

TRIBUTE TO AN ARTFUL LIFE / THE CELEBRATED ARTIST DIED DEC. 18

The amazing, serendipitous life of Philip Pearlstein, painter of nakedness and nonchalance

An epic tale of America, art and the changing ideas and ideals that allowed a poor Jewish boy from Pittsburgh – just over 5 feet tall – to be remembered as a giant.



By CHARLIE WHITE

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Andy Warhol (front) poses for this 1948 photo with fellow Carnegie Institute of Technology students Philip Pearlstein and Dorothy Cantor. (Photo provided by the Archives of American Art/Smithsonian Institution)

Very few lives are lived out at epic scale, spanning time in an almost cinematic fashion as if choreographed to carefully touch upon a generation's most significant events. And while such lives might conjure images of heroic figures, and even Teutonic ideals, our modern heroes rarely fit the classical mold; notable lives



Philip Pearlstein's artwork for the Jewish Criterion when he was a student at Taylor Allderdice High School in Pittsburgh, (c.1941) (Image courtesy of the Pittsburgh Jewish Newspaper Project)

played out across the slog of real time are often filled with the mundane, frustrating and painful occurrences that we all endure. One such life adventurer whose time on Earth married the miraculous and the mundane is the great American figurative painter Philip Pearlstein, who died on Dec. 18 at the sagacious age of 98.

Pearlstein's journey was an epic tale of America, art and the changing ideas and ideals that allowed a poor Jewish boy from Pittsburgh — who stood only a few inches over 5 feet tall — to be remembered as a giant in the eyes of many.

In the fashion of a true American epic, the opening scene of Pearlstein's life can be imagined as a classic silent film. Fading up from black, we see the hazed skies and muted sunset of early 20th-century Pittsburgh. It is 1924, just shy of a century ago, and Philip has been born to a young Jewish couple, David and Libby (Kalser) Pearlstein.

It is the late dawn of modernity in the industrial epicenter of America, and although Philip was born into a time of certain national prosperity, he came of age in the Great Depression. He grew up in a small house on Murray Avenue, the only child among 10 family members living together in close quarters; his father sold chickens and eggs to help make ends meet. Luckily, Philip's artistic talent became evident early, and his natural predilection for drawing was met with the rare support of his parents, who allowed him to attend the generous Saturday morning art classes at the Carnegie Museum of Art. With both his family and an esteemed institution buttressing his talents, the formative pieces of a classical art education began to miraculously fall into place.

Philip's talent opened doors to a world of opportunity. At 17, while a student at Taylor Allderdice High School, his involvement in the Carnegie Institute's 14th annual show of high school art resulted in Life magazine reproducing two of his

paintings in its June 16, 1941, issue. Such a national honor might have sparked in Philip the kind of hubris unique to adolescence, or it might have been his artistic life's highpoint. Instead, Philip gleaned from it an early insight into the fleeting nature of recognition, and the wider legitimacy needed to seriously pursue art as a career and a future. This brief moment in the spotlight allowed Philip to dream outside of the confines of his parents' world and to imagine another for himself.

University and war

In the fall of 1942, Philip entered Carnegie Institute of Technology (now Carnegie Mellon University) to study art and design under the tutelage of Robert Lepper, a fabled artist and professor who developed the country's first industrial design degree program. Lepper encouraged his students to look at ordinary items from their daily lives as potential works of art, a practical and intellectual shift that resonated with Pearlman and many of his peers. However, Pearl Harbor had been attacked only nine months earlier, and America was rapidly preparing for war. So, in June of 1943, alongside many of his conscripted classmates, Philip found himself heading to Europe.

Here, our American epic enters its classic war drama period, now in Technicolor and with sync sound. We see a Jewish American youth — a sort of local art hero who's earned laurels at home — heading across the ocean to become part of the very machinery (most of it forged at home along the Ohio River) that would ultimately bring Hitler's march to a halt. There is a romance to this part of Pearlstein's story as, alongside the gritty truths of war and its unspoken horrors, an individual's inner strength and outer confidence emerge in such a period. There is also something prescient about this place and time in Philip's life, when what must have seemed like a profound interruption may in fact have been a necessary recalibration in his life's trajectory.

These fortuitous events, born from a rupture that could have ended Philip's life or resulted in debilitating trauma, instead helped to chart his future and set his course. Philip found himself again at the vanguard of a transforming America, and again he seemed to be in the right place at the right time. In the war, art had saved Philip's life, a fact that he shared in an essay many years later when recalling his time in the military. His drafting and drawing talents had kept him from the frontlines, while his continual practice of sketching had kept his mind together; he sent more than a hundred small works back home to his parents as a sort of promise and preservation of his person.

