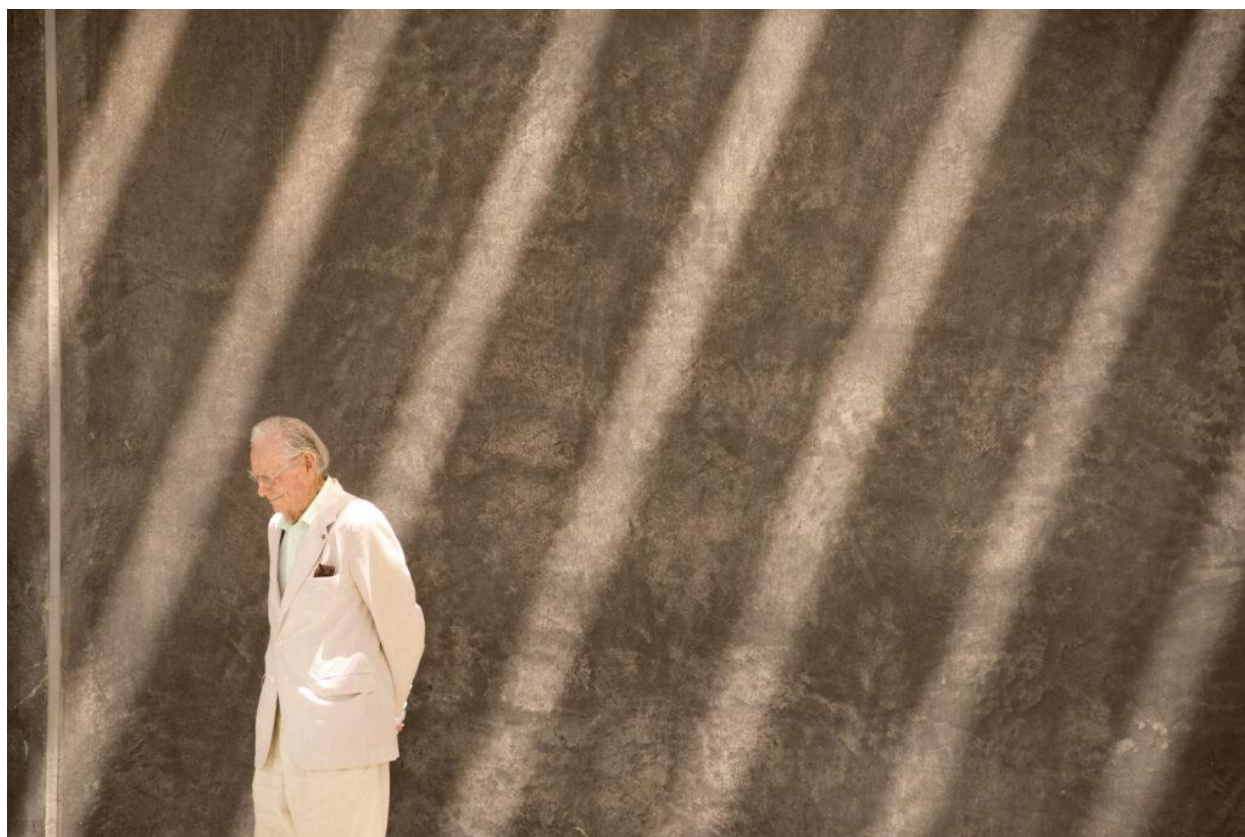


DATEBOOK

ART & EXHIBITS

## Wayne Thiebaud, famed Pop art painter, dies at 101

Sam Whiting and Kenneth Baker | December 26, 2021 Updated: December 28, 2021, 9:07 am



Wayne Thiebaud at the Jan Shrem and Maria Manetti Shrem Museum of Art in 2016.  
Photo: Gregory Urquiaga

**Wayne Thiebaud**, internationally known as the dean of West Coast Figurative painters who also was credited with originating Pop art, died Saturday, Dec. 25, in Sacramento, his principal residence since the 1950s. He was 101. His death was confirmed by his gallery, Acquavella.

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“Even at 101 years old, he still spent most days in the studio, driven by, as he described with his characteristic humility, ‘this almost neurotic fixation of trying to learn to paint,’” the gallery’s statement said.

Leaders in the art world and critics credited Thiebaud (pronounced “Tee-bo”), among others, with originating Pop art and extending the lineage of Bay Area Figuration, the region’s emblematic style.

