

## OBITUARY

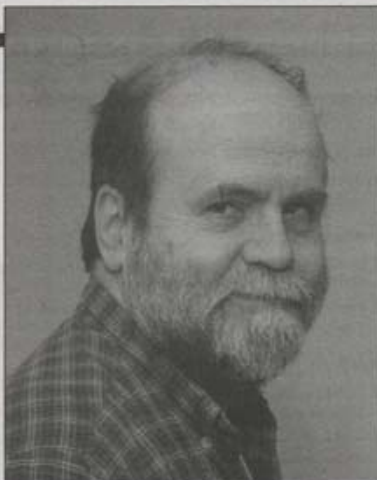
## Jan Sawka

Artist, printmaker, designer and architect Jan Sawka suffered a fatal heart attack in his studio and home in High Falls on August 9. He was 65. One of the premier artists of the famed Polish Poster School and a leading artist of the Polish and American counter-cultures, Sawka designed art sets for Samuel Beckett, The Grateful Dead and Steve Winwood among others as part of his theater projects. At the time of his death, he had just completed a multimedia spectacle titled "The Voyage" that will tour with Grateful Dead drummer Mickey Hart's ensemble in 2013.

His *Exodus* poster was one of just 20 representing the Polish School of the Poster 2009 exhibition at the MoMA. Sawka's paintings, posters and prints are in over 60 museums around the world and he has had over 70 solo shows at international museums and galleries.

Sawka's oppositionist activities lead to his forced exile from Poland in 1976. In 1981, when martial law was imposed in Poland, the AFL-CIO led a bipartisan fundraiser that sold Sawka's *Solidarity* poster in the millions to provide immediate support to the besieged Solidarity Movement. The image of a button with the Solidarity-logo as a sun above a landscape of crowd-like trees became an icon of the rebellion.

Sawka won the Premio di Lorenzo Il Magnifico Gold Medal in Multimedia at the 4th International Biennial of Contemporary Art in Florence, Italy in 2003 and was also the 2011 winner of the American Institute of Architects Excellence in Architecture Award in the Unbuilt Category for his Peace Monument, Jerusalem design. He was one of the first artists-in-residence at the Pompidou Center in



Paris, where he fled following his exile.

Sawka was born in the Silesian city of Zabrze in 1946 to an architect father and linguist mother. His childhood was overshadowed by his father's Stalin-era political imprisonment. Sawka completed two Masters degrees: in painting and print-making from the Wrocław Fine Arts Academy and in architectural engineering from the Institute of Technology in Wrocław. By his late 20's, Sawka had become a star of the Polish Poster School.

Sawka moved to New York City in 1977 and quickly became part of the American art scene. He produced numerous editorial page commentary drawings for *The New York Times*; exhibited his paintings in galleries in New York, Los Angeles and abroad; and designed for such theaters as the

Harold Clurman, Jean Cocteau Repertory and Samuel Beckett Theater. James Beck, Columbia University art historian and critic at the time, described Jan Sawka as a contemporary Renaissance artist, not only for his creative breadth, but for his well-honed painting techniques.

In 1975, Sawka was the youngest artist to win the 1975 Oscar de la Peinture and President's Award for painting in Cagnes-Sur-Mer, France and he won the Gold Medal at the 1978 Warsaw Poster Biennial. In 1989, Sawka designed a ten-story-tall set for the Grateful Dead's 25th Anniversary Tour.

Sawka's prints and posters comprise the largest collection of works on paper in the collection of the Library of Congress, whose curator Elena Millie, called Sawka's dry-point work "painterly on par with Rembrandt" (in 1996). Among these is the dry-point engraving series called, "The Book of Fiction," which later was published in book form by Clarkson and Potter and was awarded *The New York Times*' Book of the Year Award in 1986.

In 1993, while Sawka was in Japan on a Cultural Ministry art residency, the Japanese government introduced the artist to various high-tech laboratories, inspiring him to create his first full multi-media spectacle, "The Eyes," in that country. This was the beginning of his collaboration with Japanese technology studios and corporations, which led to the creation of high-tech interactive sculptures and monumental installations.

Sawka designed "The Tower of Light Cultural Complex" for Abu Dhabi, U.A.E., initially presented to the Royal Family in 1996. His unbuilt design for a Peace Monument, Jerusalem is a symbol of interfaith unity. When he was awarded the AIA award for the design in 2011, the jury comment was, "Poetry and passion... who could argue with this concept?" The pilot for his current multimedia spectacle, "The Voyage," won the Gold Medal in Multi-Media at the 2003 Florence Contemporary Art Biennial. Sawka's work is represented by landmark ACA Galleries in New York's Chelsea arts district.

He is survived by his wife of 38 years, Hanka Sawka; his daughter, the filmmaker Hanna Sawka; and his two grandsons.

The family is planning a memorial exhibition at ACA Galleries in New York City. Friends and relatives may call at Copeland Funeral Home, Inc., 162 South Putt Corners Road, New Paltz, on Friday, August 17, from 10 a.m. to 11 a.m. A mass of Christian burial will be offered at 11:45 a.m. at St. Peter's Church, 1017 Keator Ave., Rosendale. Cremation will follow at Poughkeepsie Rural Cemetery. Condolences may be made to the family at [www.copelandfhn.com](http://www.copelandfhn.com).

Hanna M. Sawka

Jan Sawka's website includes essays about the artist by very prominent critics at this link: <http://www.jansawka.com/bio/essays.html>