Philip came home in 1946, returned to Carnegie Tech on the GI Bill, and, as a result of the ripple in time caused by the war, met a young man who would become an inextricable part of his life, and a young woman with whom he would fall in love. The new friend was Andy Warhola (not yet the famed Andy Warhol) and the new love was Dorothy Cantor, who Philip would marry and with whom he would raise a family and share a life for the next 68 years. During his time abroad, Philip gained maturity and insight that allowed him to now experiment and take creative risks with his artistic practice. During this critical period, Philip cemented his relationship to observational art and to what would become a new era in American realism, an interest that went against nearly every cultural trend on the horizon.

When Philip first arrived in New York, he pursued work in graphic design and went on to get a master's degree in art history from New York University, where he focused on artist Francis Picabia and completed his thesis in 1955. There was a matter-of-factness — almost a squareness — to Philip that differed greatly from his friend Andy Warhol's persona and ambitions and placed him outside of the many currents of contemporary New York. Yet he was utterly of his moment and his work slowly evolved to reflect this, becoming more and more of its own time. Pearlstein became an instructor at the Pratt Institute, and then a professor at Brooklyn College. As if guided by the worries and wishes of Depression-era parents, he created a stable platform that allowed him to care a bit less about selling artwork, which meant that he could paint what felt right, instead of what people wanted or the art world expected.

Defining a style

Art movements have a cascading impact on young artists. Sometimes new practitioners drown under the force of stylistic currents; other times, they stay afloat, getting beyond the cresting rage and into calmer waters where they are able to swim in their own ideas again. In the mid-20th century, these movements created a sort of cultural accretion, moving from abstract expressionism, to Pop art, to minimalism, to conceptualism, and to photorealism and beyond. What is most notable in this period is that Pearlstein continued to carefully observe, draw and paint figures, nudes, portraits, people, and places outside of these currents. By the early '60s, when he was in his late 30s, his practice had evolved into highly focused painting of nudes from life. It was an antiquated idea, but with his approach it became shockingly modern: In Pearlstein's bodies and pared-down spaces, there was a nonchalance that allows the nude to be naked, the human to be humane and the erotic to be exchanged for something more intellectual and less objectified.

This was an absolute breakthrough: Bodies seated, slouching and resting above carefully executed parquet floors meeting white beveled moldings. Nude figures with long hair and body hair reclining on draped textiles and carefully detailed rugs. There is a meaningfully untraditional quality about Pearlstein's nudes, and although they show the influence of Henri Matisse and Francis Picabia, they are more photographic, more exact. If the visceral, the muscular, the fleshy and the felt was the space of the secular, then Pearlstein's cooler, intellectually painted bodies, spaces and patterns were the Semitic interpretation of figuration. Pearlstein had, after years of refinement, captured a look and feel that was both of and outside of its time in ways that made his work part of something entirely new. As such, he joined a very small group of painters who could, without much antipathy from their peers, continue the humanistic tradition of figuration, and, in many ways, keep it alive.

The apex of a career

Here our American epic enters its third and final act, its modern period, with far less lyricism and much greater realism. This was the apex of Pearlstein's career, and it coincided with the changing of the guard, a period defined and designed by a younger generation born in America rather than those who had arrived. It was at this point that Pearlstein's influence and ideas began to permeate the art world and its institutions.

Pearlstein had hit his stride, and in 1979, at age 55, he was commissioned to paint a portrait of Henry Kissinger for the cover of Time magazine. This was not his most iconic work, nor was it in keeping with his many other portraits; confined by the magazine's aspect ratio, it was akin to a closely cropped headshot and bereft of any additional visual cues. However, the layers of this opportunity were many, and their meanings myriad.

This portrait marked a turning point, a shift from outsider to insider, with Philip, seemingly always in the right place at the right time, no longer being an interloper on the sets of the grand narrative; instead, he was now a part of it. Philip was unknowingly completing a journey from the margins of America to the center, a journey shaped by the influence of his generation. Here was Philip's return to a popular and powerful American periodical. Here, also, was the portrait itself, of a Jewish statesman and complex individual. And here was the unexpected turn of a man known for his stark, modern nudes who was carving out his own place in art history just like the artists he studied at the beginning of his career.

Throughout his life, Philip Pearlstein painted every single day. Diligently working in his studio well into his 90s, he painted when no one was watching and when the art world had moved on. He continued in his own steadfast, unique style in spite of the shifts and demands of the art world, in spite of the trends. And, in turn, this methodical and singular practice shaped Philip's life: uprooted him from his humble beginnings in Pittsburgh, shielded him from battle during the war, and granted him the courage to face each new day after the death of his beloved wife, Dorothy.

Philip's story was a grand narrative of a great American artist, an account of 20th-century Jewry, and an everyman's tale of art, love, life and friendship.

Now that he's no longer here, his work and life will be remembered and perhaps seen with a new perspective and honored anew. Now, we can all reflect on the life and work of this little man, who led a beautiful and full life and who mastered the purity of the human form. PJC

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