and philanthropist, best known as the patron and champion of choreographer George Balanchine, whom he brought to the United States in 1933. Born in Rochester, NY, Kirstein was raised among the wealthy elite of Boston and graduated from Harvard University. A prolific writer, editor, collector and fund-raiser, Kirstein was a tireless advocate on behalf of the arts generally, and ballet and dance specifically in the United States. He was a founding editor of the literary quarterly *Hound & Horn* and helped to create the organisation that became the Museum of Modern Art. With Balanchine, Kirstein founded a series dance companies in the 1930s and 1940s, as well as the School of American Ballet (SAB), culminating in the creation in 1948 of the New York City Ballet (NYCB). He served as Managing Director of New York City Center and was a member of the original planning committee for Lincoln Center. He was instrumental in securing major philanthropic support from the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations for SAB and NYCB (in addition to other American dance companies), and was a crucial institutional leader of both organisations throughout his life. Kirstein was an astute and wide-ranging collector of art, books and dance memorabilia, and his donations to the MoMA Dance Archives and the New York Public Library’s Jerome Robbins Dance Division constitute some of the most significant archival holdings in America on the history of ballet and dance.

**Timeline of Life and Career:**

1907, born in Rochester, New York

1927, co-founds *Hound & Horn*

1928, organises Harvard Society for Contemporary Art with Edward M. M. Warburg and John Walker III

1930, graduates from Harvard University

1933, invites George Balanchine to come to the United States

1934, School of American Ballet opens

1935, publishes *Dance: A Short History of Classic Theatrical Dancing*; debut of American Ballet

1936, debut of Ballet Caravan

1938, publishes *Blast at Ballet*

1941, founds *Dance Index*; marries

Fidelma Cadmus; American Ballet Caravan tours South America

1946, founds Ballet Society

1948, debut of New York City Ballet

1952, becomes Managing Director of New York City Center

1953, secures Rockefeller Foundation grant for new ballet and opera at City Center

1959, secures the first of several major grants from Ford Foundation for SAB and NYCB and other U.S. dance companies and schools

1964, New York State Theater at Lincoln Center opens

1975, publishes *Nijinsky Dancing*

1996, dies in New York City

**Background**

Lincoln Kirstein was born in Rochester, New York, and was raised among the wealthy elite of Boston. His mother, Rose Kirstein (née Stein), was from a prosperous Rochester family; his father Louis Kirstein was a successful businessman—most notably as a partner in the Filene department store company—and a dedicated philanthropist whose sense of *noblesse oblige* would greatly influence his son. His parents, as well as his sister Mina Curtiss and brother George Kirstein were generous supporters, financially and personally, of his many artistic and organisational endeavours throughout his life. Kirstein attended the Berkshire School in western Massachusetts, and subsequently enrolled at Harvard University, graduating in 1930.

Kirstein’s parents were relatively unobservant Jews, although active in Jewish political and philanthropic causes, and his religious upbringing was nominal. In high school he was introduced to the practices of the spiritual teacher George Gurdjieff, who would prove a strong influence, especially in Kirstein’s early adulthood. In his later years he became interested in Roman Catholicism, although he never took any formal steps toward conversion. In 1941 Kirstein married Fidelma Cadmus, sister of his friend, the painter Paul Cadmus, and was a devoted husband until her death in 1991. He maintained numerous passionate relationships with men throughout his life, both sexual and nonsexual, but never explicitly identified himself as homosexual.

**Contributions to Dance and to Modernism**

During Kirstein’s time at Harvard, his primary interests were literature and the visual arts. He wrote several books of poetry and an autobiographical novel, *Flesh is Heir*, published in 1932. Of more lasting significance than his own work was the literary quarterly *Hound & Horn,* which he co-founded in 1927 with Varian Fry and R. P. Blackmur. Modelled on T. S. Eliot’s *The Criterion*, the journal would in its seven years of existence publish original work by American modernist writers such as Katherine Anne Porter, e. e. cummings, William Carlos Williams and James Agee. Kirstein himself contributed two major articles on ballet, his earliest writings on dance.

During this same period, Kirstein and fellow students Edward M. M. Warburg and John Walker III, under the influence of Harvard professor Paul Sachs, organised the Harvard Society for Contemporary Art. The Society mounted several shows of work by living artists, which met with indifferent to indignant reception among Boston’s conservative art patrons. Although short-lived, the Society provided the organisational nucleus of the institution that would become the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. Although he never functioned in a leadership capacity, Kirstein would maintain close ties to MoMA. He was responsible for numerous exhibitions and the accompanying catalogues, including a 1932 exhibition of contemporary mural painting and a 1948 retrospective of Polish artist Elie Nadelman. He would continually advocate for the acquisition of more work by American artists and helped to broker many relationships between the museum and artists whom he championed. In 1939 he donated his significant private collection of books, prints and dance memorabilia to the museum to establish the Dance Archives, the first such scholarly resource in the United States.

