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American artist and architect Jan Sawka dies at 65

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Jan Sawka had 70 solo shows at international museums and galleries. (Dennis Stock / Magnum Photos)



Photo: Jan Sawka "Sunset Strip, 1978"

By Jamie Wetherbe
August 10, 2012 | 3:52 p.m.

Jan Sawka, the Polish American artist and architect who designed for the Grateful Dead, has died at age 65. Sawka died Thursday after a heart attack in his studio and home in High Falls, N.Y., his family said in a statement.

Sawka had 70 solo shows at international museums and galleries, and his paintings, posters and prints hang in more than 60 museums around the world. He had just completed a multimedia piece titled "The Voyage" set to tour next year with former Grateful Dead drummer Mickey Hart.

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Photo: Jan Sawka

Two years ago, Sawka's work was featured as part of Westways magazine's cover art program on display at Pasadena Museum of California Art. The artist painted his first impressions of Los Angeles after a day on the Sunset Strip in 1978.

"I took a notebook and markers and walked down [Sunset Boulevard](#)," Sawka told The Times in 2010. "It was awful and strangely beautiful how billboards dominated human life."

Sawka was born Poland in 1946 to a linguist mother and an architect father, who was imprisoned during the Stalin-era.

Sawka completed two master's degrees -- in painting and printmaking, and architectural engineering -- and in his 20s became a star at the Polish Poster School. Sawka was exiled from Poland in 1976 for his involvement in the Polish and American counterculture movements.

A year later, he moved to New York, where he produced editorial commentary drawings for the New York Times and designed theaters including the Harold Clurman, Jean Cocteau Repertory and Samuel Beckett Theater.

Sawka won numerous awards in both art and design, including the Premio di Lorenzo Il Magnifico Gold Medal in

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Multimedia in 2003 and the American Institute of Architects Excellence in Architecture Award in 2011.

Sawka is also known for his genre-bridging collaborations, including a 10-story-tall set for the Grateful Dead's 25th anniversary tour and interactive sculptures inspired by Japanese technology studios.

Sawka is survived by his wife of 38 years, Hanka Sawka; his daughter, filmmaker Hanna Sawka; and his two grandsons. The family is planning a memorial exhibition at ACA Galleries in New York City.

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