



HIRSCHL & ADLER GALLERIES

APG 8981

JOHN KOCH (American, 1909–1978)

*The Concert*, 1954

Oil on canvas, 25 x 30 in.

Signed (at lower right): Koch



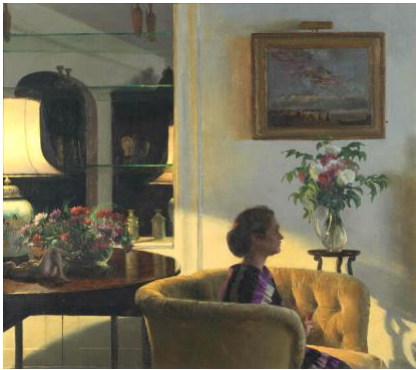
EX COLL.: the artist; to [Kraushaar Galleries, New York]; private collection, and by descent; private collection, Park City, Utah until 2022

In 1954, the painter John Koch, and his wife, pianist, and piano teacher Dora Zaslavsky (1905–1987), moved into a spacious apartment in the El Dorado, an elegant Manhattan apartment building occupying the whole block between 90th and 91st Streets overlooking the 106-acre Central Park Reservoir. The new home (to which they soon added an adjacent apartment) became the center of their creative lives, where both artists maintained their studios and entertained their guests. The life they led there became the subject of Koch's most important paintings, chronicles of an Upper West Side salon that the couple hosted for over two decades in the third quarter of the last century.



John Koch was a self-educated artist. Born in Toledo, Ohio and raised in Ann Arbor Michigan, he attended local public schools, graduating from high school in 1927. As a teenager, he studied charcoal drawing—his only experience with formal art instruction. In 1928, Koch traveled to Paris where he remained until 1934. The young American Midwesterner taught himself to be an artist in the galleries of the Louvre, modeling his practice on painstaking observation of the museum's collection.

From his earliest years, Koch was primarily figure painter, supporting himself in Paris with portrait commissions. (For a concise personal, professional, and contextual overview of Koch, see *John Koch: Painting a New York Life*, exhib. cat. [New York: New York Historical Society, 2001]. All page numbers refer to this source, unless otherwise indicated.) Through the decades of the twentieth century, as abstraction became the defining mode of contemporary art, Koch remained defiantly committed to a rigorously realist style. Faithfulness to what the eye sees suited the tastes of Koch's society patrons who sought out his skill as a portraitist. It was, as well, a sincere expression of his personal beliefs. Koch's realism, expressed in a visual language related more to the past than to even the objective art of the twentieth century, bedeviled critics of the contemporary art scene, defensively dedicated as they were to the project of convincing the public at large of the sole legitimacy of abstraction as a way of making art.



Dora Zaslavsky, Koch's wife, was the child of eastern European immigrants, brought to the United States as an infant. A piano prodigy from the tenements of East Harlem, she attracted the notice of Janet Schenck, the founder of what became the Manhattan School of Music. Zaslavsky was among the school's first graduates and served as a revered piano teacher there from 1926 until she retired in 1986. By the time Koch returned to New York from Paris, he had already shown his work in Paris group exhibitions. In 1934, he courted Zaslavsky, who was in the process of ending a brief first marriage. The couple married in 1935, the same year in which Koch had his first solo gallery show in New York. In 1939, he was the last artist taken on by John Kraushaar, owner of the estimable Kraushaar Galleries before he passed the business on to his daughter, Antoinette. Koch remained with Kraushaar throughout his life, exhibiting his work in one-man shows in 1939, 1941, 1943, 1946, 1949, 1951, 1954, 1958, 1961, 1965, 1969, 1972, and 1974, capped by a memorial exhibition in 1980, and a posthumous one-man show in 1996.