Kirstein had a long interest in ballet, particularly in the Ballets Russes and its founder and artistic director, Serge Diaghilev, on whom he modelled his own career as an impresario. He made yearly visits to Europe beginning in the 1920s and saw performances of *Firebird* (1910) and ballets by Léonide Massine and Balanchine. Through his friendship with Romola Nijinsky—for whom he served as ghost-writer for significant portions of her biography of her husband, Vaslav Nijinsky—Kirstein gained access to the circle of Russian émigré dancers and choreographers, including Balanchine. With Balanchine somewhat institutionally adrift since Diaghilev’s death in 1929 and the onset of the Great Depression, Kirstein found the choreographer receptive to the idea of coming to the United States to start a new company. Kirstein brought Balanchine to the United States in October 1933.

In the fifteen years following Balanchine’s arrival, the organisation envisioned by Kirstein would assume many forms. Crucial to the enterprise in all of its incarnations, however, was the continuous presence of a training institution, the School of American Ballet (SAB), which opened its doors at a studio on Madison Avenue shortly after Balanchine’s arrival. Students from SAB first performed in June 1934 at a private performance at the estate of Felix Warburg in White Plains, New York—including the ballet *Serenade*, the first original work created by Balanchine in America. The company made its debut as the American Ballet in March 1935 at the Adelphi Theatre on Broadway, garnering the notice of the new head of the Metropolitan Opera, Edward Johnson, who invited the group to become the Met’s resident ballet troupe. The arrangement would prove uncongenial and lasted only three years, but it did allow the fledgling organisation to mount several significant performances: an all-Stravinsky programme—conducted by the composer himself—which featured the American premiere of Balanchine’s *Apollo* (1928) and a dance-intensive staging of Gluck’s *Orpheus and Eurydice* (1936) designed by the artist Pavel Tchelitchev, of whom Kirstein was a devoted patron. Kirstein articulated his frustrations with the Met, as well as his larger critique of the hegemony of Russian ballet in America, in his 1938 pamphlet *Blast at Ballet.*

Concurrent with the American Ballet, in 1936 Kirstein formed a second troupe called Ballet Caravan, conceived as a summer touring company (and confidently posited in *Blast at Ballet* as an antidote for the degenerate state of ballet in America). The Caravan allowed Kirstein to pursue more directly his vision of a company with a distinctly American profile and afforded him an active, all-encompassing role as producer, allowing him to commission original music and designs from artists of his choosing. The dancers themselves created the choreography, in collaboration with a distinguished roster of American writers, composers and artists, including Paul Cadmus, Ben Shahn, Aaron Copland, Paul Bowles, Florine Stettheimer and Virgil Thomson. Although the troupe did not survive the 1930s, the Caravan provided important exposure and choreographic experience for dancers such as Ruthanna Boris, Lew Christensen, William Dollar and Eugene Loring. The Caravan was also notable for being less focused on classical ballet, and organisationally and aesthetically represented a *rapprochement* by Kirstein with the world of modern dance, towards which he was generally unsympathetic. True to its name, the Caravan was always somewhat makeshift in its organisation and execution, and only two of its ballets—*Billy the Kid* (1938) and *Filling Station* (1938), for which Kirstein himself wrote the scenario—garnered significant critical and popular acclaim.

In 1941 Kirstein and Balanchine formed the American Ballet Caravan, combining their two previous ventures for an extended tour of Latin America, funded by the State Department’s office of Inter-American Affairs, headed by Kirstein’s long-time friend and patron Nelson Rockefeller. The goal of the tour was to promote goodwill and counteract the region’s growing pro-Nazi sentiment. Kirstein returned to South America the following year, again at the request of Rockefeller. His official mission was to purchase new work by Latin American artists to augment the collections of the Museum of Modern Art—of which Rockefeller was President—but the real purpose was to gather off-the-record political intelligence.

