

Artist Harold Lehman, 92, Dies

By Mary Rourke Los Angeles Times

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LOS ANGELES -- Harold Lehman, an artist who worked with Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros in Los Angeles in the early 1930s and later became a member of the Post-Surrealist art movement in Southern California, died April 2. He was 92.

He died of natural causes in his home in Leonia, N.J., according to Roger van Oosten, a friend.

Lehman's serendipitous art career began when he was a student at Manual Arts High School in Los Angeles in the late 1920s. His classmates included Philip Guston and Jackson Pollock, who became leading names in the field.

As a student at the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles in the early 1930s, he developed a style for realistic art working in sculpture as well as painting.

He met Siqueiros in 1932 when he attended a lecture by the controversial muralist who put his pro-labor ideas into his art works. Lehman took art classes from Siqueiros in exchange for working as his assistant on several murals. One of them, "Street Meeting" of 1932, was recently discovered under several layers of paint at what was then the Chouinard School of Art in Los Angeles.

Lehman planned to take part in an exhibit organized by Siqueiros in Hollywood, and to include his small mural, "Analogy:Capitol/Labor," that shows a man with his hands tied above his head as if he were going to be flogged.

Van Oosten, who had lengthy conversations with Lehman over the years, said that the artist told him that police -- opposed to the political nature of the art work -- raided the exhibition just before it was due to open in December, 1932, and destroyed the works. One photograph of Lehman's mural remains.

"That is where Harold learned that officialdom can be oppressive," van Oosten said this week. Lehman continued to portray labor class people in his art.

One early painting, "The Landlady," shows a plain but elegant woman who wears a hardened expression on her face that suggests a difficult life. The painting won second place at what is now the Los Angeles Museum's annual competition of painters and sculptors in 1933.

The next year Lehman joined a group of Los Angeles Post-Surrealist artists led by Lorser Feitelson and Helen Lundeberg. Several of Lehman's works from that period were included in a 1995 exhibition, "Pacific Dreams: Currents of Surrealism and Fantasy in California Art, 1934-1957," at the Armand Hammer Museum in Los Angeles.

In his review of the 1995 exhibition, Los Angeles Times art critic Christopher Knight wrote that the artists in the show displayed a "method for undermining conformist ways of thinking and feeling," that is at the heart of Surrealism.

Lehman was born in New York City. His parents divorced when he was in grammar school and his father moved to Los Angeles. At 16 Lehman joined him in California.

In the mid-1930s he returned to New York where he painted several murals sponsored by the Federally funded Works Projects Administration. One of them "Man's Daily Bread" was commissioned for the cafeteria at what was then Rikers Island Penitentiary.

"It seemed to me that a theme that had some connection with not only the handling of food but the idea of earning one's bread by one's own sweat, so to speak, would have some good constructive connection with that prison without being an obvious lecture," Lehman later said.

He later painted murals for a post office in Renovo, Pa., and for the 1939 World's Fair in New York.

Lehman also taught art for many years in his New York City studio. His friendships with Siqueiros, Pollock and Guston made Lehman a valuable resource for art curators, historians and biographers over the years.

Lehman is survived by his wife, Leona Koutras, two children and two grandchildren.