Ken Howard, painter in traditional style whose work sold in great numbers at the RA Summer Exhibition – obituary

He revealed a gift for darker subjects when the Imperial War Museum sent him to paint the Troubles in Northern Ireland

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Ken Howard: a master at depicting the fall of light

Ken Howard, who has died aged 89, was a figurative painter whose works were highly popular with the more conservative art-buying public, but less so with critics who wanted something more than the realistic and traditional.

Howard described himself as "the last Impressionist, much influenced by Degas and Walter Sickert", and the bulk of his work was bright, sunlit, strongly observed and unchallenging – oils and watercolours of pleasant daylight scenes often in or around places personal to him.

Although technically expert, his work could be repetitive, however. There were too many pretty girls and obvious views. Some of his best pictures belong to the early years of his career and are of more prosaic subjects such as railway sidings.

Mousehole High Water, oil on canvas CREDIT: Courtesy of Portland Gallery

He depicted Cornish beaches (he had a house in Mousehole), Venetian city scenes (he had a home there as well), and street scenes and nudes in and around his studio in Chelsea – in an arts-and-crafts house which had been previously occupied by the society painter William Orpen.

A gift for darker subjects was revealed, however, when, on the strength of some graphic images of operating theatres Howard had produced for Charing Cross Hospital, the Imperial War Museum sent him in the 1970s to document the Troubles in Northern Ireland.

He was not officially a "war artist", as the conflict was not officially a war, and the remit was rather different from that given to British artists in the two world wars. "War artists were originally supposed to do propaganda," he recalled, "but they told me to go over there and paint what I saw."

From the Royal Exchange, Rain Effect, oil on canvas

He recollected leaping in and out of helicopters, sketchbook in hand, and narrowly escaping death on one occasion by returning to barracks moments before an Army patrol was gunned down by the IRA in the marketplace where he had been drawing.

His most vivid memory was of a 10-year-old boy scaling a lamppost in the Falls Road: "When he came down, I said, 'I'll give you 50p if you go back up,' and I drew him. A year later I went up Shankill Road and found a wall with the writing 'No Pope here', which was religion; 'UVF', which was politics; and 'Remember 1690', which was history – the Battle of the Boyne. I thought: 'If I was religious, I'd think these three things – religion, politics and history – were the reasons for the crucifixion.' Then my mind returned to the boy, and I decided to put him in a triptych."

The result, a painting Howard regarded as his finest, was "Ulster Crucifixion", which depicted a boy dangling from a lamppost by both hands, sandwiched between walls daubed with Loyalist and Republican graffiti.

Ulster Crucifixion (1978), triptych with predella, held in the Ulster Museum, National Museums NI Collection CREDIT: The Estate of Ken Howard, Ulster Museum Collection

The younger of two children, James Kenneth Howard was born in Neasden, north-west London, on Boxing Day 1932. His father Frank was a mechanic from Lancashire while his Scottish mother, Elizabeth (née Meikle), worked as a cleaner.

Young Ken was drawing and painting skilfully before he could write. Encouraged by an art teacher at Kilburn Grammar School he won a place at Hornsey College of Art, where he studied from 1949 to 1953 and developed skills in social realism, painting what he called "the horizontal and vertical structures of railway yards and factories". During National Service in the Royal Marines he topped up his serviceman's wages by painting portraits of officers' wives.

In 1955 he went on to the Royal College of Art; the vogue was all for abstract expressionism and he began to feel, as he put it, "a bit out of kilter". He remained out of the fashionable mainstream, but did not seem to mind his work being dismissed as saccharine by the sniffier critics, because it gave much pleasure to a great many people.

Interior, Mousehole, oil on board CREDIT: Courtesy of Portland Gallery

His paintings were among the first to sell every year at the Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition, and as he once observed, "I've probably got more pictures on people's walls than any other painter living today." And though they were in no sense radical, they were exceptionally competent: he was a master, for example, at depicting the fall of light.

He had little time for conceptualists such as Damien Hirst and the Britart crowd, observing that fashions always change with time: "One day, Damien," he said, "you'll be a boring old fart, too."

After his stint in Northern Ireland Howard later travelled to document life in Army bases all over the world. He was a talented raconteur, and wrote a fascinating memoir entitled Light and Dark (2011). In later years he dressed the part of the bohemian artist, in long black cloak and fedora, and painted in the style of a century before.

Howard painting the Greek island of Santorini CREDIT: Dora Bertolutti Howard

He worked hard and travelled a good deal, retracing William Turner's tours of Switzerland in five trips which yielded a book, Ken Howard's Switzerland: In the Footsteps of Turner (2013). Howard, who appointed OBE in 2010, was elected a Royal Academician in 1991, and from 2004 to 2010 served as the Academy's professor of perspective. He was elected president of the New English Art Club in 1998 and was a patron of the Turner's House Trust.

Ken Howard's second wife died of cancer and he was a committed supporter of the work of the Marie Curie charity, often donating paintings to auctions.

He married first, in 1962 (dissolved 1974), Annie Popham, and secondly, in 1990, Christa Gaa Köhler, a German painter who died in 1992. He is survived by his third wife, Dora Bertolutti, an Italian photographer whom he married in 2000, and by two stepdaughters and a stepson.

Ken Howard, born December 26 1932, died September 11 2022