Following a stint in the army, Kirstein’s next major undertaking was Ballet Society, created in 1946 and conceived as a non-profit membership-based subscription organisation. As with Ballet Caravan, Kirstein held primary responsibility for both artistic and administrative planning and commissioned librettos, music, scenery and choreography from a wide range of artists, many of whom had been involved in his previous endeavours. Although Balanchine was not a central institutional force behind Ballet Society, he was a key collaborator for two of its most important works: *The Four Temperaments* (1936), to a score by Paul Hindemith, commissioned personally by Balanchine several years earlier, and featuring elaborate costumes by Kurt Seligmann (subsequently abandoned in favour of simple practice clothes); and *Orpheus* (1948), to a newly-commissioned score by Stravinsky, with designs by Isamu Noguchi (a frequent collaborator of Martha Graham) and starring Maria Tallchief, Tanaquil Le Clerq, Nicholas Magallanes and Francisco Moncion. Although its performances were critically acclaimed, Ballet Society was never self-supporting, despite its non-profit status and substantial personal contributions from Kirstein and other patrons. In 1948, however, when its demise seemed inevitable, the chair of the executive committee of New York City Center, Morton Baum, invited Ballet Society to become the resident ballet company of the city-operated venue. Thus the Kirstein and Balanchine enterprise finally achieved institutional permanence under the new identity of the New York City Ballet.

Although City Center provided the company with a more stable institutional base and covered day-to-day operating costs, there were few funds available for the creation of new work, and Kirstein continued to support new productions from his own funds and by soliciting donations from patrons. In 1952, Kirstein became Managing Director of City Center, and during his tenure secured a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to support new opera and ballet productions. A committed liberal throughout his life, Kirstein was a strong supporter of the Civil Rights movement and participated in the 1965 march in Selma, Alabama, later writing a poem about the experience. He helped numerous African-American dancers, especially men, gain admission to SAB in the 1940s and 1950s, and supported NYCB principal dancer Arthur Mitchell in founding the Dance Theatre of Harlem.

As a member of the Lincoln Center planning committee Kirstein was instrumental in ensuring the company’s permanent home at the New York State Theater and SAB’s inclusion in the complex. In 1959 the Ford Foundation, at Kirstein’s urging, made a major grant to SAB that made possible national audition tours and an expanded scholarship program, effectively transforming the organisation into America’s leading training academy for ballet. This position was further strengthened in 1963

when Kirstein secured a second major commitment from Ford, a controversial multi-million grant in support of a half dozen American ballet companies, most of which belonged to the NYCB ‘family’. Until his death, Kirstein served as the guiding institutional force of both NYCB and SAB and of dance in the United States more broadly.

**Legacy**

Alongside and frequently in tandem with his undertakings, Kirstein was a prolific writer, as notable for his many published books, articles, programme notes and prefaces as for his prodigious personal correspondence and diaries. As a critic, historian and collector, he played an essential role in the professionalisation of the study of dance in the United States, not simply as an artistic practice but as a subject of intellectual study. As the founder of *Dance Index*, Kirstein oversaw the first scholarly journal in America devoted to dance. His work on Nijinsky helped to secure the dancer’s place in the history of ballet as more than an idiosyncratic performer and reasserted the place of male dancers in the history—and future—of ballet. His historical and critical writings are at once indispensible scholarly references and important primary sources in their own right, documenting the development of ballet and dance in the twentieth century. In addition to his donations to MoMA and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, his personal papers and other collections constitute some of the most significant archival holdings of the New York Public Library’s Jerome Robbins Dance Division.

Kirstein possessed a seemingly unlimited reserve of energy and ideas, and the quantity of his many unrealised endeavours is as noteworthy as his successes. It was in this expansiveness of imagination and willingness to put his artistic convictions into action that his true genius lay, no matter the obstacles or potential for failure. He thrived when at his busiest and was constantly engaged in multiple projects, all the while dreaming up new ones for the future. It is difficult to say exactly whence this disposition arose. To some, it was in part a product of his family’s wealth and connections—the unfettered mindset of individuals with significant financial resources at their disposal. Others posit psychological origins, pointing to his history of manic episodes and bipolar tendencies, or argue that he was able to get by on very little sleep. Whatever the cause of his passion, Kirstein was one of the most active and generous advocates on behalf of modernist expression in the twentieth century, in virtually all of its generic manifestations.

