

Walt Kuhn  
American, 1877 - 1949

## *Dryad*

1935

oil on canvas

overall: 86.2 x 58.5 cm (33 15/16 x 23 1/16 in.)

framed: 111.1 x 83.2 x 6.4 cm (43 3/4 x 32 3/4 x 2 1/2 in.)

Inscription: lower right: Walt Kuhn / 1935

Gift of the W. Averell Harriman Foundation in memory of Marie N. Harriman  
1972.9.13

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### ENTRY

During the mid-1930s, Walt Kuhn sought to perfect his draftsmanship through rigorous drawing exercises. He developed a monumental style that emphasized mass, volume, and economy of form. As a result of this return to study, Kuhn produced only eight paintings in 1935, less than half the total of each of the preceding two years. *Dryad*, a nearly three-quarter-length nude that was one of the artist's eight paintings of 1935, derives its title from Greek mythology. A dryad is a female forest nymph who inhabits a tree, often an oak.

Kuhn recorded that the model for this painting was Betty Rothenburg, who “blew in” to his studio at 112 East 18th Street in New York. [1] Pressed close to the picture plane and set against a shallow, empty background, Rothenburg stands in a frontal pose, holds her hands behind her back, and looks dispassionately off to her left. Her hair is pulled up and an unadorned cloth tightly covers her lower body. The figure's solid, abbreviated form dominates the stark composition and is reminiscent of late Archaic or early Classical Greek sculpture. Her body is columnar, mimicking the trunk of a tree where the mythical dryad resides. Unlike Kuhn's other female nudes of the period, *Miss X* (1932, Birmingham Museum of Art) and *Miss R* (1936, private collection), the subject of *Dryad* does not address the viewer. While *Miss X*'s and *Miss R*'s gazes force an acknowledgment of their individuality, the woman in *Dryad* is depersonalized, allowing her to more seamlessly inhabit the guise of a forest nymph.

Kuhn noted that *Dryad* “had the most general appeal of pictures exhibited” when it was first shown at the Mary Harriman Gallery in 1937. [2] One critic praised Kuhn's

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penetrating insight into human character and concluded that in the “serene records” of Wisconsin and “the unaffected model called Dryad,” the artist achieved “a deeper characterization and a much more sweeping rhythm” than in some of his circus subjects. [3] Another praised *Dryad* as a “sculptural body against a slaty background—a lovely classic figure in which Kuhn has set himself a high mark to surpass.” [4] In his study of Kuhn’s work, Paul Bird described *Dryad* as a “devotional essay on the eternal stability of womankind. The Amazonian model stands like a Doric column with gentle entasis of design.” [5] The artist’s biographer, Philip Rhys Adams, deemed *Dryad* “probably the finest of Walt Kuhn’s nudes, certainly the least sensuous and most sculptural.” [6]

Robert Torchia

July 24, 2024

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### NOTES

- [1] Walt Kuhn Papers, reel 242A, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
  - [2] Walt Kuhn Papers, reel 242A, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
  - [3] Alfred M. Frankfurter, “Kuhn: Master of the Painting Language,” *Art News*, February 27, 1937, 11, quoted in Philip Rhys Adams, *Walt Kuhn, Painter: His Life and Work* (Columbus, OH, 1978), 174.
  - [4] Howard Devree, “Seeing the Shows,” *American Magazine of Art*, March 30, 1937, 178.
  - [5] Paul Bird, *Fifty Paintings by Walt Kuhn* (New York, 1940), 31.
  - [6] Philip Rhys Adams, *Walt Kuhn, Painter: His Life and Work* (Columbus, OH, 1978), 164.
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### TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The unlined, plain-weave fabric support remains mounted on its original stretcher. The tacking margins are intact with a sewn-on strip lining reinforcing the entire upper tacking edge. The thin white ground was commercially applied. [1] There is no underpainting visible using infrared reflectography that cannot be clearly detected on the surface in the form of dark outlining with paint. The artist painted

*Dryad*

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the background fluidly, with wet-into-wet blending. The figure was more thickly and carefully painted, with leaner scumbles placed over already dry paint layers, indicating that the painting was executed over a relatively long period of time. The x-radiograph does not reveal any pentimenti. The painting is in good condition, although its appearance is marred by a scattering of tiny orange spots throughout its surface that appear to be undissolved particles of varnish resin. It is coated with an even layer of somewhat discolored natural resin varnish.

Michael Swicklik

July 24, 2024

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### TECHNICAL NOTES

[1] The priming covers the right and left tacking margins and extends almost up to the selvage at the top and bottom, indicating that the canvas was primed before painting. This type of priming was usually commercially prepared rather than artist applied.

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### PROVENANCE

The artist [1877-1949]; his estate; (Maynard Walker Gallery, New York); purchased 20 December 1960 by W. Averell [1891-1986] and Marie N. [1903-1970] Harriman, New York; W. Averell Harriman Foundation, New York; gift 1972 to NGA.

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### EXHIBITION HISTORY

1937 Paintings for Paris, Museum of Modern Art, New York, November-December 1937, no. 21.

1937 Walt Kuhn, Marie Harriman Gallery, New York, February-March 1937, no. 4.

1937 Walt Kuhn, Studio House [Phillips Memorial Gallery], Washington, D.C., March-April 1937, no. 6.

1958 Walt Kuhn, Albany Institute of History and Art, 1958, no. 11.

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1960 Walt Kuhn 1877-1949: A Memorial Exhibition, Cincinnati Art Museum, 1960, no. 65, repro.

1961 Exhibition of the Marie and Averell Harriman Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1961, unnumbered catalogue, repro. 48.

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. 78, repro.

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

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## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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

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

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