

# Peter Kahn

*July 5, 1921 — February 16, 1997*

Peter Kahn was an accomplished artist and a deeply learned man. His vivifying and exemplary presence had such an impact on students, colleagues, and friends, and was expressed in such a dazzling variety of activities, that his life is not readily captured by focusing simply on his academic career or his artistic production. What gets lost is his warmth, his contagious enthusiasm, his generosity, and his almost infinite capacity for friendship. During almost forty years of association with Cornell, he combined with light but disciplined skill, such elaborate forms of cultural creation as painting, graphic production, typography, and theatre design, with the arts of daily life: conversation, gardening, cooking and mushroom collecting. He altered the visual landscape around him through his abundant and freely-given posters, so effectively announcing forthcoming cultural events that they were often collected as soon as they were put up, and very few of his contemporaries will be able to imagine the Finger Lakes region without seeing it through Peter's paintings, woodcuts and drawings.

Peter was born in Leipzig, Germany in 1921. He immigrated to New York in 1937 where he rejoined his father, Emil Kahn, the former conductor of the Stuttgart Philharmonic Orchestra. During World War II, Peter served in the U.S. Army as a tank mechanic and also as a court interpreter at the Nuremberg pre-trials. After the war, in 1945, Peter returned to New York where he participated in the emergence of Abstract Expressionist painting, a movement that made New York the creative center of the international art world at that time. He was a student of the master teacher and artist, Hans Hoffman, whose impact and influence were enormous on what came to be called "action" painting. At the same time, Peter completed a Master's degree in Philosophy at New York University in 1951.

After two years of teaching art at Louisiana State University, Peter was appointed in 1954 to the chairmanship of the Art Department at what is now Hampton University. He was an active participant in the nascent civil rights movement during this period before accepting a position at Cornell in the Fine Arts Department of the College of Architecture in 1957.

Peter remained at Cornell until his death, except for a brief stint at the University of Victoria in Canada from 1968-69, a move undertaken in part as a protest against the Vietnam War. On his return, Peter was offered a position in the Art History Department of the College of Arts and Sciences. The appointment was both unusual and imaginative. Although not strictly an art historian either by training or inclination, he was encouraged to give

students direct, experiential acquaintance with the traditional materials and methods of the artists, and to offer courses on the development of letter forms and the history of the book. At the same time, and in recognition of his wide learning, Peter was given free rein to form alliances across academic disciplines. The result was a series of interdisciplinary courses in music, mathematics, the theatre, sociology, European history and French and German literature, and in the Rare Books Department of the University Libraries.

Peter's commitment to teaching was simply an overflow of his ebullient and generous nature. It didn't matter if the setting was a university classroom, a group of aspiring local artists meeting in his barn after work, or a study tour abroad offered under the auspices of the Cornell Alumni University (CAU). From 1978 until his death (with no break following his "retirement" in 1984), he offered thirteen CAU courses. These covered, in addition to study tours in Europe, such varied subjects as drawing, rare books, the "Art of Seeing" and "Learning from the Modern Masters". It is no exaggeration to say that Peter played an indispensable role in making CAU a major part of the Cornell experience for many alumni.

Peter chaired the Advanced Placement in Art Program of the Educational Testing Service in Princeton from 1970-74. He was a visiting artist and teacher at the University of Virginia, London Royal College of Art, Cal Tech, Purdue, New York University, and Hobart. He also directed the Cornell Program in Hamburg during 1985-86.

His activities were not limited to academic projects, however far-flung. From involvement in Amnesty International, whose logo is a variant on Peter's original design and of which he was a founding member and generous supporter of the Ithaca chapter, to such civic activities as the Trumansburg Fire Department, Library Board and Board of Zoning Appeals. As one of his co-workers says, "he was everywhere." He inspired the poster for an exhibition of "Edible Art" that raised funds for the Tompkins County Arts Council. He was a supporter of the Upstate Crafts Fair, active in the local movement for Historic Preservation, and in the creation of the "Summer Ithaca" guide to promote Ithaca's rich resources of crafts and cultural events. The Ithaca Festival which grew out of the latter initiative honored him in 1997 by adopting a Peter Kahn watercolor of the local landscape as their emblem and disseminating it in thousands of reproductions on T-shirts, badges, and mugs.

Peter's energy and inventiveness seemed to spill over into every domain, but he was especially devoted to the theater. He was interested in every aspect of staging and performance (including musical performance) and was often the first person who came to mind when a group contemplated "putting on a show."

Peter was not an actor or a director but he was an ideal collaborator who contributed to every facet of the undertaking from program design to costumes, stage setting and all forms of interpretation. Here, his many talents fully came

into play. Thanks to his education and general culture, he understood different styles and traditions and could unerringly find the right note. He was also a good reader of texts and could link what he saw on the page to what would eventually be seen on a stage. His practical sense blended well with his painterly eye so that his sets not only worked technically (Peter was a real craftsman) but were wonderfully evocative and handsome, as were his costumes. Yet, Peter was frugal and disciplined. He shunned the ornate and the bombastic. Thus his esthetic sense worked hand in hand with an ethical sensitivity that required honest labor and simplicity.

To all this, Peter added enthusiasm and inventiveness so that his very presence during rehearsals and, later, performances was a joy for actors and directors alike. All of these activities brought out the very best in him and blended the depth of the serious artist with the playfulness of the Renaissance man.

Peter and his wife of fifty years, Ruth Stiles Gannett Kahn, author of the Children's classic, *My Father's Dragon*, were noted for the warmth of their hospitality. Friends, students and visitors found welcome and sparkling conversation in the large yellow Victorian farm-house on the edge of Trumansburg, with its print-shop, studio-barn, orchard and carefully tended flower gardens.

It was in Trumansburg in 1977, when Peter was 55 years old, that he became a volunteer firefighter. For twenty years, he responded to fires, directed traffic at emergencies, cooked omelets and pancakes at fund raisers. He was on duty at the scene of an accident on a cold February night when he had a fatal heart attack. He died as he lived, always at the center of things and giving generously of his energy and his gifts.

Peter's work has been shown widely in this country, most recently in 1997 at the Museum of American Art in New Britain, Connecticut in an exhibition, "All in the Family". This title follows from the fact that the exhibition includes work by Peter; his brother, Wolf; his sister-in-law, Emily Mason; her mother, Alice Trumbull Mason; their daughter, Cecily Kahn and her husband, David Kapp.

Peter is survived by his wife, Ruth; their seven daughters: Charlotte Kahn, Margaret Kahn Crone, Sarah Manfredi, Hannah Kahn, Louise Kahn, Catherine Kahn, and Elizabeth Ratzlaff; and also by his brothers, Wolf and Hans Alfred; his sister, Eva Ekvall; and eight grandchildren.

*Alain Seznec, Esther Dotson, Stanley O'Connor*