**Selected Writings**

Kirstein, L. (1983) *Ballet: Bias & Belief—Three Pamphlets Collected and Other Dance Writings of Lincoln Kirstein*, New York: Dance Horizons, Inc. (Reprints of seventeen articles on dance written between 1930 and 1978 and the pamphlets *Blast at Ballet*, 1938; *Ballet Alphabet*, 1939; and *What Ballet is About*, 1959)

---. (1991) *By With To & From: A Lincoln Kirstein Reader*, Ed. N. Jenkins, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux. (Reprints of writings on dance, literature, politics and art)

---. (1935) *Dance: A Short History of Classic Theatrical Dancing*, New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons. Reprinted 1987, with an appreciation by N. Reynolds, New York: Dance Horizons, Inc. (A history of dance from antiquity to the early twentieth century and the first such English-language reference; the final chapters are valuable for insight into Kirstein’s early impressions of twentieth-century figures including George Balanchine, Léonide Massine and Martha Graham)

---. (1994) *Mosaic: Memoirs*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux. (Kirstein’s memoirs through the year 1933)

---. (1970) *Movement and Metaphor: Four Centuries of Ballet*, New York: Praeger. (Reissued in 1984 as *Four Centuries of Ballet*; provides a brief introduction to ballet and short articles on fifty individual works from 1573 to 1968.)

---. (1975) *Nijinsky Dancing*, New York: Knopf. (Kirstein’s monograph on the dancer and choreographer)

---. (2009) *Program Notes*, ed. R. Bourscheidt, New York: Eakins Press Foundation and Alliance for the Arts. (A reprint of programme notes written by Kirstein for the American Ballet, Ballet Caravan, American Ballet Caravan, Ballet Society and the New York City Ballet.)

---. (1978) *Thirty Years: Lincoln Kirstein's The New York City Ballet* (2nd ed.), New York: Knopf.  (Kirstein's 1973 volume, expanded to include the years 1973-78, in celebration of the company's thirtieth anniversary)

**References and Further Reading**

Duberman, M. (2007) *The Worlds of Lincoln Kirstein*, New York: Knopf. (Comprehensive biography of Kirstein)

Garafola, L., (ed.), with E. Foner. (1999) *Dance for a City: Fifty Years of the New York City Ballet*, New York: Columbia University Press. (Collection of essays on the history and origins of New York City Ballet, with several contributions addressing Kirstein’s involvement)

Garafola, L. (2005) ‘Dollars for Dance: Lincoln Kirstein, City Center, and the Rockefeller Foundation’ in L. Garafola (2005) *Legacies of Twentieth-Century Dance*, Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 305–16. (Recounts Kirstein’s longstanding efforts to secure funding for City Center from the Rockefeller Foundation)

Kayafas, P., (ed.), (2007) *Lincoln Kirstein: A Bibliography of Published Writings, 1922–1996,* New York: Eakins Press Foundation. (Comprehensive guide to Kirstein’s writings)

Reynolds, N. (1999) ‘In His Image: Diaghilev and Lincoln Kirstein’ in L. Garafola, Ed., with N. Van Norman Baer, *The Ballets Russes and Its World*, New Haven: Yale University Press. (Examines the influence of Diaghilev on Kirstein’s artistic philosophy and career as an impresario)

---. (1977) *Repertory in Review: Forty Years of the New York City Ballet*, New York: Dial Press. (Catalogue-style overview of the repertoire of New York City Ballet, with an introductory note by Kirstein)

Weber, N. F. (1992) *Patron Saints: Five Rebels Who Opened America to a New Art, 1928–1943*, New York: Knopf. (Portrait of five ‘high bohemian’ patrons who supported modernist art and artists in America; in addition to Kirstein discusses Edward M. M. Warburg, Agnes Mongan, James Thrall Soby and A. Everett ‘Chick’ Austin.)

**Online Resources**

Lincoln Kirstein Bibliography: http://www.lincolnkirstein.org

New York City Ballet: http://www.nycballet.com

School of American Ballet: http://www.sab.org

**Photographs**

The following images are included as separate files. They are intended to show the image. Publishable versions would need to be obtained from the copyright holders.

Lincoln Kirstein holding a copy of Dance: A Short History of Classic Theatrical Dancing, ca. 1935.  Photographer unknown. \*MGZE (Kirstein, Lincoln 4), JRDD-NYPL.

Portrait of Lincoln Kirstein, 1940s.  Photo by George Platt Lynes.  Possibly owned by Jensen Yow.

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Portrait of Lincoln Kirstein, 1940s?  Photo by George Platt Lynes.

[https://www.nycballet.com/company/history/kirstein.html](https://mail.uvic.ca/owa/redir.aspx?C=85Hx5y_qR0e-5ry8MPHbSBTMkRp1S89Ipt4_B9xisBjApKX7a0kmFeLkm2dllAOlIbuF95JhkK0.&URL=https%3a%2f%2fwww.nycballet.com%2fcompany%2fhistory%2fkirstein.html)

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Lincoln Kirstein during a New York City Ballet rehearsal of George Balanchine’s Agon’, 1957.  Photo by Martha Swope.  Probably in \*MGZE (Agon), JRDD-NYPL.

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James Steichen