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Remembering Jan Sawka

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Art:

Jan Sawka



Artist & architect, who fled Poland and settled in High Falls.

Internationally acclaimed visual artist Jan Sawka died of a heart attack at age 65 in his High Falls studio on August 9. His artistic legacy includes plans for huge outdoor monuments; "The Voyage," a 1,202 painting creation epic projected on a stadium-sized screen; myriad canvases and posters; and 25 intimate drawing journals.

The journals meticulously illustrate the mind and milieu of this brilliant and highly productive artist, who fled communist Poland in 1977 with his wife and baby daughter. Previously seen only by family members and close friends, Sawka's Journals are being exhibited for the first time at the Bard College Library, in a show titled "Personal Equilibrium." It's free, open to the public, and up until mid December.

"Jan Sawka was such a vibrant, creative man," says Debra Klein, Bard's assistant visual curator. Klein met with Sawka last spring. After the artist died, his daughter Hanna Sawka, a filmmaker who knew Klein via the area Smith College alumni network, pushed to make the event happen quickly. It's the first posthumous exhibit of her father's work.

Sawka's works are in over 60 museums around the world; he was exhibited in about 70 solo shows. In 1989, Sawka designed a 10-story set for the Grateful Dead's 25th Anniversary tour. It toured with the group for two years. Remnants of the set are on exhibit at the Grateful Dead Archive in California. Sawka met band member Jerry Garcia through singer-songwriter and poet Leonard Cohen, and was also close friends with Grateful Dead drummer Mickey Hart.

Klein said "Personal Equilibrium" is a particularly appropriate show for the display windows at the entrance of Bard's library. "Many Bard students keep journals," says Klein.

"Working on the Bard show initially kept us going, it's how we dealt with the grief," says Hanna, a petite single mom who now lives with her mother and works out of her father's studio, a converted barn. The Sawkas bought their place in 1986.

Convenient to Manhattan's art galleries, but rural and unpretentious, living in High Falls suited the Sawkas, who became mainstays of the upstate arts scene.

"We're hoping to establish a Jan Sawka Museum – there's not enough room on our property for it, though – some of my father's sculptures are enormous, weighing half a ton, which is why the show at Bard is such a rare opportunity," says Hanna. "The journals are intricate and personal, small in scale; next to many of my father's finished works, they would just disappear."

One of the ideas Sawka toyed with repeatedly throughout his career concerned the appearance of writing as distinct from its meaning. The journals – as well as many of his paintings – feature elaborate calligraphy-like doodles.

Within a year after arriving in Manhattan, Sawka became an editorial illustrator for the Op-Ed page of The New York Times. He designed the official poster for the Solidarity movement. In 1986, a limited-edition book of hand-colored engravings titled "A Book of Fiction," won book of the year at the Frankfurt Book Fair, the publishing industry's major international trade show.

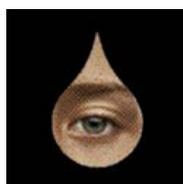
The Sawkas said they think a museum would attract visitors from all over the world to the Catskills.

"We had over 70,000 visitors to the official Jan Sawka website in just one day after the obituaries began to appear," says Hanka.

"My Husband Was A Symbol of Freedom"

The couple met at a university in Poland when Jan was 27 and Hanka was 20. "I was very beautiful as a young woman," confides Hanka. "Jan asked me to marry him on our third date, but I said no - I have a twin sister and our mother wasn't initially in favor of the match - but Jan had such a great sense of humor, and he was very persuasive. We married in 1974 and he was an absolutely wonderful husband," says Hanka. "We were together day and night - I ran the business with him for 39 years."

"My husband was such a symbol of freedom to Eastern Europe," says Hanka, who published



a culinary autobiography called *At Hanka's Table* in 2004. Although well-received – it was reviewed by Florence Fabricant of *The New York Times* - Sawka never received any proceeds from book sales. She's not willing to invest the time and money into hiring a lawyer, however.

"I didn't even want to make it a cookbook, but that's what the publisher advised," says Hanka. "In Europe these sorts of memoirs sell, you don't have to put recipes in them!" she exclaims. "But then again, political poetry is still very big in Poland. The society is a lot less commercial than in the United States."

Posters, Jerusalem's Peace Monument, and "The Voyage" During the communist era in Poland, everything was heavily censored. "There were no galleries, no art museums," recalls Hanka. Like other artists of this era from Eastern Europe, Sawka managed to eke out a subsistence living designing posters, because anything that required a printing press to produce could be easily controlled.

"That's why the posters of this period are so good -- Leo Castelli actually got his start as an art dealer selling posters," says Hanka.

Sawka's posters contained hidden protest messages and black humor. He became very famous as an underground artist. It became apparent that the family should leave Poland as quickly as possible. The Sawkas were assisted in their emigration effort by none other than art collector and socialite Peggy Guggenheim.

In 2011, Sawka won the "Excellence in Architecture" award in the unbuilt category from the American Institute of Architects for his model for the Peace Monument in Jerusalem.

Hanna says that she anticipates interest in her father's art will continue to increase.

"The Voyage" is a 90 minute multimedia experience. It's going to be produced at concert venues here, and then will go on world tour with the Mickey Hart Band," says Hanna. "We're mostly busy with organizing and promoting my father's estate."

There will be a memorial exhibit at ACA Galleries in New York this spring. The Polish National Museum in Krakow just announced plans for a Sawka retrospective sometime in 2013.

"Personal Equilibrium: The Private Journals of Jan Sawka" will be on view in the Stevenson Library Lobby Display Cases at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson from Monday, November 1 through December 15.



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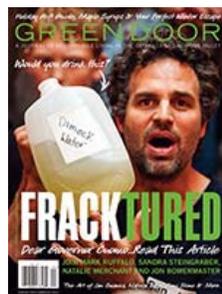
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