

The first American twentieth-century self-taught artist to receive national recognition during his lifetime,<sup>66</sup> John Kane was a man who “had no time to paint, no money to paint and no earthly provocation or encouragement to paint,” in the description of one commentator.<sup>67</sup> Nonetheless, Kane was impassioned about making art, inspired by “mills, factories, coal barges, trains, tracks, sheds, sheep, cattle, plow horses, hills, valleys, meadows, [and] streams,” by his own account.<sup>68</sup> He was an artist to whom even robins cried out, “Paint me, John. Paint me,”<sup>69</sup> and who once sat down and sketched a burning hotel after determining that it was beyond saving.<sup>70</sup> Before he lost a leg in a freak accident at age thirty-one, the brawny Kane helped construct Pittsburgh’s streets, bridges, and factories. Subsequently, he worked as a day laborer painting houses and steel boxcars, gamely maneuvering with his peg leg. In his memorable paintings of America’s Northeast, Kane depicted the world around him “both the way God made it and as man changed it.”<sup>71</sup>

Born in Scotland of Irish parents, the future painter emigrated to western Pennsylvania in 1879 at the age of nineteen. Thirty-one years previously, another young Scotsman had settled in the same

# JOHN KANE

(1860–1934)

BORN WEST CALDER, SCOTLAND

WORKED PITTSBURGH

BY JUDITH E. STEIN

Pittsburgh area. Like Kane, this earlier outlander had known hardship and privation in the Old World and was imbued with the American dream of prospering through hard work. Kane’s older countryman was Andrew Carnegie, who through

luck and his keen business acumen became the richest man in the world. Kane’s financial rewards, in contrast, were meager in the best of times. In 1928, nine years after the millionaire’s death, the artist paid Carnegie homage by depicting his birthplace in Dunfermline, Scotland, with Carnegie’s portrait bust hovering in the sky above.<sup>72</sup> Although the two had never met, their lives were unwittingly entwined.<sup>73</sup>

Kane’s first job in the United States was as a gandy dancer, tapping down rocks between the ties of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad at McKeesport, Pennsylvania. Like as not, the rails laid down after Kane’s hard labors were manufactured at Carnegie’s nearby steel mill, which the savvy industrialist had fitted out with the recent advances in steel-making technology. Plentiful steel facilitated the expansion of the railroads, and as the need grew for more steel, both Carnegie and Pittsburgh flourished.

According to Carnegie’s “gospel of wealth,” it was the duty of men of great means to live simply and to redistribute their money responsibly. Thus the industrialist became a philanthropist, founding, among other benefactions, Pittsburgh’s Carnegie Institute of Technology in the first years of the twentieth century. Soon after it opened, Kane tried to enroll in Carnegie Tech’s art school, but he could not afford the materials and tuition. He proceeded to teach himself what he needed to know by copying the illustrations in art books in one of the free public libraries endowed by Carnegie.

In 1896 Andrew Carnegie helped found the Carnegie International Exhibition, an annual show of contemporary painting. By the 1920s Kane had transcended his lack of formal training and was working on his art at every opportunity. Twice he submitted work to the prestigious International, and twice its jurors rejected the painted copies he naively thought were appropriate. But in 1927, the



HIGHLAND HOLLOW / c. 1930–1935 / Oil on canvas / 26 1/2 x 36 1/2" / Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh / Gift of Mary and Leland Hazard, 1961 / 61.2.1

