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Wolf Kahn, celebrated painter of resplendent landscapes, dies at 92

By Emily Langer
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Wolf Kahn, an artist who was evacuated from Nazi Germany as a child and settled in the United States, where he became renowned for his resplendent landscapes depicting beauty and permanence in an often uncertain world, died March 15 at his home in New York City. He was 92.

The cause was congestive heart failure, said his daughter Melany Kahn.

Mr. Kahn was one of thousands of Jewish refugee children shepherded to Britain between 1938 and 1940 as part of the rescue effort known as the Kindertransport. Later he joined his family in the United States and established himself as an artist in the 1950s. For years he divided his time between studios in New York City and Brattleboro, Vt., where he and his wife, artist Emily Mason, worked while ensconced in a hillside farm.

He was known primarily for his pastels and oil paintings that captured on paper and canvas the intoxicating colors — as Mr. Kahn perceived them — of trees, the sky, and rolling hills and sometimes the barns and cabins tucked inside them.

Reflecting on his life, he observed that he was perhaps drawn to the land because of his experience during the Holocaust, which took the lives of his grandparents and left him for a period without a home.

“After all, landscape is something that might be searching for roots,” he said in an oral history in the late 1970s with the Smithsonian Institution’s Archives of American Art. He added that “nature, which is unchanging,” gives one “solidity.”

His style was influenced by many traditions, including the dreamlike aura of French impressionism and color field painting techniques pioneered by abstract artists including Mark Rothko. But he insisted that he was a realist, once remarking to an Associated Press reporter, “You see, the forest is there.”

The forest was there, but not always as one might expect to find it.



Mr. Kahn, shown here with his painting “Uphill,” was renowned for the resplendent colors of his pastels. (Courtesy of Miles McEnery Gallery, New York, NY)



A view of Mr. Kahn's studio. (Courtesy of Miles McEnergy Gallery, New York, NY)

"Wolf Kahn's America: An Artist's Travels" (2003), one of several collections of his works. "We do believe them; his images keep a sense of place and moment, though what strikes us first is their abstract gorgeousness. Gorgeous, but they do not leave the earth."

Mr. Kahn's work was exhibited and housed in institutions including the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Smithsonian Institution's American Art Museum in Washington and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. In a testament to his popularity, it also filled wall calendars and address books.

In Vermont, Mr. Kahn lived in a renovated farmhouse. Danny Lichtenfeld, director of the Brattleboro Museum & Art Center, told the publication *VT Digger* in 2017 that Mr. Kahn was "to southern Vermont what Winslow Homer is to the coast of Maine, Georgia O'Keeffe to the New Mexico high desert and Claude Monet to the French countryside."

And yet, Mr. Kahn said, his bucolic scenes were also the product of the months he spent in Manhattan.

"The environment in which my paintings grow best is at Broadway and 12th Street. I can see nature most clearly in my studio, undistracted by trees and skies," he said in an interview quoted by the *Forward*. "Art being emotion recollected in tranquility, I constantly find Nature too emotional, and Broadway very tranquil."

Hans Wolfgang Kahn was born in Stuttgart on Oct. 4, 1927. (He was always known as Wolf, his daughter said, and legally changed his given name after settling in the United States.)

His father was the conductor of the Stuttgart Philharmonic but lost his post because of anti-Semitic persecution during the Nazi regime. His mother was an artist and died when Mr. Kahn was 3, leaving him in the care of a grandmother in Frankfurt while his father traveled for his conducting career.

The widow of a banker, she provided Mr. Kahn with an affluent upbringing, including formal art lessons. Mr. Kahn's artistic potential had been apparent since he was 4 or 5, when he began drawing the musicians of his father's orchestra with their instruments.

"My choice of color is dictated by tact and decorum, stretched by an unholy desire to be outrageous," he once told the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*. "I want the color to be surprising to people without being offensive."

In Mr. Kahn's renderings, trees could be a blazing orange, grass could be a radiant yellow and a horizon could be a ribbon of pink.

"He brings back from his survey of nature colors — magentas, purples, orange-pinks — that must be seen to be believed," novelist John Updike wrote in an introduction to Mr. Kahn's book

Mr. Kahn recalled being physically attacked on the street because he was not wearing a Hitler Youth uniform. When he arrived in England as part of the Kindertransport, he was first placed with a wealthy family that treated him cruelly.

The father wanted “a real refugee, you know, with rickets, and dark under the eyes,” Mr. Kahn said in the Smithsonian oral history, whereas, thanks to his grandmother, Mr. Kahn’s arrival was “anticipated by the arrival of a bicycle and a huge steamer trunk.” The host family made him work for them as a servant until he was placed in another home that was less well-to-do, but where he was treated kindly.

“My class bias comes from that, I suppose,” Mr. Kahn said. “I’ve always been very dubious about the rich, and much more in favor of . . . the less fortunate.”

In the United States, he was reunited with his father and his siblings. They lived in New Jersey before settling in New York City, where Mr. Kahn studied at the High School of Music & Art. He served in the Navy before receiving a bachelor’s degree in fine arts from the University of Chicago in 1950.

Before attending the university, Mr. Kahn had been a studio assistant to Hans Hofmann, a German-born abstract expressionist who became a mentor.

“He didn’t believe in systems,” Mr. Kahn told the publication Vermont Arts & Living. “He said at some point some genius would arise who would know how to systematize color, but until then you have to use your intuition.”

“I have my own system for color, but I’ve never formalized it,” he added. “It all goes through my intuition instead of any knowledge. In fact I don’t believe in knowledge.”

Mr. Kahn continued painting until the end of his life, once remarking to the program “CBS Sunday Morning” that “as I get older, the blue gets bluer and the yellow gets yellower.”

“I hope to live to a very ripe old age,” he quipped, “because . . . who can tell how yellow the yellow [will] become?”

Mr. Kahn’s honors included the State Department’s International Medal of Arts, awarded to him in 2017. Among other philanthropic work, he and his wife established the New York-based Wolf Kahn and Emily Mason Foundation, a grant-giving organization for the visual arts.

His wife died in December after 62 years of marriage. Survivors include two daughters, Cecily Kahn, also an artist, of Friendship, Maine, and Melany Kahn of West Chesterfield, N.H., and six grandchildren.

Art is “about intuition, imagination and fantasy,” Mr. Kahn told the Vermont arts publication. “Once you have your nose pointed in the right direction, you can start smelling something. It’s not about expertise. I don’t believe in it. I believe in innocence of spirit.”