

On the Death of Lincoln Kirstein  
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Lincoln Kirstein (born May 4, 1907) was an American writer, art connoisseur, dance impresario, and cultural figure in New York City. Kirstein's remarkable commitment, capability, and energy stimulated creativity and accomplishment in a number of the fine arts from the 1930s through the 1980s. In his twenties, he began *The Hound and the Horn*, a highly respected and influential literary journal. In 1948, along with choreographer George Balanchine, he founded the New York City Ballet, now one of the premier dance companies in the world, and served as its general director for four decades. He authored a number of articles and books that helped popularize ballet in America. He commissioned and helped fund the New York State Theater building at Lincoln Center, which was designed by his Harvard classmate and friend, Philip Johnson (1906–2005). In the period around 1960, he organized a series of tours of Japan by American musicians and dancers. And so on, and so on. English critic Clement Crisp wrote, "He was one of those rare talents who touch the entire artistic life of their time: ballet, film, literature, theatre, painting, sculpture, photography all occupied his attention." On March 26, 1984, President Ronald Reagan presented him with the Presidential Medal of Freedom for his contributions to the arts.

Now it was the 1990s and Lincoln Kirstein was well into his eighties. A friend asked him how he was doing. "Oh, it's a half life. I've no energy. I'm getting senile." Someone who had lived life constantly on the go now for the most part didn't leave his apartment. Lincoln's appointment diary, once stuffed with projects and ideas for projects, became a scratched-up toy for the five cats in residence. When people came to visit, there would be lapses of silence for up to twenty minutes and then he would say, "Well, I have to go up now. Thank you for coming." Occasionally, with effort, he attended the ballet; he tried hard to hang on to that. But one evening he made it to the outside of the theater and felt too weak to go inside. He began to cry and hid behind a column so he wouldn't be seen.

In 1995, Lincoln developed debilitating physical problems: phlebitis, bedsores, and an enlarged prostate that led to surgery. He

was eating badly--mostly Chinese take-out--and getting no exercise. He would just lie on his bed, sometimes reading, though usually not. A friend tried to engage him in some art books he'd especially enjoyed in the past. He quietly said, "I don't care anymore." A male nurse was hired to attend to his basic needs. As the weather warmed up that summer, he was moved from his bedroom, which fronted on the street and was noisy at night, to a daybed in the first floor sitting room, where it was somewhat cooler and where he could be surrounded by some of his favorite paintings. By late fall he was seldom responsive. He lay in the dark, asleep much of the time.

On the evening of January 5, 1996, Lincoln Kirstein died. He had simply faded away. Perhaps his heart had given out.

Source: Martin Duberman, *The Worlds of Lincoln Kirstein* (Knopf, 2007).