



Walt Kuhn
American, 1877 - 1949

Pumpkins

1941

oil on canvas

overall: 101.6 x 127.7 cm (40 x 50 1/4 in.)

framed: 120.3 x 145.7 x 5.7 cm (47 3/8 x 57 3/8 x 2 1/4 in.)

Inscription: lower left: Walt Kuhn / 1941

Gift of the Avalon Foundation 1968.3.1

ENTRY

Walt Kuhn painted *Pumpkins* on the porch of his cottage on Lake Buel in the Berkshires, near Great Barrington, Massachusetts, during the early autumn of 1941. [1] Seven of the approximately eight paintings that the 64-year-old artist executed that year were still-life subjects. [2] After having spent the early part of the year in Chicago and California working on decorative panels for trains, Kuhn felt overworked and ill and was struggling to recover some of the creative energy of his youth. In October he wrote to his wife, Vera Kuhn, “The thing to do is to do more paintings of good size. That’s one thing no other American painter can do. . . . Anyway the two pumpkin paintings have got my swing back. The swing I had 20 or 30 years ago and which I had perforce to give up for the time being to arrive at quality, precision and class.” [3]

This large still life represents a variety of pumpkins and squash arranged before a shallow basket. The basket, propped nearly vertically against a wall, acts as a backdrop rather than a container. It does not appear large enough to contain the bounty displayed by the artist. The fruits are delicately balanced so that any shift would initiate a cascade toward the viewer, imbuing the still life with tension. [4] In

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the foreground of the arrangement, the largest pumpkin supports a leaning yellow squash and an oblong orange pumpkin improbably steadied on the larger fruit's edge. This tenuous grouping holds back the tide of mounded pumpkins behind it. Even the dividing line between wall and floor tips slightly upward at the left, adding to the painting's imbalance.

Kuhn explored the mottled oranges, greens, and yellows and the curving stems of his subjects, treating each pumpkin or squash like a portrait. Kuhn's biographer, Philip Rhys Adams, noted that *Pumpkins* "has an atypical degree of detailed surface rendering almost worthy of a Victorian salon." [5] This attention to texture is applied not only to the skins of the fruits but also to the uneven pattern of the basket and the play of shadows on the wall and floor.

Pumpkins has the latent energy, power, and vibrant color that characterize Kuhn's most successful still-life and figurative subjects. The triangular arrangement, a classic compositional device, adds weight and seriousness to the painting.

Pumpkins, significantly larger than the majority of Kuhn's object studies, is one of the most imposing and important still-life paintings that the artist produced during the final phase of his career.

Catherine Southwick, Robert Torchia

July 24, 2024

NOTES

- [1] Brenda Kuhn to William P. Campbell, National Gallery of Art curator, May 22, 1970, NGA curatorial files.
- [2] Philip Rhys Adams's catalogue raisonné, *Walt Kuhn, Painter: His Life and Work* (Columbus, OH, 1978), lists seven paintings completed in 1941. This number does not include *Pumpkins and Gourds in a Basket* (see note 3).
- [3] Walt Kuhn to Vera Kuhn, October 27, 1941, quoted in Philip Rhys Adams, *Walt Kuhn, Painter: His Life and Work* (Columbus, OH, 1978), 193. Letter held by the Archives of American Art, Walt Kuhn, Kuhn family papers, and Armory Show records, 1859–1984, Box 4, Folder 31: Walt Kuhn Letters to Family, 1941. The second pumpkin painting mentioned in the letter is *Pumpkins and Gourds in a Basket* (1941, Hunter Museum of American Art, Chattanooga, TN), which is not included in the Adams catalogue raisonné.
- [4] M. Therese Southgate described *Pumpkins* as "not a static painting at all,

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but one in which the fruits have only paused in their tumbling, barred only temporarily from further action by the massive pumpkin in the foreground.”

The Art of JAMA: One Hundred Covers and Essays from “The Journal of the American Medical Association” (New York, 1997), 82. But given the position of the basket, which is propped rather than overturned, Kuhn’s arrangement gives an impression of equilibrium rather than suspended motion.

- [5] Philip Rhys Adams, *Walt Kuhn, Painter: His Life and Work* (Columbus, OH, 1978), 194. *Pumpkins* elicited a very favorable response when it was exhibited at the Kennedy Galleries in 1967. One critic judged it “one of the best” paintings in the exhibition, and another considered it “particularly remarkable.” K. L., “Reviews and Previews,” *Art News*, October 1967, 13; and J. B., “In the Galleries,” *Arts Magazine*, November 1967, 59.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The artist initially painted the medium-weight, plain-weave fabric support while it was tacked to an upright surface. A graphite line was used to delineate the perimeter of the composition, and drips of thinned paint extend over the bottom. The fabric was then mounted on its six-member stretcher with one crossbar running in each direction. The very thin white ground was commercially prepared; it is so thin that the top surfaces of the canvas threads are exposed. The artist sketched out the composition with thin washes of diluted paint and then added successively more opaque, brushmarked layers. In the final stages of painting, the artist applied thick, defining touches in low impasto for the highlights and rich, semitransparent to opaque liquid strokes in dark paint to reinforce the outlines around the compositional elements. The painting is in very good condition. The surface is coated with a thin layer of synthetic varnish.

Michael Swicklik

July 24, 2024

PROVENANCE

The artist [1877-1949]; his estate; his daughter, Brenda Kuhn [1911-1993], Cape Neddick, Maine; (Kennedy Galleries, New York); purchased 1968 by NGA.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1947 Walt Kuhn, Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center; San Francisco Mus. of Art; Santa Barbara Mus. of Art; Los Angeles County Mus. of History, Science and Art; Joslyn Memorial, Omaha; Mus. of Cranbrook Acad. of Art, Bloomfield Hills, MI, 1947, no. 15, repro.

1967 Walt Kuhn 1877-1949, Kennedy Galleries, Inc., New York, 1967, no. 26, repro.

1969 In Memoriam, Ailsa Mellon Bruce, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1969, unnumbered checklist.

1983 Extended loan for use by Ambassador L. Paul Bremer, U.S. Embassy residence, The Hague, The Netherlands, 1983-1987.

1987 Extended loan for use by Ambassador John Shad, U.S. Embassy residence, The Hague, The Netherlands, 1987-1989.

1989 Extended loan for use by Ambassador Howard Wilkins, U.S. Embassy residence, The Hague, The Netherlands, 1989-1992.

1993 Extended loan for use by Ambassador Robert H. Pelletreau, U.S. Embassy residence, Cairo, Egypt, 1993-1994.

1996 Extended loan for use by Secretary Robert E. Rubin, U.S. Department of the Treasury, Washington, D.C., 1996-1998.

2001 Extended loan for use by Ambassador William Stamps Farish III, U.S. Embassy residence, London, England, 2001-2004.

2005 Extended loan for use by Secretary Mike Johanns, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C., 2005-2008.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1970 *American Paintings and Sculpture: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1970: 76, repro.

1978 Adams, Philip Rhys. *Walt Kuhn, Painter: His Life and Work*. Columbus,

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OH, 1978: 193-194, 269, no. 413, pl. 127.

1980 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1980: 190, repro.

1981 Williams, William James. *A Heritage of American Paintings from the National Gallery of Art*. New York, 1981: color repro. 219, 225.

1992 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1992: 224, repro.

To cite: Catherine Southwick, Robert Torchia, “Walt Kuhn/*Pumpkins*/1941,” *American Paintings, 1900–1945*, NGA Online Editions, <https://purl.org/nga/collection/artobject/50845> (accessed April 11, 2025).