

# Jan Sawka, Polish Artist, Dies at 65



Amanda Switzer

Jan Sawka largely escaped conflict with Poland's Soviet-style censors during the politically volatile '60s and '70s, when he designed posters and stage sets for avant-garde theater groups in Krakow and Warsaw.

By PAUL VITELLO  
Published: August 27, 2012

Jan Sawka, a Polish artist, arrived in New York in 1977 with his wife and baby, four suitcases and a portfolio of the theatrical posters that had provoked the Polish government to expel him.

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The artist Jan Sawka's "Voiture de l'Année" ("Car of the Year"), which won the gold medal at the International Poster Biennale in Warsaw in 1978, after he fled Poland.

The family settled in a one-bedroom apartment in Manhattan, where Mr. Sawka (pronounced SOFF-ka) began creating a body of work that eventually included paintings, sculptures, engravings, editorial illustrations, architectural installations, peace monuments, light shows and a movable 10-story stage set for the Grateful Dead's 25th-anniversary concert tour.

The head-spinning diversity of it made labeling Mr. Sawka difficult, which suited him fine. "I have no idea which trend of art I represent," he told Arts magazine in 1983. "Nothing interests me less."

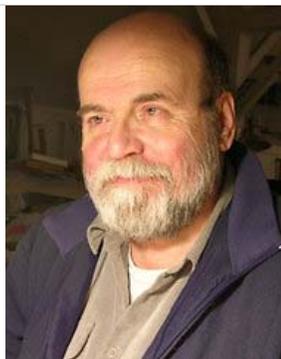
When he died on Aug. 9 at his home and studio in High Falls, N.Y., Mr. Sawka was finishing a multimedia project on which he had worked for 10 years: "The Voyage," a series of 1,200 images to be projected on a set of giant outdoor screens and accompanied by a score composed by Mickey Hart, the former Grateful Dead drummer. The

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Hanna Sawka  
The Polish artist, Jan Sawka, moved to New York in 1977.

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"At the Beach," a 1986 painting by Jan Sawka.

cause was a heart attack, said Mr. Sawka's daughter, Hanna Sawka. He was 65.

"'The Voyage' is the voyage of humanity, a spectacle about the singularity of all races and people," said Stephen Trombly, a filmmaker working on the project. He described Mr. Sawka as an "artist of the Communist diaspora" who never lost touch with an ideal notion — especially as seen from behind the Iron Curtain — of what the 1969 Woodstock music festival represented.

A bearish man of irrepressible energy, Mr. Sawka had largely escaped conflict with Poland's Soviet-style censors during the politically volatile 1960s and '70s, when he designed posters and stage sets for avant-garde theater groups in Krakow and Warsaw. But by the mid-'70s, foreign art critics had begun noticing the black humor in his work and raving about his subtle style of anti-authoritarianism. The raves helped secure Mr. Sawka's reputation among leading dissident Polish poster artists, whose work anticipated the Solidarity revolution of 1980. It also stoked the enmity of the censors, leading to his exile in 1976. His family left for New York after a year in France waiting for visa clearances.

Mr. Sawka's productivity in New York was renowned. Within a year he became a prolific editorial illustrator for the Op-Ed page of The New York Times. While producing paintings at his home studio, he designed theater posters and worked on sets for plays at the [Jean Cocteau Repertory Theater](#) and the Clurman Theater, including a 1983

production of "Krapp's Last Tape," in which he collaborated closely with the playwright, Samuel Beckett.

In an [article about Mr. Sawka's first one-man show](#) in 1985, Douglas C. McGill remarked on his whirlwind pace. How had an artist who had arrived as an unknown in New York just eight years before pulled it off? "The best guess that emerges from interviews with his supporters is that apart from the quality of his work, his zestful and enterprising personality has been key," Mr. McGill wrote in The Times.

Jan Andrzej Sawka was born on Dec. 10, 1946, in Zabrze, Poland, shortly after his father, Jan, an architect, was jailed by the newly installed Polish Communist government. (He was released seven years later.) His mother, Maria, a linguist, worked as a teacher. Besides his daughter, his survivors include his wife, who, like his daughter, is named Hanna, and a sister, Anna.

Mr. Sawka studied art, printmaking and architecture during a period of political ferment throughout Eastern Europe, including the widespread student protests throughout Poland in 1968 that set off a brutal government crackdown on dissidents. His poster designs for avant-garde theater groups became well known for their wordplay and their deadpan style, in which symbols of protest were often stitched into the graphics.

In one well-known example — a circus poster — only close inspection reveals that a tightrope walker at the center of the composition wears prison garb.

Soon after emigrating, Mr. Sawka was commissioned by Solidarity leaders to design an official poster for the movement. More recent works included a peace monument in Israel celebrating the Abrahamic faiths, a peace monument in Nagasaki and "The Tower of Light" in Abu Dhabi, a glass obelisk in the capital of the oil-rich United Arab Emirates, suggesting a solar-powered future. In the early '80s he spent a year making engravings, which he then hand-painted and assembled in a limited-edition book titled "A Book of



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Fiction.”

Mr. Sawka’s boyish delight in his work and the multiplicity of sites he found for it came through in [an essay](#) he wrote, which appears on his Web site (jansawka.com): “Sometimes I must pinch myself when flying to Tokyo or Abu Dhabi again,” he wrote. “It feels like a magic trip for an artist who began his career as an underground graphic artist in Krakow.”

*This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:*

**Correction: August 28, 2012**

An earlier version of this article include a photo with a caption that incorrectly described the pictured artwork. The image depicts “At the Beach,” a painting by Jan Sawka, not a poster.

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