“We have lost a legendary artist as well as a very close, kind, and generous friend with the passing of Wayne Thiebaud,” Neal Benezra, director of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, told *The Chronicle*. “Wayne has for so long held a beloved place in our hearts and our galleries. He will be deeply missed by us all.”

Thiebaud’s high-keyed paintings of foodstuffs, deli and bakery display cases and ordinary objects such as shoes and lipsticks became icons of the late 20th century American mass cravings for pleasure and optimism. He simply saw himself as a sort of chronicler of everyday stuff.

“Of course, you’re thankful when anyone ever calls you anything,” he once said. “But I never felt much a part of it. I must say I never really liked Pop art very much.”



“Untitled (cupcakes), 1999” by Wayne Thiebaud

Photo: Berggruen Gallery

Instead, Thiebaud saw himself as belonging to longer and more cosmopolitan art traditions that put little stock in stylistic labels or divisions between fine and functional art. Trained as an illustrator and animator, he took an artisanal view of picture-making and liked to reserve the term “art” for only the

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most felicitous performances of a basically task-oriented practice: make a portrait, describe an object, set a scene, real or imaginary.

“I want to be able to paint any damn thing I want at any time, in any way that I want to do it,” he told *The Chronicle* in 2018. “I don’t want to develop a product or an image.”

On Sunday, Dec. 26, Gov. Gavin Newsom noted that style.

“From gumball machines to the landscapes of San Francisco, he transformed everyday life into an iconic statement of color and form,” the governor said in a statement.

He called Thiebaud “a devoted Sacramentan” who gave back to Californians as an art professor, adding, “Thiebaud was the pride of California, and a great gift to the world.”



Wayne Thiebaud, “Buffet,” 1972-1975, oil on canvas. Gift of Jon and Shanna Brooks to San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Photo: Wayne Thiebaud / Licensed by VAGA at ARS, New York / Katherine Du Tiel

Thiebaud’s most widely seen work included cover illustrations for the *New Yorker* and a 1994 design for a California license plate that implicitly identifies a car’s owner as a cultural insider.

But the fantastic landscapes from his mid- to late career, inspired by San Francisco’s most hilly streets or by the Central Valley’s patchwork of furrowed fields and river meanders, toy with perspective and allusive surface designs in ways fully appreciated only by viewers conversant with modern art’s history.

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“The streetscapes are among the most abstract work that Thiebaud makes,” said retired Chronicle visual art critic **Charles Desmarais**. “By looking at them, we get a better sense of how his brain works and his understanding of form. That helps us understand his more popular works like the cakes and pies.”

## Wayne Thiebaud saw the streets of San Francisco like no one else



Wayne Thiebaud's "Street and Shadow," 1982-1983 (1996).

Photo: Thiebaud, Wayne / Crocker Art Museum

In 2001, the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco organized “Wayne Thiebaud: A Paintings Retrospective,” which traveled to museums in Texas, New York City and Washington. D.C. The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art had staged a career survey in 1985, and the Palm Springs Art Museum and San Jose Museum of Art collaborated on another in 2009 and '10.

Also in 2010, the Museo Morandi in Bologna, Italy, organized an exhibition, which traveled later to Vienna, that set Thiebaud's still life paintings alongside those of one of his artistic heroes, painter and printmaker Giorgio Morandi (1890-1964), whom he never met, but several of whose works he owned.

For his 100th birthday last year, the Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento and the Berggruen Gallery in San Francisco marked the milestone with major exhibitions displaying his work.

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Thiebaud curated paintings for SFMOMA's collection in September 2018.

Photo: Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle 2018

Thiebaud specialist and friend John Berggruen, who got the news of Thiebaud's passing on Sunday while vacationing in Hawaii, said that "aside from his extraordinary talent and vision, he was perhaps the most gracious, charming, eloquent and inspirational figures that I have ever known."

Berggruen had shown Thiebaud's work shortly after opening John Berggruen Gallery on Union Square in 1970, one of the first of eight or nine solo shows that consumed the entire gallery, he said.

"Any time we have presented a Thiebaud exhibition there has been an enthusiastic response from clients, supporters and curators," Berggruen said. "His work appealed to a lot of people's sensibilities. He had a very positive take on mundane and banal subjects, like pies and cakes. But beyond that his sensibility regarding the California landscape."

In the past decade, prices for major paintings by Thiebaud, at auction and even in gallery shows, passed the seven-figure mark. A prolific printmaker who worked frequently with San Francisco's Crown Point Press, Thiebaud also produced comparatively affordable works in editions for decades.

