



The "avant-garde" confronted an unversed America during the 1913 Armory Show. As one of the show's key organizers and compilers, Walt Kuhn was a harbinger of abstraction in American art. But it is ironic that Kuhn's own art never lost the semblance of solid reality. Kuhn was painter of the commonplace, the unadorned, the matter-of-fact. Landscapes and randomly piled apples counted for much among his subjects. The most telling Kuhnian images, however, are his portraits of show girls, acrobats, and clowns where he inevitably sets his subjects before a neutral background in direct eye contact with the viewer. One such portrait is the *Young Clown* (Figure 1) in the Arizona State University Art Museum. In it we see Kuhn's interest in the solid physical form but equally the solid psychological presence of his sitter. He reveals the private face of the lone performer away from the stage; and in so doing, he holds up a mirror to the viewer.

Although remembered for his portraits of clowns and performers, Kuhn was not the innovator of this genre. A survey of artists from Watteau to Picasso who treated the clown theme suggests a varying as much as it does a common expressive interest. Kuhn's own fascination with the clown has its origins in his adolescence. His mother was responsible for instilling in him a love of the theater. He became acquainted with backstage life when he made deliveries of costumes as a youth from the sporting goods store where he worked to the stage doors of theaters.

Shortly thereafter he frequented county fairs as a bicycle racer. It may have been at this time that he began associating with circus people. Several times during his life he helped stage vaudeville revues; his association with the circus never ended. From 1941-48, he maintained a press pass to the Ringling Brothers-Barnum and Bailey Circus when it was in New York. He spent February of 1948 with the circus at its winter quarters in Florida. Kuhn's portraits are of the clowns and show people who were his friends; he often dressed them for

Figure 1. Walt Kuhn, *The Young Clown*, 1945, oil, Arizona State University Art Museum. Gift of Oliver B. James.

their portraits from his own storehouse of costumes kept in his studio.

The performer no doubt appealed to Kuhn on more than one level. His portraits reveal the face of the clown not seen by the audience. In this, however, they become metaphors for Everyman. Each person, no matter from what walk of life, wears an actor's mask in the day to day interactions with others. This human phenomenon was undoubtedly most apparent to Kuhn in the theater and the circus – places he knew well. His portraits are direct and monolithic images of common man with a subtle, unsentimental melancholy. In paintings such as the *Young Clown*, he allows the viewer to glimpse behind the persona of his sitter.

Kuhn the formalist did not dismiss the pure form of abstraction. Rather he believed that the artist's ultimate goal was to go beyond subject matter. To Kuhn, however, this transcendence of the subject had to use clearly-defined reality as a stepping-stone. Vaudeville and the circus provided Kuhn the building blocks for his vision. He never plunged into abstraction to the degree that many of his contemporaries did. He maintained in his art the solid form that Rubens had maintained. Kuhn considered Rubens a fellow formalist, suggested in the statement he made about his own painting *Tricorne*: "A lump of weighted form, the one, the universal substance of art. Trying to get it makes art history. The Greeks had it, lost it; Rubens caught it, then it slipped through Van Dyck's fingers. Cezanne chopped it up to see how it is made; his followers fooled with the pieces. Here it is whole again."¹ If Cezanne was the formalist heir of Rubens, then Kuhn was the heir of Cezanne, the one to give form its substance again after it had been dissected and flattened by Picasso and Matisse. Abstraction was important to Cezanne but solid reality was as well. Throughout his life, Kuhn remained a devoted disciple of Cezanne. In retrospect, he said, "I've tried to get the whole of Cezanne and give it new flavor."²

Kuhn had a sound knowledge of art history and an openness to the artistic developments taking place around him. From the years following the Armory Show, elements of Cubism and Fauvism can be detected in his work. His mature works show modelling of weighty form in a painterly shorthand harkening back to Manet. As is the mark of a master, he was able to assimilate the work of other masters and from this forge his personal synthesis.

This synthesis came for Kuhn in *The White Clown* of 1929, which Philip Rhys Adams calls, in his book *Walt Kuhn, Painter: His Life and Work*, Kuhn's "passport to immortality."³ In the crouching figure of the clown,

