

Walter Egel Kuhlman
1918-2009

Biography

The painter and printmaker Walter Kuhlman (1918-2009) is closely associated with the San Francisco Bay Area, where he spent most of his life and career. Kuhlman was one of the pioneers within the distinctive San Francisco School of Abstract Expressionism, which emerged in the late 1940s and flourished through the 1950s. Starting about 1960, Kuhlman's work evolved toward an expressive figurative style. Painting was Kuhlman's primary passion, but he also created many fine works on paper, including abstract expressionist prints and figurative monotypes.

Walter Kuhlman was born in St. Paul, Minnesota. He attended the St. Paul School of Art (graduating in 1939) and the University of Minnesota (BA, 1941). Kuhlman established a reputation as a notable young artist, exhibiting regionally and at the New York World's Fair. His early career was interrupted by military service in World War II.

In 1947, Kuhlman enrolled at the California School of Fine Arts (CSFA; now San Francisco Art Institute). CSFA faculty and students alike – including Kuhlman – embraced Abstract Expressionism. Their distinctive work established San Francisco as a recognized center apart from the New York School. In 1950-1951, the artist studied in Paris, where his works appeared in some of the first European exhibitions to feature American Abstract Expressionism.

Kuhlman continued his focus on Abstract Expressionist painting through the decade of the 1950s. His work was included in the US exhibition at the 1955 International Biennial of Sao Paulo, Brazil. Kuhlman received a fellowship in 1957 from the Chicago-based Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts. This prestigious award helped solidify Kuhlman's national reputation.

Starting about 1960, the artist became drawn toward figurative imagery. He developed a very personal painting style through which to create images that conveyed philosophical, spiritual, and artistic themes

The artist taught for various periods at several San Francisco area institutions, including CSFA, University of California at Berkeley, Santa Clara University, and Stanford University. He was on the faculty of the University of New Mexico from 1960 to 1965, and then tenured at Sonoma State University (California) from 1969 until his retirement in 1988. The California Arts Council named Kuhlman an "Outstanding Artist and Teacher" in 1982.

Kuhlman was elected to the National Academy of Design in 1995, and his papers were accepted into the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art. The artist died in San Raphael, California, in 2009.

The artist's paintings and prints can be found in many public collections, including: British Museum, Cleveland Museum of Art, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Menil Collection, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Oakland Museum of California, Phillips Collection, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Smithsonian Museum of American Art, and Worcester Museum of Art.

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