



Walt Kuhn  
American, 1877 - 1949

## *Wisconsin*

1936

oil on canvas

overall: 50.9 x 40.8 cm (20 1/16 x 16 1/16 in.)

framed: 70.5 x 61 x 6 cm (27 3/4 x 24 x 2 3/8 in.)

Inscription: lower right: Walt Kuhn / 1936

Gift of Brenda Kuhn 1968.25.1

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### ENTRY

The subject of this painting is actor George Fitzgerald, who also served as the model for Walt Kuhn's *The Man from Eden* [fig. 1] and *The Camp Cook* [fig. 2]. [1] Kuhn's biographer, Philip Rhys Adams, stated that Fitzgerald was represented by a booking agency that had "an intuitive sense of Kuhn's requirements and sent him many useful models over the years." [2] In the book that he wrote with Paul Bird in 1940, Kuhn recalled that the "Lincolnian figure" in *The Man from Eden* was "not from the Garden of Eden, but Eden, Wisconsin where he grew up as a farm boy. He drifted with the show business to New York, and eventually to the artist's studio. He is a loyal admirer of art and artists and enjoys posing for such reflective pictures." [3] Fitzgerald and the Kuhn family remained in touch between the execution of the three compositions, which spanned six years. Fitzgerald sent the artist a postcard from Santa Fe, New Mexico, in February 1933, signing it "the Camp Cook & Man From Eden." [4]

In *Wisconsin*, as in *The Man from Eden*, Kuhn portrayed Fitzgerald with a blank expression, his lips slightly parted midsentence or lost in thought. Fitzgerald faces and stares to the left of the viewer. By reducing the scale from the half-length of the previous paintings of Fitzgerald to the bust-length of *Wisconsin*, Kuhn centered and placed greater emphasis on the sitter's face. His sunken cheeks and the dark circles under his eyes imply the toll of physical labor. He wears a wide-brimmed hat—despite the indoor setting—and a simple shirt with an open collar. *Wisconsin* was not intended as a portrait of a specific individual but as a study of American ruggedness. Kuhn completed other bust-length paintings exploring this theme, including *The Guide* (1931, Sheldon Museum of Art, University of Nebraska—Lincoln)

and *Woodsmen* (1933, private collection). The artist spent summers in Ogunquit, Maine, where he may have taken inspiration from the townspeople to work on such a project. [5]

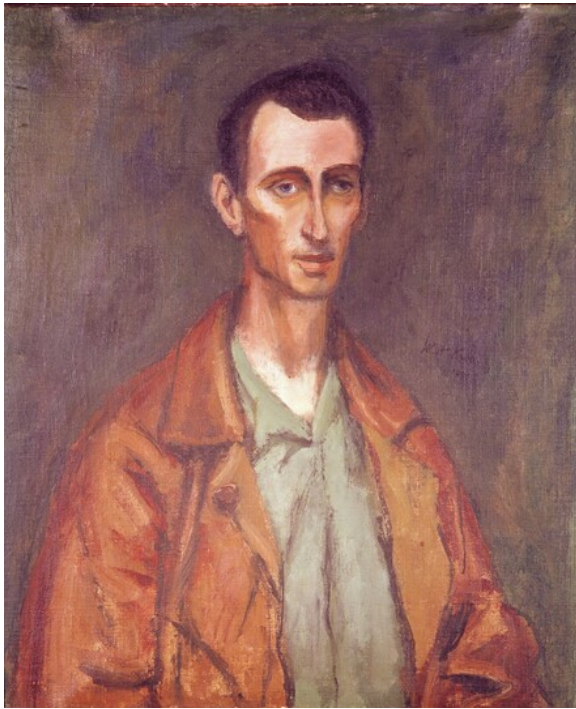
Kuhn and his wife, Vera, kept meticulous records, and they recorded that *Wisconsin* was the “biggest all around success” when it was first shown at the Marie Harriman Gallery in 1937. In a review of the exhibition, critic Margaret Breuning remarked that both *Wisconsin* and *Juggler* [fig. 3] showed “a penetration of character that passes far beyond the realism of literal record into the fusing of subjective values and factual statement. The significance that the artist found in these subjects is interspersed with simplicity and power in a thoroughly personal idiom.” [6] That same year another critic praised Kuhn’s penetrating insight into human character and concluded that in both the “serene records of the Wisconsin countryman” and *Dryad*, also in the National Gallery’s collection, the artist had achieved “far deeper characterization and a much more sweeping rhythm” than in some of his circus subjects. [7] A trustee of the Wichita Art Museum considered purchasing *Wisconsin* in 1940 but did not do so, the Kuhns speculated, because it “did not have enough glamour.” [8] The painting remained in the collection of the artist’s family until his daughter, Brenda Kuhn, donated it to the National Gallery in 1968.