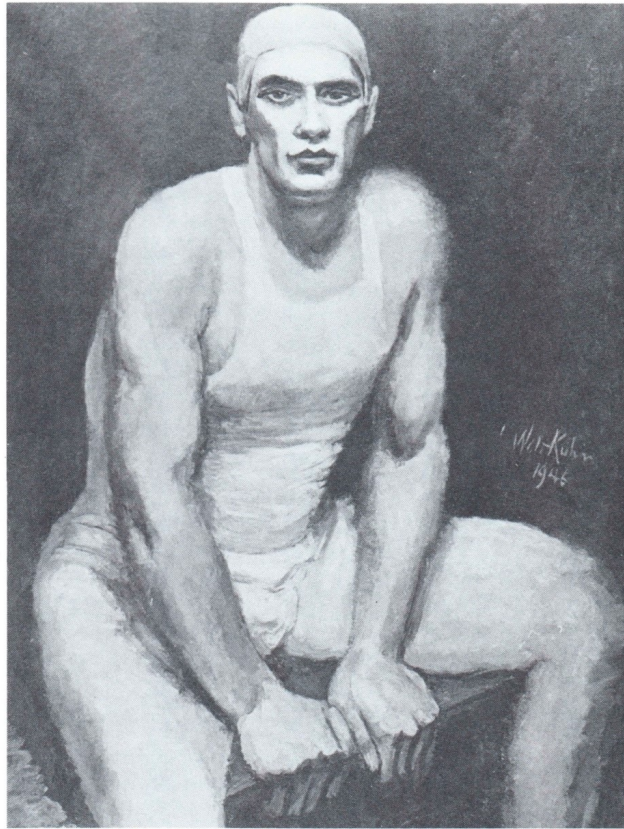


Figure 2. Walt Kuhn, *Roberto*, 1946, Private collection.

Kuhn showed a stark, massive solidity that would remain constant throughout his mature works. The direct glance of his performers to the viewer was developed in works following *The White Clown*, and this gave to his quiet figures, in front of their severe backgrounds, the added dimension of psychological substance which was every bit as weighty as their physical mass. Key works in this development were *The Blue Clown* of 1931, *Trio* of 1937, and the climax to Kuhn's quest for physical and psychological form, *Roberto* (Figure 2), painted in 1946, just three years before his death.

In *Roberto*, Kuhn painted a male figure in a sitting position similar to that used in *The White Clown*. The figure is dressed in a pink tank top and tights. He wears an ochre-colored skull cap, and his face is covered with white makeup. He straddles a stool with his hands joined between his legs and clasping the edge of it. His massive figure is tense and at any moment ready to spring into action; but the bulkiness of his thighs, arms, and shoulders is matched by that of the confronting glance he gives the viewer.

The *Young Clown* dates from 1945, the year before *Roberto*; and although it is a small portrait of only a clown's head, it shows the interest in psychological form that was so important to *Roberto* and the other mature works of Kuhn from the thirties and forties. Kuhn produced little in 1945, and Adams remarks that "it was a strangely unproductive year, a lull before the creative storm of 1946 or a natural period of gestation for the major works to come."⁴ This being true, the *Young Clown*, in the Arizona State University Art Museum, and the few other small heads of clowns painted in 1945 can be seen as preparations for *Roberto* and other major works of 1946.

Daniel M. Mendelowitz observes that Kuhn's *Young Clown* "reveals the awkward simplicity and strength of feeling with which he portrayed his monumental figures from the world of vaudeville."⁵ This simple monumentality is intensified in the painting by Kuhn. The artist presents a completely frontal view of his sitter tightly cropped to barely include the shoulders. He forces the viewer to confront the young clown in stark, white makeup.⁶

The painting is a visual play between surfaces that are thin and sketchy and surfaces that are highly tactile with impasto; from areas that are flat to areas that are briskly modelled. The colors are for the most part neutral which brings intensity to the few stronger colored accents and the white of the face. This play between surfaces and subtle colors is the means by which Kuhn molds form.

The white-faced clown wears a skull cap which is modelled in tones of yellow ochre. Kuhn's characteristic black contours are in marked contrast to the thick white almost pastiness of the face. This treatment of black and white firmly establishes the clown's face as the center of interest. The areas around it are handled broadly and with relative flatness. The blouse is dull blue with a green fringe sketched in hurriedly which allows the underpainting to show through. The cool beige background recedes behind the warmer hues of the skull cap and face.

The ears of the figure are handled in the same sketchy manner as the blouse fringe, but from their brown and salmon flesh tones, the viewer is directed to the brown eyes of the clown that stare out from the incisive black lines that delineate their lids and brows. The whites of the clown's eyes are not white at all but of the same salmon and tan hues of the ears and skull cap. Their yellowish cast makes them stand out against the white of the face, and their warm dullness enhances the subtle melancholy of the portrait.

Before Kuhn allows the mask of the performer to be penetrated, he makes sure that the viewer sees it. This is accomplished by contrasting the flesh-colored ears and neck of the clown with the white of his face. The white makeup shows the features of the face with clarity but is in actuality a thin veneer placed over them. It is by way of the eyes that the viewer is able to see behind the mask of the performer.

The longer the viewer studies the young clown the more apparent Kuhn's subtle use of asymmetry becomes. In the left side of the face there is calm serenity, almost the aloofness of an Egyptian pharaoh carved in stone. In the right side, however, there is more heaviness to the face, as seen in the frown of the brow, the drooping eyelid, and the tapered corner of the lips. Here Kuhn allows the viewer a glance beneath the mask of the performer. He shows the contemplative if not slightly regretful side of the clown: the side relegated to a corner apart from the glamour and excitement of the stage, the side that is a private part of each and every person.

The power of Kuhn's performers to express lies in their simple directness. They are lone figures of physical and psychological substance, not merely clowns and show girls but universal symbols of humanity on the stage of life. In portraits such as the *Young Clown*, Kuhn does not paint life's glitter but rather more directly and simply its essence, its pith, its very form. He paints the solid and the solitary in a way that nobles the prosaic.