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“Large Pool, 2006” by Wayne Thiebaud.

Photo: Berggruen Gallery

Born Morton Wayne Thiebaud in Mesa, Ariz., on Nov. 15, 1920, Thiebaud grew up in Long Beach and Utah, where his father, an engineer and inventor, had moved the family during the Depression to take up farming.

Thiebaud began drawing as a teenager while recovering from an incapacitating sports injury. While still attending high school in Long Beach, he took classes in commercial art and worked summers as an apprentice animator at Walt Disney Studios.

Military service during World War II interrupted the formal education that Thiebaud had begun at Long Beach Junior College (now Long Beach City College). From 1941 to 1945, he served in Northern and Southern California on military projects that used his skills in graphic arts.

“I became an airplane mechanic while waiting for pilot training. In the interim, I found some guys working in cartoons and poster making. I was amazed that such a thing existed in the service,” he told **The Chronicle in 2018**.

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Betty Jean Thiebaud and husband Wayne Thiebaud  
Photo: Ray "Scotty" Morris / Special to The Chronicle

In 1943, he married Patricia Patterson and had two daughters, Twinka and Mallery Ann. But he eventually divorced Patterson in 1959 and married Betty Jean Carr. Together they raised her sons, Matthew and Mark Bult. The couple's own son, Paul Thiebaud, who died of cancer at 49 in 2010, established galleries in his own name in San Francisco and New York that represented his father's work. The family continues to operate the San Francisco venue.

After a leave of absence spent in Manhattan, which brought him into contact with the great painters and critics of the New York School, Thiebaud got his big career break in 1962, with a New York solo show at the Allan Stone Gallery, a fruitful association that would continue until Stone's death in 2006.

He also went back to school, studying at San Jose State College (now University) and California State College (now University) in Sacramento. While completing his master of fine arts degree at Sacramento Junior (now City) College, Thiebaud began his own long and distinguished teaching career there.

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He was a longtime professor at UC Davis too. Thiebaud was considered the star on what became a famous art department faculty that included Robert Arneson, William T. Wiley, Roy De Forest and Manuel Neri. He officially retired in 1991, but continued teaching one class a year at the university.

“Wayne Thiebaud had a profound and lasting influence on our university, but his legacy transcends UC Davis,” Chancellor Gary S. May said in a statement. “He was a brilliant artist, and his work will forever encourage us to see our world in a more textural light, where common objects can ascend to profound and iconic heights.”

During his tenure, Thiebaud was awarded the UC Davis Prize for Undergraduate Teaching and Scholarly Achievement, in 1988; the UC Davis Medal, the university’s highest honor, in 1988; and the Chancellor’s Lifetime Achievement Award for Innovation, in 2016.

“Teaching at the university became my education,” **he said at age 98.**



Thiebaud at SFMOMA in September 2018.  
Photo: Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle 2018

Thiebaud was also considered a patron saint of the Jan Shrem and Maria Manetti Shrem Museum of Art, which opened in 2016 at UC Davis.

“Wayne Thiebaud believed teaching and learning were life’s most important pursuits,” said Rachel Teagle, founding director of Manetti Shrem. “He loved to read, discuss, and look together with his students.”

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Timothy Anglin Burgard, distinguished senior curator and Ednah Root curator in charge of American art at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, which owns five Thiebaud paintings in its permanent collection and has two currently on display, said Thiebaud “is rightly renowned as a painter’s painter who sustained the relevance and resonance of figuration despite the advent and demise of dozens of abstract art manifestos and movements. He will be remembered as a quintessentially American artist who not only augmented the history of art, but also plumbed its deepest depths, drawing resonant links between the past and the present.”

Among the other awards in recognition of his work as artist and educator, Thiebaud was elected to the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, received the Governor’s Award for Lifetime Achievement in the Arts, and the National Medal of Arts. He received honorary doctorates from Dickinson College, the San Francisco Art Institute, the Art Institute of Southern California and California State University Sacramento.

Thiebaud is survived by his daughters, Twinka Thiebaud and Mallery Ann Thiebaud, from his first marriage; son, Matt Bult, from his second marriage; and six grandchildren.

*The Associated Press contributed to this report.*

- Sam Whiting and Kenneth Baker Sam Whiting is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer, and Kenneth Baker, who died this year, was a former visual art critic at The Chronicle.