

Walt Kuhn
American, 1877 - 1949

Hare and Hunting Boots

1926

oil on canvas

overall: 73.9 x 68.7 cm (29 1/8 x 27 1/16 in.)

framed: 96.5 x 91.4 x 6.4 cm (38 x 36 x 2 1/2 in.)

Inscription: lower left: Walt Kuhn / 1926

Gift of the W. Averell Harriman Foundation in memory of Marie N. Harriman
1972.9.15

ENTRY

Walt Kuhn maintained an interest in the genre of still life painting throughout his career. He began with fruit and flower subjects, and in 1925 he expanded his repertoire to game pieces with *Still Life—Ducks* (Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, Massachusetts) and *Hare* (location unknown). The following year he painted *Hare and Hunting Boots* and *Mallards* (Detroit Institute of Arts, Michigan). Kuhn and his wife, Vera, kept meticulous records, and they identified the subject of the National Gallery's still life as a Canadian hare that he bought at A. Silz, [1] a poultry, game, and meat supplier near the artist's studio at 23 East 14th Street. [2] In the book that he wrote with Paul Bird in 1940, Kuhn described *Hare and Hunting Boots* lyrically: "Out of Dutch painting, Chardin, and the woods of America comes this quiet, masculine still life. No theatrics—just a limp rabbit and muddy boots thrown in the corner. But the painting of the soft fur is whipped into a convincing simulation of the actual subject. The picture has that strange loneliness of men without women." [3]

This stark, desolate image is one of Kuhn's most important early paintings, and it exhibits the expressive power characteristic of his mature work. The color palette is restricted to tans and browns, a dark vertical edge on the far left balancing the brown of the boots on the far right. The arrangement is humble, the earthy boots signaling practicality rather than affluence. Both the hare and the boots slump to one side, lifeless and abandoned, though one shoelace is curiously animated and snakes sideways in an S curve.

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It is likely that Kuhn's painting is a deliberate quotation of Vincent van Gogh (Dutch, 1853 - 1890), who painted five still lifes with boots while in Paris in the late 1880s [fig. 1]. [4] Kuhn assisted in selecting the European works of art for the 1913 Armory Show in New York, which exhibited 18 paintings by Van Gogh, including a still life of shoes. While en route to the United States by ship after an Armory Show scouting expedition, Kuhn also worked on a translation of Van Gogh's letters with Arthur B. Davies (American, 1862 - 1928). [5]

Kuhn's still life subjects of this period respond to a northern European tradition of game and trophy subjects, such as *Still Life with Dead Game* (1661) by Willem van Aelst (Dutch, 1627 - 1683) in the National Gallery's collection. An exhibition of works by the 18th-century painter Jean Siméon Chardin (French, 1699 - 1779), celebrated for his still lifes and genre scenes, was held at Wildenstein and Company, New York, in 1926 and may have reinforced Kuhn's interest in this type of still life. Two compositions with dead hares were part of the exhibition, including *Still Life with a Hare* [fig. 2]. [6] Similar to this Chardin still life, Kuhn's painting does not relish in the triumph of the hunt, nor does it tantalize the viewer with an opulent setting. Instead the work evokes a quiet pathos.

The Kuhns' files record that *Hare and Hunting Boots* "received much favorable comment" when it was exhibited at the Marie Harriman Gallery in 1930 and that the gallery "said they could have sold it, if cheaper, but it is too complete a picture to let go cheap." Evidently the gallery held firm. The Kuhns noted that on July 12, 1938, Helen Adair, secretary to poet Edna St. Vincent Millay, requested the painting's value, "stating that the picture was a great favorite of [Millay's] and that she would like to have it if she could afford the price," but nothing came of the matter. [7] The painting remained in the artist's collection for the rest of his life.

Robert Torchia

July 24, 2024

COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 Vincent van Gogh, *A Pair of Boots*, 1887, oil on canvas, Baltimore Museum of Art, The Cone Collection, formed by Dr. Claribel Cone and Miss Etta Cone of Baltimore, Maryland, 1950.³⁰²



fig. 2 Jean Siméon Chardin, *Still Life with a Hare*, c. 1730, oil on canvas, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Gift of Henry P. McIlhenny, 1958

NOTES

- [1] The Kuhns' files refer to the store as "Silz and Co." Patent office records show the company as A. Silz, Inc. See *Official Gazette of the United States Patent Office* 284 (March 1921): cxxvii.
- [2] The Kuhns' files describe that the work was "painted direct from model in one sitting due to fact that rabbit collapses soon after being taken out of cold storage." The files for *Hare* and *Hare and Hunting Boots* also note that the two paintings used the same hare, but the paintings are dated (on the canvases) 1925 and 1926 respectively. Walt Kuhn, Kuhn family papers, and Armory Show records, box 12, folder 1, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, https://edan.si.edu/slideshow/slideshowViewer.htm?damspath=/Collections/Online/kuhnwalt/Box_0012/Folder_001.
- [3] Paul Bird, *Fifty Paintings by Walt Kuhn* (New York and London, 1940), cat. 2. 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] The other four paintings are listed in J.-B. de la Faille, *The Works of Vincent Van Gogh: His Paintings and Drawings*, rev. ed., 4 vols. (New York, 1970),

F255, F331, F332, and F332a.

