

ARTnews

Philip Pearlstein, Whose Nude Portraits Defined Realist Painting, Dies at 98

BY HARRISON JACOBS December 18, 2022 8:34pm

f t t p +



Philip Pearlstein, an American painter best known for his realist nude portraits, died on December 17 at 98.
PHOTO BY JACK MITCHELL/GETTY IMAGES

Philip Pearlstein, an American painter best known for his realist nude portraits, died Saturday at the age of 98.

Pearlstein's death was confirmed by [his gallery, Betty Cunningham](#), in [an Instagram post](#). He died in a hospital in New York, the [New York Times reported](#), but no cause of death was given.

Considered one of the 20th century's masters of figuration, Pearlstein began painting nude models in the 1960s, during an era when Abstract Expressionism was still considered the finest form of art-making.

Pearlstein's rejection of the Abstract Expressionists' emotionalism and formalism was coupled with an embrace of what he called "hard realism," an art that was "sharp, clear, unambiguous," as he told *ARTnews* in 1967. This translated to rigorously painted figures shown in harsh lighting, subdued colors, and naturalistic, sometimes unflattering poses, with bodies often cut off at the edges of the canvas.

Pearlstein was clear-eyed about his approach to the human figure from early on. In a 1962 piece for *ARTnews*, Pearlstein wrote that too many artists use the figure "as a storytelling device," or that they "distort" it so that it can "function as a symbol for poetic evocations." Pearlstein insisted that the figure — and thus the art object — existed solely as itself.

"The character of a work of art results from the technical devices used to form it, and the ultimate meaning and value of a work of art lie in the degree of technical accomplishment," he **wrote in the same piece**. He continued, "As an artist, I can accept no other basis for value judgements."

Pearlstein's derision toward Abstract Expressionism, which he practiced early in his career, was also voiced by other reigning artists, including Pop art icon Andy Warhol, who like Pearlstein, hailed from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Born on May 24, 1924 to a first-generation Russian immigrant father and Lithuanian immigrant mother, Pearlstein attended Saturday classes at the Carnegie Museum of Art as a child.

He studied art at the Carnegie Institute of Technology, now the Carnegie Mellon University, until he was drafted into the military in 1943 and dispatched to Italy, where he served a graphic artist and spent time viewing Renaissance art. He returned to his studies three years later, where he met Andy Warhol (then Warhola). The two became friends and settled in New York together.

In 1950, Pearlstein married Dorothy Cantor, a Carnegie Tech classmate who was also a painter. She died in 2018. They are survived by their three children and their two grandchildren.

Pearlstein initially painted what he called "symbolist" paintings, based on major American symbols like Superman. In the mid-1950s, he painted Abstract Expressionist-inspired landscapes based on places in Maine. In 1963, however, he showed a series of realistically painted nude models at Allan Frumkin Gallery.

Nude models became his subject, along with more elaborate decorative props, for the next 50-odd years.

Pearlstein's work is in the collections of many major institutions, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Hirshhorn Museum, and the Art Institute of Chicago, among others.