

# Jan Sawka, a visionary who created perfection

HIGH FALLS - Artist, printmaker, designer and architect Jan Sawka suffered a fatal heart attack in his studio and home in High Falls on Aug. 9. 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.



Sawka

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.

His 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 4<sup>th</sup> International Biennial of Contemporary Art in Florence, Italy in 2003 for his pilot of "The Voyage" 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. 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.

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.

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. In 1988, 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 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 1966.

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.

His unbuilt design for a Peace Monument, Jerusalem, a symbol of interfaith unity was awarded the AIA award for the design in 2011. The jury comment was, "Poetry and passion... who could argue with this concept?" Sawka's work is represented by landmark ACA Galleries in New York's Chelsea arts district and a memorial exhibition is planned there in the Spring of 2013.

In 2010, Sawka exhibited for his immediate community, with a show called "Homecoming" at the Mohonk Arts Center at 186 Mohonk Road. Most recently, he organized a show there of fine Japanese printmaking called, "The Japanese Touch." According to his family, he was "a visionary, who could execute his ideas immediately on paper and later through other means, whether this was drypoint engraving, painting, sculpture or architecture. Whatever medium, he would create things of perfection, which never ceased to amaze us. As a person, he loved to collaborate with other people, whether these were poets, scientists or other artists and he was very supportive of other people's talents. He was a wonderful husband of nearly 39 years, a great father and loving grandfather. High Fallonians surely saw him walking his grandsons on morning strolls. Despite his genius, he was a very humble person, with a deep compassion for his fellow human beings."

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