

Painting

Ken Howard obituary

Popular and prolific painter who described himself as 'the last impressionist'

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Detail of *The Grand Canal from the Accademia Bridge*, 2018, by Ken Howard, who kept a studio in Venice. Photograph: Courtesy of Portland Gallery

In 1973, Ken Howard was sent by the Imperial War Museum to cover the Troubles in Northern Ireland as a war artist in all but name. (In the political rhetoric of the day, the province's violence did not constitute warfare.) To Howard's surprise, he found that his habit of painting en plein air made him friends on both sides of the sectarian divide. "If you used a camera, you were in trouble," he said. "If you sat on the street and drew, and they could see what you were doing, then you weren't in trouble."

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Ulster Crucifixion (1978), now in the *Ulster Museum*, of the National Museums Northern Ireland, is made in the style of a gothic altarpiece, with a central panel, folding wings and a predella. The raw paint of its background both depicts and echoes the graffitied walls of west Belfast. Its child subject hangs from the post as though from a cross.

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Ken Howard's 1978 work *Ulster Crucifixion* is in the style of a gothic altarpiece. Photograph: The estate of Ken Howard, Ulster Museum Collection

If *Ulster Crucifixion* was to be Howard's most noted work, it was far from his most typical. Its flavour was, distantly, of Francis Bacon; a far more usual tang was of Claude Monet. To the horror of highbrow critics and a younger generation of British artists, Howard, who has died aged 89, was happy to describe himself as "the last impressionist". He was, he said, "a painter of light", in the squares of west London - his habit of sketching in the street led locals to dub him "High Street Ken" - in Mousehole, Cornwall, and in Venice, each of which place he kept a studio in.

Typical of this practice would be works such as Honesty and Charlotte (1990), made in his Chelsea studio. Painted *contre-jour*, against daylight, the canvas's dappled colours take their cue from the titular vase of white seed pods in the centre of the composition. The glance of light off wallpaper, cloth, glass and flesh becomes the picture's subject; its Sickertian nude seems almost incidental. So, too, with the subjects of Howard's many depictions of Venice and Mousehole. "Mousehole is the one place in the world that's close to Venice in terms of light," he said.

His uplands had not always been so sunlit. Born in the north-west London suburb of Neasden, the younger of two children of Frank, a mechanic from Lancashire, and Elizabeth (nee Meikle), a Scot who worked as a cleaner, Howard recalled "painting properly from the age of seven and drawing and painting before I could write".

An art teacher at Kilburn grammar school encouraged the young Ken to apply to the nearby Hornsey College of Art, where he studied from 1949 to 1953. This was followed by national service in the Royal Marines, then two years at the Royal College of Art (1955-57).



📍 Ken Howard, painting en plein air in Rajasthan, India. He was, he said, 'a painter of light'.
 Photograph: Dora Bertolutti Howard/Gabriel Fine Arts

By then, Howard had already been through the prevailing trends of social realism - "I painted Neasden and power stations," he recalled - and kitchen-sink painting. Both had brought him a degree of success. The first work he sold was of the shipyards at Aberdeen, where he had been taken by a lorry-driving uncle just after the war: the painting was bought by David Brown, the future owner of Aston Martin.

For all his later taste for sunlight and sea, Howard insisted that it was this early grounding in industrial grime that had shaped his art. "I was brought up surrounded by the horizontal and vertical structures of railway yards and factories," he said. "I am not a landscape painter, but rather a vertical and horizontal painter."

While this was clear in the composition of *Ulster Crucifixion*, it was less so in Howard's many images of beaches, churches and Venetian canals. When he went to the Royal College, his fellow students were in thrall to abstract expressionism. "America had arrived just before I did," Howard recalled. "I began to feel a bit out of kilter."

He would remain outside the fashionable mainstream for the rest of his life. Whatever its linear underpinnings, his art was both figurative and unapologetically pleasant; to critics such as the late Brian Sewell, saccharine. His work with the British Army apart, it also seemed never to change, as Howard happily agreed. "I'm one of those people who always bangs away at the same nail," he said. Despite showing in the Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition for many years, he was nearing 60 before he was made a full Academician.



📷 Sarah at Oriel, 2018, by Ken Howard, painted 'contre-jour', or 'against daylight'. Photograph: Courtesy of Portland Gallery

Above all, he admired Turner, and not just for what he termed the master's "visual genius". "I like the idea that, like Turner, I come from a working-class background," Howard said.

In the 2010s, he retraced his hero's trips through Switzerland in five journeys of his own, producing 100 monumental canvases of Swiss mountains and lakes and a book called Ken Howard's Switzerland: In the Footsteps of Turner. In 2004, he had also followed Turner in being appointed the Royal Academy's professor of perspective, a position he held until 2010. In 2017, he was made a patron of the Turner's House Trust.

All this made the dismissal of critics such as Sewell easier to bear, as did the awarding of an OBE in 2010. Financial success also softened the blow. If Howard's work never achieved the kinds of prices enjoyed by his more avant-garde contemporaries, he made up for it by being both prolific and popular. "I've probably got more pictures on people's walls than any other painter living today," he liked to say. Short, merry and given to theatrical capes and hats, he was not prone to introspection.

He also had a good eye for property. In 1973, Howard rented his Chelsea studio - once the atelier of the Edwardian society portraitist William Orpen - for six pounds a week. Over the next 30 years, he bought not just it but the large house in which it stood, worth several million pounds by the time of his death. "My mother always used to say that if I fell down the loo, I'd come up with a bar of chocolate," Howard laughed. "I think that just about sums it up."

He married three times: first, in 1962, to Annie Popham, a dress designer (they were divorced in 1974); then, in 1990, to the Hamburg-born painter Christa Gaa Köhler, whom he had met in Florence in the 1950s (she died of cancer in 1992); and last, in 2000, to the Italian photographer Dora Bertolutti. She survives him, along with a stepson and two stepdaughters.

● James Kenneth Howard, painter, born 26 December 1932; died 11 September 2022