

1958 Colville describes the process of composing this work as “a great battle, sort of a war of attrition.”

13) Lincoln Kirstein to Alex Colville, 20 October 1972

This letter is a typical example of the type of conversation Colville had with Kirstein. It contains a response to Colville’s latest painting, *The River Spree* (1971), and goes on to discuss current events in New York, the ballet and modern art. Kirstein also praises Colville for his decision to live and work remotely from the art world “in a province which means freedom from those factors that do not contribute to anxiety, useless remorse of conscience, impotent compassion and attention to trash.”

14) Lincoln Kirstein, introduction to *The Art of Alex Colville*, by Helen J. Dow (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1972), pp. 9–13

This second essay by Kirstein continues to discuss Colville in opposition to abstract art. Kirstein praises Colville for his continued work in the realist tradition, as well as for his deliberate choices: “to choose willfully not to be a ‘modern’ artist; to assert a need, or rather the necessity of latching onto structures supporting rather than stylization selling; to insist on a social isolation which can be read as a reactionary elitism but which in fact is the assertion of a powerful identity are moral victories parallel to Colville’s aesthetic and plastic success.”

15) Lincoln Kirstein to Alex Colville, 13 November 1985

The frequency of the exchange of letters between Colville and Kirstein lessened into the 1970s and 1980s, yet the content of their letters kept apace with that from previous decades.

Kirstein continued to advise on art galleries and dealers and to offer his comments on Colville’s work. This letter includes a reference to *Taxi* (1985), which Kirstein describes as “a marvellous epitome and also very beautiful.” Despite the passage of over 30 years, Kirstein persists in pressing against abstract art and advises Colville that representational art was at last returning to mainstream art practices. By this time, Colville was well-established as a successful artist both in Canada and internationally. Yet Colville’s continued correspondence with Kirstein underlines the value he placed on his patron’s opinion, support and friendship.

ALEX COLVILLE AND LINCOLN KIRSTEIN AN AMERICAN PATRON

EXHIBITION NO. 50

24 April – 7 September 2015

National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives

CHECKLIST

This exhibition explores the relationship between Alex Colville and Lincoln Kirstein, one of the artist’s earliest and most influential patrons.

The items presented in this exhibition are sourced from the Alex Colville fonds at the National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, while the Walker Evans’ photograph *Double Portrait of Lincoln Kirstein* is from the photography collection of the National Gallery of Canada. The fonds consists of two previous donations of Colville’s student drawings, which was enlarged by a third donation of preparatory drawings and archival material from Colville in 2013. The correspondence, sketches and photographs showcased in this exhibition are supplemented with copies of Colville’s letters to Kirstein; the originals are preserved at the New York Public Library (Lincoln Kirstein papers).

1) Walker Evans, *Double Portrait of Lincoln Kirstein*, c. 1931, gelatin silver print. Gift of Phyllis Lambert (no. 19501)

Kirstein was a published author and art critic. His writing was published as early as the 1930s, and before he met Colville he had contributed catalogue introductions to the exhibitions *American Realists and Magic Realists* (1943) and *Symbolic Realism in American Painting* (1950), among others. In 1938 he wrote a catalogue introduction about Walker Evans, the photographer of this portrait, for a solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Through his association with the Hewitt Gallery, Kirstein also organized exhibitions and wrote about realist artists, including Paul Cadmus, Andrew Wyeth, Jared French and George Tooker.

2) Unknown photographer, Alex Colville, 1963, gelatin silver print

The friendship between Colville and Kirstein spanned over 30 years. Their letters from 1954 to 1985 broach a range of subjects, from art galleries, modern art, literature, travel and ballet to theatre, health and Colville's paintings and serigraphs. The contents of the letters include straightforward descriptions of Colville and Kirstein's personal and professional activities as well as in-depth discussions on topics such as realism, abstract art, metaphysics and politics.