- [5] The Van Gogh painting of shoes in the Armory Show was *Nature morte. Souliers de bois*, now titled *A Pair of Leather Clogs* (1889, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam). For the unpublished manuscript of the Van Gogh letters Kuhn dictated to Davies in November 1912, see Walt Kuhn, Kuhn family papers, and Armory Show records, box 2, folder 17, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, https://edan.si.edu/slideshow/slideshowViewer.htm?damspath=/CollectionsOnline/kuhnwalt/Box_0002/Folder_017.
- [6] See *Exhibition of Paintings by J.-B.-S. Chardin* (New York, 1926), illus. VIII, *Le Lapin et la Gibecière*, and IX, *La Lièvre*. *La Lièvre* is now in the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art as *Still Life with a Hare*.
- [7] Walt Kuhn, Kuhn family papers, and Armory Show records, box 12, folder 1, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, https://edan.si.edu/slideshow/slideshowViewer.htm?damspath=/CollectionsOnline/kuhnwalt/Box_0012/Folder_001.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The plain-weave fabric is unlined and remains mounted on its original stretcher; the latter retains the supplier's stamp, "F. Anderson Co., Brooklyn, N.Y.," on its reverse.

[1] The ground consists of a single layer that is a gray-tinged off-white; it is commercially prepared. [2] The work was likely painted while pinned to an alternative support. There are additional pinholes along the tacking margins, and the composition sometimes extends beyond the bounds of the stretcher. A pencil line marks the lower edge, while the title is written in pencil on the upper tacking margin.

On top of the ground, the painter began by loosely sketching in the composition with black paint. With the sketch as a guide, he then constructed the painting inexactly with broad, dark, sketchy paint applied in a variety of thicknesses in the boots and background and with impastoed, shorter, thicker strokes in a wider range of colors to suggest the fur of the hare. Examination with infrared reflectography did not reveal any sign of underdrawing. The surface is coated with a thin, even, dull application of natural resin varnish on which a considerable layer of grime has accumulated. [3] Dirt has accumulated beneath the varnish in the low points of the brushwork. Other than minor areas of abrasion and losses that are confined to the edges and small areas of retouching in the foreground, the painting

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is in very good condition.

Michael Swicklik

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TECHNICAL NOTES

- [1] There are also some paper labels on the reverse of the stretcher that could be artist applied: along the top, printed in ink, “TO AVOID CONFUSION, PLEASE MAKE NO CHANGE IN TITLE”; and handwritten in black ink, “Hare and Hunting Boots by Walt Kuhn.”
 - [2] The priming covers all of the tacking margins, indicating that the canvas was primed before painting. This type of priming was usually commercially prepared rather than artist applied.
 - [3] The greenish fluorescence of the varnish layer under ultraviolet light suggests that it is a natural resin.
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PROVENANCE

The artist [1877-1949]; his estate; (Maynard Walker Gallery, New York); purchased 18 December 1959 by W. Averell [1891-1986] and Marie N. [1903-1970] Harriman, New York; W. Averell Harriman Foundation; gift 1972 to NGA.


EXHIBITION HISTORY

1930 Exhibition of Paintings by Walt Kuhn, Marie Harriman Gallery, New York, 1930, no. 16, repro.

1958 Walt Kuhn, Albany Institute of History and Art, 1958, no. 1.

1959 Seventh Annual Exhibition, Museum of Art of Ogunquit, Maine, 1959, no. 17.

1960 Walt Kuhn 1877-1949: A Memorial Exhibition, Cincinnati Art Museum, 1960, no. 38, repro.

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1961 Exhibition of the Marie and Averell Harriman Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1961, unnumbered catalogue, repro. 42.

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. 49, repro.

1984 Extended loan for use by Ambassador Walter Cutler, U.S. Embassy residence, Riyadh, Saudia Arabia, 1984-1990.

1990 Extended loan for use by Ambassador Charles W. Freeman, U.S. residence, Riyadh, Saudia Arabia, 1990.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1940 Bird, Paul. *Fifty Paintings by Walt Kuhn*. New York, 1940: 2, repro.
- 1978 Adams, Philip Rhys. *Walt Kuhn, Painter: His Life and Work*. Columbus, OH, 1978: 104-105, 250, no. 169, pl. 48, color repro.
- 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: 225, repro. 227.
- 1992 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1992: 222, repro.

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