In 1946, Koch joined Portraits, Inc., the ingenious brainchild of socialite and art and antiques dealers Lois Shaw and Helen Appleton Read. Originally organized to provide professional portraits of young soldiers about to ship out during World War II, in the post-war period the initiative was repurposed as a high-end portrait service linking American artists with patrons seeking classical portraits. Shaw's gallery occupied a space at 460 Park Avenue, "suavely furnished with fine old French pieces and ... deftly baited with samples of the work of artists for whom the gallery ... [acted] as agents" (*The New Yorker*, February 1, 1947, "Talk of the Town: Consequences of Affection," p. 18). The sophisticated Portraits, Inc. showroom illustrated to Koch the marketing advantage of paintings hung in an elegant interior. The association with Portraits, Inc. proved lucrative for Koch. In 1947, he and Dora were able to purchase a country house in Setauket, Long Island. By 1949, the Kochs began their own odyssey as art collectors.

Portrait painting subsidized the lifestyle that allowed Koch to follow his own muse and produce the body of work for which he is best known: carefully composed paintings of interiors, sumptuously detailed, and comfortably furnished, where cultured people gathered to intermingle surrounded by music, art, and freely flowing cocktails. Koch's meticulous realism brought him a national reputation, at the same time it elicited criticism for a perceived lack of evolution during a career that paralleled the transition in art from postwar abstraction to the counterculture of the Vietnam era. Koch's work is probably best understood as intensely personal, almost hermetically sealed within the walls of his Upper West Side apartment, studio, and, occasionally, his home on Long Island. His interior scenes, alive with people, often recognizable friends, also served as an opportunity for him to exercise his impressive skills as a painter of still life. The Koch home abounded in the material objects of a life graciously lived: art, sculpture, musical instruments, fine furniture, plants, flowers, and food and drink proffered on porcelain and silver. These scenes, often focused on musical performance, are closer to the Enlightenment-era conversation piece ideal than the work of any other twentieth-century artist. Grady T Turner, in his catalogue essay, "Enigmatic Intimacy: The Interior World of John Koch," takes note of Koch's ongoing relationship with the masters he admired:

Koch's appreciation of the accoutrements of refinement is evident in the many still lifes featuring the *objects d'art* that decorated the apartment. In his still lifes, Koch rehearsed the lesson of two admired masters, Vermeer and John Copley, each of whom reveled in the substance of things (p. 33).

There was no sharp delineation in Koch's world between music and art. He was the painter; Dora was the musician, but creativity is seamless, and music was vitally important to the painter. In 1968, Koch told an interviewer for an oral history at the Smithsonian Archives of American Art "I can't live without music. Emotionally it's perhaps almost more important than any other art form" In the catalogue discussion of *Music* (1956–57, The Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio, p. 61 plate 15 illus.) the text states that:

Koch was very well versed in musical literature, played the piano by ear, and prided himself on knowing the words of both German lieder and Broadway show tunes, which he sang enthusiastically. There was always music playing when he painted

In addition to his abilities as a painter of figures and still life, in *The Concert* Koch displays his technical mastery of the portrayal of different sources of light, and their effects—a central and recurrent concern of painters from Caravaggio to Vermeer to the Impressionists. On the right side of the canvas, as seen by the viewer, the audience sits absorbed in the magic of the musical performance and illuminated lit by what appears to be daylight while the figures on the viewer's left are seated in a connected but interior room, lit by artificial light made more dramatic by Koch's emphasis on the

shadows cast by a lamp and a picture light.

*The Concert* offers an early glimpse into the world that *New York Times* art critic Ken Johnson described when he wrote that the Kochs created and John Koch painted, at the appropriately named El Dorado, “an intellectual paradise ... a kind of public place, a utopian theater of cultivated civility” (“Art Review: One Life in the Light, Another in the Shadows,” *New York Times*, December 21, 2001, Section E, p. 45.) This canvas is a harbinger of a group of such scenes that are John Koch’s legacy to the frenetic world of the twenty-first century.

CONDITION: Near pristine. Unlined canvas. Minor inpainting in the extreme upper-right quadrant in the quarter-round top of the display cabinet to mitigate a pattern of drying craquelure in that pigment tone. New gilded Modernist-style frame.