3) Alex Colville to Lincoln Kirstein, 5 November 1954

This is one of the earliest and most significant letters between Colville and Kirstein. Colville discloses he was not fond of how the classification "magic realism" had come to represent a "slight-of-hand" or trickery, in which art was seen as deceptive and only fleetingly significant. Colville notes he prefers to associate magic realism with seriousness: "the art was realistic not for academic reasons (reasons of show, display of skill, etc.) but because it was devoted to, was paying homage to (with really a religious sort of fervour) certain rather tangible things." Although Colville would have his first exhibition at the Hewitt Gallery in 1955, a locus for magic realism in the 1950s, this letter demonstrates that he began to disassociate himself from the term as early as 1954. This was only four years after completing what he considered his first mature work, *Nude and Dummy* (1950).

4 & 5) Three Sheep [Study 2], 21 July 1954, ballpoint pen on paper (COL-651). Three Sheep [Study 3] 21 July 1954, ballpoint pen on paper (COL-652)

Kirstein presented two of the three Colville paintings he purchased to the National Gallery of Canada; one of these, *Three Sheep* (1954), was donated in 1996. This pair of preparatory drawings for *Three Sheep* depicts Colville's study of the anatomical features of the animals and a study of the fenced-in background.

6) Alex Colville to Lincoln Kirstein, 18 March 1955

The relationship between Colville and Kirstein went beyond the sale of works. Kirstein provided books, art supplies and, most significantly, contacts in New York and abroad. Through Kirstein, Colville met the American artists Paul Cadmus and Andrew Wyeth, as well as other early dealers and buyers. In addition to a discussion of Colville's dilemma when viewing the work of other artists, this letter summarizes a visit the artist had with Kirstein's brother-in-law, painter Paul Cadmus.

7) Alex Colville to Lincoln Kirstein, 6 November 1958

Colville would send Kirstein photographs of completed paintings and serigraphs in search of his patron's opinion. He was very appreciative of Kirstein's support for his work, a sentiment he shares in this letter. Colville also mentions a commission he accepted from *Maclean's*, a painting of the Saint John River, which he was having difficulty conceptualizing. He finishes the letter by mentioning his latest completed work, *The Swimming Race* (1958).

8) Lincoln Kirstein, "Alex Colville," *Canadian Art* 15 (August 1958), pp. 216-219.

Kirstein found an ally in Colville, whose realist style appealed to Kirstein's abhorrence for abstract art and his demonstrated interest in realism. This was Kirstein's first published essay about Colville and it sets the artist apart from abstract expressionism, the then dominant trend in modern art. Instead, Colville is grouped with British and American artists who "work unshaken by the dominant style; their own private personalities do not obsess them; what occupies them is their technique towards an increasingly sharp focus of their own vision of a tangible visible world."

9) Lincoln Kirstein to Alex Colville, 10 November 1958

In this letter Kirstein expresses his interest in purchasing Colville's *The Swimming Race*, which Kirstein later donated to the National Gallery of Canada in 1962. The letter also mentions Joseph Reed, a collector of Colville's work in the 1950s whom the artist met through Kirstein. Among others, Reed purchased *Cattle Show* (1955), which Kirstein compares to *The Swimming Race* for the shared verisimilitude of the figures. Kirstein also praises Colville for his ability to preserve an instant in his work, a feature that Kirstein felt set realist painters such as Colville, Paul Cadmus and Andrew Wyeth apart from the mainstream trends of abstract art.

10, 11 & 12) The Swimming Race [Study 2], 9 August 1958, ink on paper (COL-910r). The Swimming Race [Study 5], 26 August 1958, graphite on paper (COL-912r). The Swimming Race [Study 14], 9 August 1958, graphite on paper (COL-920)

Both Colville and Kirstein reflected on the sense of suspended movement in the painting *The Swimming Race*. These preparatory drawings reveal how Colville examined the placement of the figures in order to create a timeline of the action of diving. In a letter to Kirstein on 6 November