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Philip Pearlstein, painter who mastered the nude, dies at 98

With his close friend Andy Warhol, he began his career rebelling against abstraction

By Andy Grundberg

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Portrait artist Philip Pearlstein in front of one of his paintings in his studio in 1989. (Jack Mitchell/Getty Images)

Philip Pearlstein, an artist who with his friend Andy Warhol rebelled against abstraction in the 1950s, then built a legacy that rests on realistic, even daring paintings of nude models, died Dec. 17 at a hospital in Manhattan. He was 98.

The death was confirmed by Betty Cunningham of the Betty Cunningham Gallery in New York. No cause was given.

A Pittsburgh native like Warhol, Mr. Pearlstein studied art and design in the years during and after World War II at the Carnegie Institute of Technology (now Carnegie Mellon University), where he and Warhol met and studied under teachers who brought the vanguard of painting from New York to western Pennsylvania.

After graduating in 1949, the ambitious young artists moved to Manhattan, carrying their belongings in shopping bags, and supported themselves as illustrators and designers for magazines and department stores. Warhol achieved nearly instant success as a fashion illustrator, but Mr. Pearlstein was the first to find his way as an artist.

Inspired by an idea for an illustration, Mr. Pearlstein painted a large dollar sign in the center of a canvas, which led to a series of what he called “paintings of icons,” which included the Statue of Liberty, Dick Tracy and Superman. Exhibited in New York in 1952, the works prefigure the Pop Art movement by a decade; Warhol began drawing and painting dollar signs in the early 1960s.

By that time, Mr. Pearlstein had moved on to drawing and painting human figures directly from observation in the studio. This technique was nearly as old as painting itself and continues to be used, mostly in art schools, but in a decade that featured Pop, Minimalism and Conceptual art, it seemed retrograde.

Mr. Pearlstein, however, chose to see himself as an art-world rebel. “It seems madness on the part of any painter educated in the twentieth-century modes of picture-making to take as his subject the naked human figure,” he wrote in the magazine ARTnews in 1962. He proceeded to make the naked human figure his subject for the next half-century.

Unlike the fleshy, pulchritudinous and radiant nudes of Rubens and Renoir, Mr. Pearlstein’s models are painted as ordinary human beings. Their often-sagging, uncomfortably posed flesh and their expressions reveal the boredom of the excruciatingly slow modeling process. A few paintings include men, but the vast majority depict women.

Stomachs show folds and creases, breasts succumb to gravity, and arms, feet and knees claim much space on the canvas, producing a vertiginous effect. The paint itself seems to refute any hint of glamour in the flesh, with dull shades of brown and tan contesting Renoir’s insistence on glowing cotton-candy pinks.

Much of Mr. Pearlstein’s career coincided with a growing feminist consciousness in the art world, and for some women his pictures were merely another instance of the male gaze objectifying the female body.

Mr. Pearlstein’s artistic interest was not limited to his naked subjects. Especially in later paintings, the human figure competes for attention with Turkish rugs, African or [Asian masks](#) and other precisely painted decorative objects, the patterns of which dazzle the eye and divert any possible fixation on the nude.

Together, the figures and objects create complex compositions that seem to defy spatial logic. This effect is achieved partly by the abrupt cropping at the paintings’ edges, purportedly a consequence of Mr. Pearlstein’s technique of starting his brushwork in the center of the canvas and working outward. The closest precedent could be the contorted proportions found in [Mannerist paintings](#) of the late Renaissance.

Mr. Pearlstein positioned his work as a statement against the Modernist preoccupation with the flatness of the picture plane and Cubism’s insistence on multiple points of view. Instead, he made perspective both his ally and his enemy, creating paintings that challenge the very illusions they proffer.

In a 1962 ARTnews article, "Figure Paintings Are Not Made in Heaven," Mr. Pearlstein rejected the prevailing notion that the space of a painting needed to be flat, thus making the work necessarily abstract. "A moralistic ban has been placed on spatial illusionism," he wrote. "But it is an arbitrary ban. The flatness of the picture plane is no more a truth than was the flatness of the world before Columbus."

Many critics loved his work from the start. Painter and art critic Sidney Tillim called Mr. Pearlstein's first one-person show of figure paintings a "historic exhibition," arguing approvingly in Arts Magazine that the models depicted were not symbols of beauty but human facts.

The son of a first-generation Russian immigrant father and Lithuanian immigrant mother, Philip Martin Pearlstein was born in Pittsburgh on May 24, 1924. His parents sold chickens and eggs during the Great Depression, barely scraping by, but when Philip developed an interest in art, they let him attend Saturday classes at the Carnegie Museum of Art.

As a high school junior in 1941, he won first and third prizes in a national high school art competition sponsored by Scholastic Magazine, and Life magazine reproduced his winning paintings. After graduating, he enrolled at the Carnegie Institute of Technology, but in his first year, he was drafted into the Army. He served in World War II in Italy as a graphic artist, designing road signs and other visual aids.

At the end of his three years of service, Mr. Pearlstein returned to the art program at Carnegie Tech. A younger aspiring artist, Andy Warhol (he later dropped the "a" at the end), studied alongside him and by all accounts looked up to him as a more worldly and accomplished older brother.

[Andy Warhol, Pioneer of Pop Art, Dies After Heart Attack](#)

After they settled in New York, they roomed together for a year before Mr. Pearlstein married Dorothy Cantor, a painter who also had been a Carnegie Tech classmate. She [died in 2018](#). Survivors include three children and two grandchildren.

Mr. Pearlstein supported himself in his early New York years by working for Czech-born graphic designer Ladislav Sutnar and then for Life. After his paintings began to attract critical attention, the artist was in demand as a teacher; he taught at Pratt Institute from 1959 to 1963 and then at Brooklyn College until 1988.

His artistic career took off in the mid-1950s when he produced a series of paintings of rocks and trees he had sketched one summer in Maine. Then came paintings of Roman ruins he had drawn while on a Fulbright fellowship in Italy in 1958 and 1959. His next work, based on a conscious decision to purge the last traces of brushy expressionism from his art, was of realistically painted nude models.

These paintings, shown at the Allan Frumkin Gallery in New York in 1963, cemented his reputation as an artist willing to confound aesthetic fashion. They also cemented his commitment to painting the human figure over the course of the next 50 years, with the exception of an ongoing series of clothed portraits of artists, family and friends.

Mr. Pearlstein influenced younger realist painters, including Chuck Close, Rackstraw Downes, Janet Fish and Sylvia Plimack Mangold. All studied painting at Yale University, where Mr. Pearlstein was a visiting critic in 1962.

Mr. Pearlstein's paintings are in the collections of major institutions including the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art, all in New York; the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington; and the Art Institute of Chicago. A member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, he served as its president from 2003 to 2006.

Mr. Pearlstein's devotion to painting from direct observation remained constant throughout his career, and he continued to hire models and rely on props culled from his lifetime collection of decorative arts from around the world.

"At a certain point I have to accept what I have seen," he [told the New York Times](#) in 2002. "Otherwise I will keep shifting the image around forever, like a Giacometti. It would be easier to work from photographs, obviously, but there's an energy, an urgency working from life that doesn't come from a photograph. You're capturing something elusive, something you're not always sure of, or you're trying to capture it, before it vanishes."