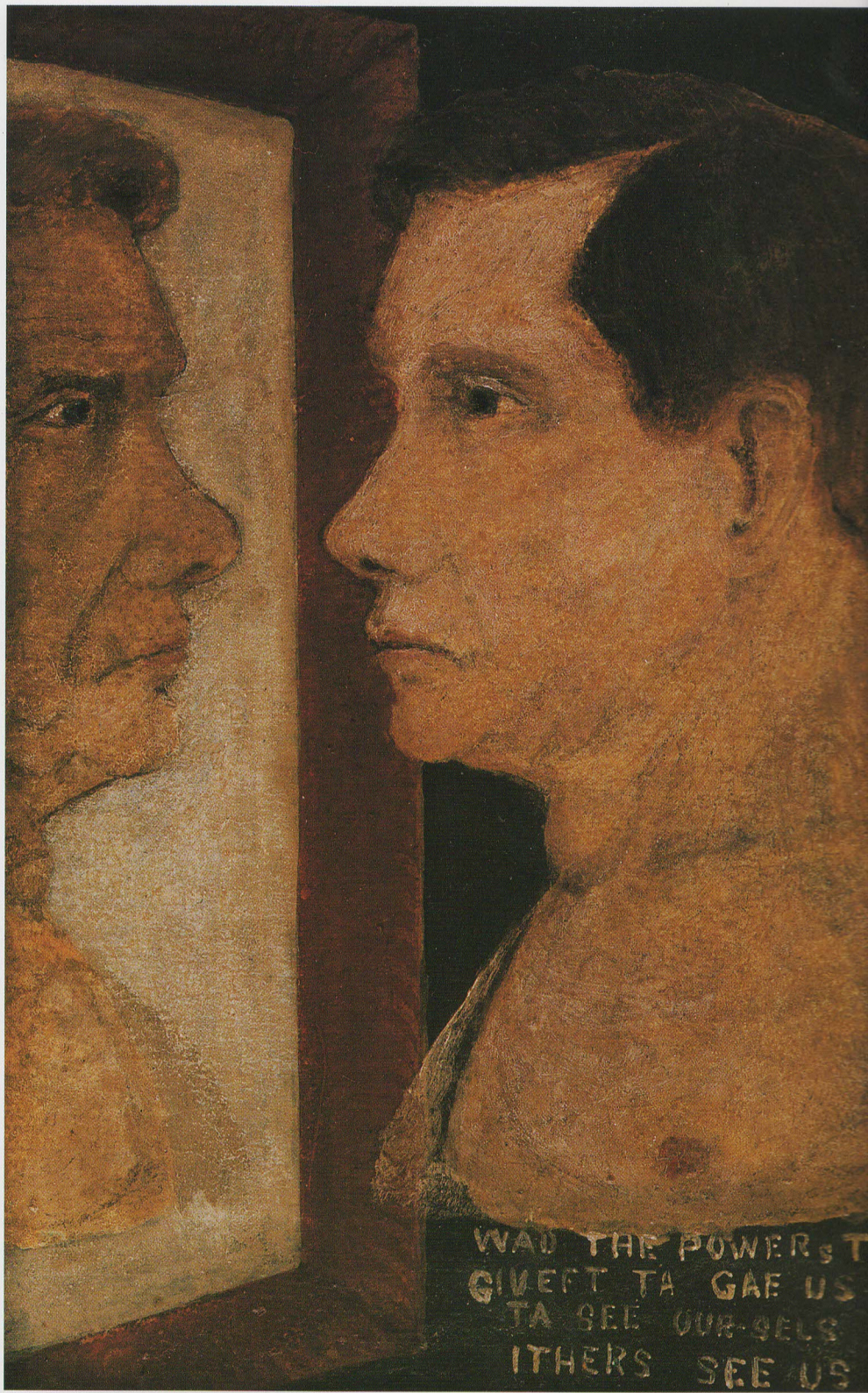


sixty-seven-year-old Kane catapulted to the attention of the national art-world after the jury accepted his original composition.

Seven years after this debut, Kane died of tuberculosis. Most of his 156 recorded oil paintings were done during this short period of time.<sup>74</sup> In his final years, Kane dictated his life story to a newspaper reporter. He called his autobiography *Sky Hooks*, a title he defined as “the curves of steel from which a house painter hangs his scaffold—by which you pull yourself to the top.”<sup>75</sup> This visual metaphor of aspiration evokes the motto “Onward and upward,” which was Andrew Carnegie’s favorite maxim.

Kane’s capital was his own body. A man of guileless charm, he prided himself on his physique, even identifying on that basis with Abraham Lincoln, who had been “a healthy robust young fellow like myself.”<sup>76</sup> Of the several self-portraits that Kane painted, three stand out as arguably the most singular American paintings of the twentieth century. *Seen in the Mirror*, an unusual double image, documents the very process by which an artist paints his own portrait. In this work, Kane cast himself as a disembodied and unclothed profile bust regarding his likeness in a framed looking glass. Seemingly punning on the concept of “reflection,” Kane inscribed the canvas with a freely recalled version of a verse by the eighteenth-century Scottish poet Robert Burns: “WAD THE POWERS THE / GIVEFT TA GAE US / TA SEE OUR-SELS AS / ITHERS SEE US”

The following year he painted the second self-portrait, described by Frank Crowningshield in 1938 as “one of the most extraordinary pictures of our time.”<sup>77</sup> The critic would have known it through verbal descriptions only because Kane had effaced it some nine years previously. Nationally acclaimed following his 1927 Pittsburgh debut, Kane had come to the attention



SEEN IN THE MIRROR / 1928 / Oil on canvas / 8 1/2 x 6 3/4" / Collection of Janice and Mickey Cartin

of the young modernists who formed the Harvard Society of Contemporary Art. In 1929 they invited him to exhibit in Cambridge. Of the six paintings he sent them, one was returned as unsuitable for display. It was “a giant canvas—more than six feet high—[showing] the nude and full-length figure of



the artist in profile." Crowningshield spoke of its startling likeness, "the faithful tracery of the veins . . . the swell of the muscles [and] the artist's artificial leg, with all its straps and complicated supports." Naively, Kane had not foreseen that others might find his unconventional nude self-portrait unseemly.

