

As published by North Jersey Media Group in **The Record on April 5, 2006**

Harold Lehman, artist; helped create American surrealist style  
Wednesday, April 5, 2006

By CAROLYN FEIBEL  
STAFF WRITER

LEONIA -- Harold Lehman, a painter and sculptor who helped establish an American style of surrealist art, died Sunday in Leonia. He was 92.

Mr. Lehman also created a number of powerful public murals during the Depression, as part of the Federal Art Project relief program for out-of-work artists. The 70-foot mural "Man's Daily Bread" graced the cafeteria wall at Riker's Island Penitentiary until it was torn down sometime in the 1970s. Its whereabouts are unknown.

"Eight to nine hundred prisoners ate [there] three times a day," Mr. Lehman recalled later. "So, 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."

Like other artists of his generation, Mr. Lehman was influenced by the tragic impact of the Depression and inspired by what he saw as the heroic strength of the working-class man. But he also developed a new strand of indigenous American surrealism along with several colleagues in 1930s Los Angeles, according to Roger van Oosten, an art historian who is writing a book about the movement.

In 1930, the 16-year-old moved from his native New York City to the West Coast to live with his father and study art. While in art school, he met future abstract painters Jackson Pollock and Philip Guston. Along with the artists Lorser Feitelson, Reuben Kadish and Helen Lundeberg, these painters established an American strand of surrealism, sometimes called Post Surrealism.

Mr. Lehman and his colleagues injected an emotional coolness into their canvases, and a southern Californian element of detachment and spaciousness, van Oosten said.

"They lived in a surreal world in Los Angeles, where there was great wealth, the stars, and great poverty, the immigrants, the Mexicans, and out-of-work actors," van Oosten said. "They lived in this surrealistic netherworld, and they tried to record it."

Mr. Lehman's most important surrealist painting from that period is "Portrait of a Dancer Plus a Sculptor," van Oosten said. The oil painting was shown last year at the National Academy of Design.

"I think he's just getting the recognition right now that he deserves for being a pioneer in surrealism," van Oosten said

Mr. Lehman, who collaborated with the political Mexican muralist D.A. Siqueiros, continued to

focus on social realist themes after moving back to New York in 1935.

His contemporaries Pollock and Guston moved to abstract art, but Mr. Lehman did not join them.

"He saw what Pollock was doing as a fad," said Mr. Lehman's daughter, Lisa Lehman Trager of Hillsdale. "He really didn't think what Pollock was doing was art."

Mr. Lehman taught art in Manhattan, married and moved his family to Leonia in 1964. He worked as a studio artist for CBS and NBC, and a consultant for the 1967 World's Fair in Montreal. He also painted sets for the Players Guild of Leonia.

Mr. Lehman was a valuable source for historians researching New Deal artists and Pollock's life.

He is survived by his wife, Leona, children Harold and Lisa, and two grandchildren. More information can be found at [haroldlehman.com](http://haroldlehman.com).

Services will be held at Frank A. Patti Funeral Home, 327 Main St., Fort Lee, on Thursday from 4 to 6 p.m. In lieu of gifts, the family suggests a donation to the Leonia Public Library.

E-mail: [feibel@northjersey.com](mailto:feibel@northjersey.com)

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