Robert Torchia

July 24, 2024

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## COMPARATIVE FIGURES



**fig. 1** Walt Kuhn, *The Man from Eden*, 1930, oil on canvas, Collection Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York; Gift of Mrs. Theodore G. Kenefick, 1956 (1956:8). Image: Albright-Knox Art Gallery / Art Resource, NY



**fig. 2** Walt Kuhn, *The Camp Cook*, 1931, oil on canvas, Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, Utica. Image: Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute / Art Resource, NY



**fig. 3** Walt Kuhn, *Juggler*, 1934, oil on canvas, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Gift of the Friends of Art, 38-1

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#### NOTES

- [1] Walt Kuhn Papers, reel 242B, frame 885, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
- [2] Philip Rhys Adams, *Walt Kuhn, Painter: His Life and Work* (Columbus, OH, 1978), 129.
- [3] Paul Bird, *Fifty Paintings by Walt Kuhn* (New York and London, 1940), 10. Philip Rhys Adams noted that the commentaries on the paintings from this source “are Paul Bird’s, but their content is original Walt Kuhn.” *Walt Kuhn, Painter: His Life and Work* (Columbus, OH, 1978), 102.
- [4] Fitzgerald also wrote Brenda Kuhn, the artist’s daughter, from Santa Fe on the same day, signing the postcard “Fitz.” Both postcards are found in the Walt Kuhn, Kuhn family papers, and Armory Show records, box 6, folder 12, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC,

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[https://edan.si.edu/slideshow/viewer/?damspath=/CollectionsOnline/kuhnwa/Box\\_0006/Folder\\_012](https://edan.si.edu/slideshow/viewer/?damspath=/CollectionsOnline/kuhnwa/Box_0006/Folder_012).

- [5] Philip Rhys Adams named Maine guide Jim Ames as the inspiration for *The Guide* but suggested that Kuhn used himself as the model for this studio painting. *Walt Kuhn, Painter: His Life and Work* (Columbus, OH, 1978), 137.
- [6] Margaret Breuning, “Current Exhibitions,” *Parnassus* 9, no. 3 (March 1937): 34.
- [7] Alfred M. Frankfurter, “Kuhn: Master of the Painting Language,” *Art News*, February 27, 1937, 11.
- [8] Walt Kuhn Papers, Reel 242B, frame 885, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

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### TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The unlined plain-weave fabric support remains mounted on its original stretcher. The intact tacking margins, painted to the edges in tones not used in the current portrait, indicate the presence of another painting under the visible composition. Evidently the artist reused this canvas, possibly by cutting down a larger composition. Neither the x-radiograph nor the infrared examination revealed any of the qualities of the underlying composition.

In the visible composition, the artist applied paint with a fairly thick and fluid consistency over an off-white ground. The painting was probably executed over a long period of time, because the artist worked over well-dried layers of paint. The painting is in good condition. The surface is coated with a layer of natural resin varnish that is slightly uneven in gloss.

Michael Swicklik

July 24, 2024

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### PROVENANCE

The artist [1877-1949]; his daughter, Brenda Kuhn [1911-1993], Cape Neddick, Maine; gift 1968 to NGA.

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## EXHIBITION HISTORY

1937 Walt Kuhn, Marie Harriman Gallery, New York, 1937, no. 11.

1960 Walt Kuhn 1877-1949: A Memorial Exhibition, Cincinnati Art Museum, 1960, no. 68.

1964 Walt Kuhn: Paintings, Drawings, Carvings, Nason College, Springvale, Maine, 1964, no. 10.

1966 Painter of Vision: A Retrospective Exhibition of Oils, Watercolors and Drawings by Walt Kuhn, 1877-1949, The University of Arizona Art Gallery, Tucson, 1966: no. 81, repro.

1967 Walt Kuhn 1877-1949, Kennedy Galleries, Inc., New York, 1967, no. 17, repro.

1974 Selected American Paintings from the National Gallery of Art, University Center Gallery, University of Tennessee, Chattanooga, 1974, no cat.

1978 Walt Kuhn: A Classic Revival, Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, Fort Worth; Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha; Wichita Art Museum; Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, 1978-1979, no. 30.

2008 Face Forward: American Portraits from Sargent to the Present, Vero Beach Museum of Art, 2008, no catalogue.

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## 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, OH, 1978: 264, no. 350.

1980 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1980: 191, repro.

1981 Williams, William James. *A Heritage of American Paintings from the National Gallery of Art*. New York, 1981: 225, repro. 228.

1992 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1992: 223, repro.

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