Following the painting's return, Kane "doubted its true merits" and, determined not to waste the canvas, he "painted out the self-portrait

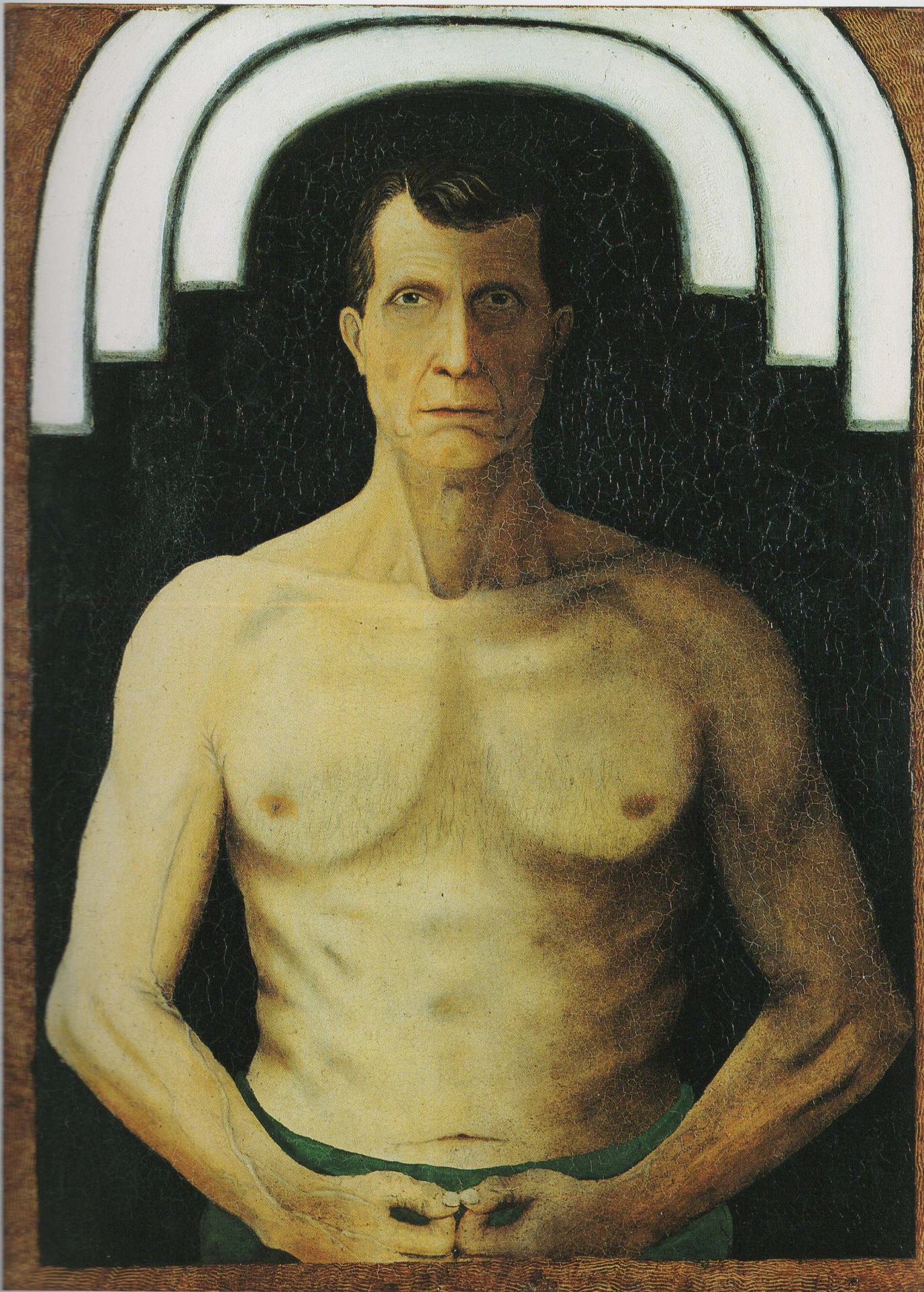
to make way for . . . the portrait of his brother, Patrick, in the uniform of the Black Watch." Today in the collection of The Chrysler Museum of Art, this "double" painting is a prime candidate for modern radiography, which would reveal many details of the phenomenal, invisible image below the surface. Chances are, radiographical exploration will help us better understand the dramatic configuration of the next self-portrait he painted.

In the same year, Kane created the third self-portrait with which we are concerned here, the striking, hierarchic composition in the collection of The Museum of Modern Art.<sup>78</sup> This unflinching view of a powerful man facing his eighth decade is all the more remarkable for its art-historical overtones. Did Kane come across an illustration of Albrecht Dürer's self-portrait executed in the millennial year 1500 while perusing art books in a Carnegie library? It certainly looks that way. Both artists chose a bilaterally symmetrical pose, with the subject looking out to confront the viewer. Both chose austere, dark backgrounds that evoke early Flemish depictions of Christ. Unlike Dürer, Kane depicted his two hands, a challenge for a self-portraitist who typically does not render the hand used for painting. Kane paid careful attention to the frame, demarking triple arches to emphasize his head, placing his loosely fisted hands "behind" the lower boundary, and bowing out his elbows toward the vertical edges, making contact on one side. Had Kane created only this one image, his standing as one of America's most important painters would be undiminished.

THE GIRL I LEFT BEHIND / 1920 / Oil on board / 15 3/8 x 11 1/8" / Collection of Janice and Mickey Cartin







SELF-PORTRAIT / 1929 / Oil on canvas over composition board /  $36\frac{1}{8} \times 27\frac{1}{8}$ " / The Museum of Modern Art, New York / Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Fund