

LEK, KAREL (Charles) (1929 - 2020), artist

Name: Karel (Charles) Lek
Date of birth: 1929
Date of death: 2020
Spouse: Phyllis Lek (née Pinness)
Child: Nicholas Lek
Child: Suzanne Lek
Parent: Sophie Lek
Parent: Hendrik Lek
Gender: Male
Occupation: artist
Area of activity: Art and Architecture
Author: Mike Hawkins

Karel, also known as Charles, Lek was born on 7 June 1929 in Antwerp, Belgium. He was the son of Hendrik Lek (1903-1985), whose family had a diamond cutting and polishing business, and his wife Sophie (1907-1994). Although they were Jewish, the family were Dutch Freethinkers. They fled Antwerp in 1940 after the Nazi invasion of Belgium. Sophie's relatives were less fortunate and nearly all were murdered in the Holocaust.

Hendrik held dual Belgian-British citizenship because his grandfather had spent six years in London cutting and polishing diamonds for Queen Victoria. (Hendrik eventually discarded his Belgian passport.) After a brief internment, the family moved to Bangor. The British diamond cutting industry had been based on the English south coast, where it was vulnerable to German bombing. It had been relocated to Bangor because it was essential for the manufacture of precision tools.

Karel's father Hendrik had wanted to become an artist but was made to join the family diamond business. He studied part-time at Antwerp Academy with Lucien De Jaegher, and painted in his spare time. He also collected antiques and after the war he became an antique dealer. In 1946 he restored the Tudor Rose, a 15th-century building in Beaumaris, which became his shop and the subject of many of his pictures. When Hendrik ceased dealing it became a gallery in which his and Karel's pictures were jointly shown. Hendrik showed at the Royal Cambrian Academy and other venues in Wales, as well as in Canada, Netherlands and America. His work is in the Anglesey Art Collection.

Karel was an artist in a wide variety of media, as well as a designer and lecturer. His love for art began when he was four years old, when his father took him to museums in Antwerp. He grew up idolising the works of Belgian artists such as Constant Permeke and James Ensor.

Karel attended Friars Grammar School in Bangor and then the Liverpool College of Art until 1952, where notable teachers included Karel Vogel and Geoffrey Wedgwood. He taught in the East End of London, at East Ham, while living at Toynbee Hall. There he met Phyllis Pinness (1921-2009) whom he married in 1957 in Hampstead, before returning to north Wales to join his father in Beaumaris, opening an antique shop opposite his father's. Karel and Phyllis had two children, Nicholas (1960) and Suzanne (1962).

Karel said he 'only ever wanted to be a painter' and joined the north Wales group of artists. This included **Sir Kyffin Williams**, Elis Gwyn, Tom Gerrard, Roy Ostle, Jonah Jones, Arthur Pritchard, Claudia Williams, Donald McIntyre and Helen Steinthal. Karel also joined the circle of Jewish refugee artists that included **Josef Herman** and **Heinz Koppel**.

He became a member of the Royal Cambrian Academy in 1954. He showed at the Royal Academy, Whitechapel Art Gallery, the Society of Wood Engravers, Woodstock Gallery, Royal Institute, ICA and public galleries in Amsterdam and Llandudno. Solo shows included the Royal Cambrian Academy, Woodstock Gallery, Oriel Bangor, and Tegfryn Gallery in Menai Bridge.

Before his death he donated a large number of his works to the National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth, and the Library also purchased several of his volumes of drawings. The Library commented: 'Human nature in all its diversity was the main subject of his work, and the importance of celebrating the civility of humanity. Needless to say, his experiences as a war refugee had a great impact on him as an artist.' His work is also in various collections including the Contemporary Arts Society for Wales, Bangor University, Oriel Ynys Môn, Lincoln Earl Kennedy Bank USA, and Kansas City Art Gallery USA. In February 2018 Karel's painting of Bangor City fans at the Farrar Road stadium in 1952, and a wood engraving of Liverpool fans walking into Anfield, were purchased by the National Football Museum in Manchester.

In 2003 he was awarded an MBE for charitable services to the NHS in north Wales. His fund-raising included weekly busking in a local hospital.

Karel Lek continued to live in Beaumaris. He died on 1 March 2020 in Ysbyty Gwynedd, Bangor, aged 90 years, and a celebration of his life was arranged at Bangor Crematorium on 10 March. He is remembered for his distinctive artistic voice, his contributions to the Welsh art community, his exploration of humanitarian themes, his charitable contribution and his lasting impact on the cultural landscape of Wales.

Author

Mike Hawkins

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