

Fidelma Cadmus Kirstein

Artist Biography

Fidelma Cadmus (1906–1991) was born in New York to artist parents struggling at the edge of poverty. As a teenager, she left home and lived with her two aunts in Greenwich Village. Like her older brother, the artist Paul Cadmus, she studied at the Art Students League, where she won a number of prizes, while earning a living designing wallpaper at the Traphagen Studio in the late twenties. Socially, she found herself immersed in the artistic milieu of her brother, who, having returned from Europe in 1931, was gaining notoriety for his paintings in New York. She would occasionally work from the studio Paul shared with his lover, the artist Jared French, on St. Luke's Place.

In the collaborative atmosphere of the social circle she occupied, she posed for many of her fellow artists, including her brother, French, the painter Pavel Tchelitchew, and the photographer George Platt Lynes. She was also the subject of a number of photographs her brother; French; and French's new wife, Margaret Hoening, began taking on their summer vacations to Fire Island, Nantucket, and Provincetown—the photos were collectively taken under the moniker PaJaMa, after their first names.

At a party thrown by Lynes in 1939, Cadmus met Lincoln Kirstein, a cultural impresario, who had founded the School of American Ballet (later renamed the New York City Ballet) with choreographer George Balanchine in 1934. He and Cadmus married in April of 1941, though he would continue pursuing male lovers. At several points, some of them lived with the two of them, such as the dancer Pete Martinez and the artist Alexander Jensen Yow. Kirstein, who had suffered from depression in her youth, continued to struggle with breakdowns throughout her life and, though she continued to work on her enigmatic paintings and drawings after their wedding, eventually the pace and volatility of her husband's personal and professional life overtook her work. They remained married until her death, in 1991.