



Miami Loses Formidable Art Historian and Critic Helen Kohen, 1931-2015

June 22, 2015

by Elisa Turner

With her outspoken mix of erudition and wit, Helen Kohen had already made a national mark when she retired in 1995 after 17 years as The Miami Herald art critic. Her formidable career never stopped.

Kohen, who died at age 83 in Miami Beach on May 26, 2015, continued to curate exhibitions, conduct oral histories, and serve as a moderator on a number of panels. A founding program committee member with ARTtuesdays/MIAMI, she held a standing-room-only conversation with Cuban art historian Dr. Juan Martínez for the group in December 2014.

For years Kohen was a mainstay of South Florida's art community, both elegant and lucid in her astute observations. "There's no better proof of that than the discussion she held only last December with Juan Martínez on the history of Miami art. We were all mesmerized," recalled her former Miami Herald editor Ileana Oroza in an email. "But to many, many people, including myself, Helen was above all a treasured friend, a mentor, a role model, and a guiding star. It's hard to think of Miami without her."



Helen Kohen. © Timothy Greenfield-Sanders, courtesy of the artist.

David Lawrence, Jr. was Miami Herald publisher during Helen's tenure at the paper. Now an advocate for early childhood education, he wrote in an email, "She didn't really come from journalism, but she knew good reporting and fine writing better than most. Her pieces were laced throughout with real depth and wisdom and context."

From Jerusalem, Miami-based artist Mira Lehr emailed this recollection: "She was one of the few people I met in the 1960s who was connected to the world of ideas, scholarship, and excellence. As I remember, art criticism for the Miami Herald was contained in a section called "for and about women." It was like the Dark Ages! When Helen started writing, criticism became real and elevated to a new level." Lehr also recalled her friendship with Kohen. "She had a dry wit and we laughed together a lot."

Miami-based artist William Cordova cited Kohen's writing as pivotal in his decision to switch from majoring in psychology to art at Miami-Dade Community College in 1991. He added, also in an email, how later he started a conversation about art with her at the Bass Museum of Art without knowing who she was.

The two were walking side by side observing an exhibit when "she made a brief comment to herself about some of the work and I immediately responded," he recalled. They went on to discuss the art. After a few minutes they began laughing and introduced themselves.

"It was a critical exchange that we promised to expand upon later. 'Let's talk about this in the future,' she said, and handed me her business card." Although that follow-up conversation never happened, "her presence and sharp insight always resonates with me," Cordova wrote.

One of her most distinctive roles evolved after she left the Herald. Kohen was founding archivist of the Vasari Project, a unique archive of Miami art history from 1945 onward, established at Miami-Dade Public Library in 2000 in collaboration with art librarians Margarita Cano and Barbara Young.

"She certainly set the bar high for all of us trying to make sense of the local art whirl. Some of my favorite memories are of spending afternoons poring through the Vasari archives under her watchful gaze, reading as much as I could about Miami in the years before I moved here in 1999," Ocean Drive arts editor Brett Sokol wrote in an email.

In a recent testament to the archives' significance, Anna Franchi included them in the Acknowledgements for her 2014 M.A. thesis, "Art Basel Goes Global," for Catholic University of Milan, Italy. Franchi, who traveled to Miami to conduct research, expressed thanks to Kohen for personally introducing her to Miami-Dade Public Library and its Vasari Project.

Kohen's connections to Vasari were further highlighted in January. During a dinner given in her honor by Florida's chapter of ArtTable, she was visibly touched but almost seemed to brush aside the plaudits, insisting that she had only been doing her job.

Still, it was clear from that evening's award ceremony that Kohen was deeply revered for her years of dedication. "The development of the Vasari archive has been an act of love for her—for this community, its history, the library, and artists here ... As evidenced by her career, she has always been a passionate, knowledgeable and unwavering supporter of Miami artists and their place in history," said retired art librarian Barbara Young in a speech at the ceremony.

Then Kohen, a member of ArtTable for 34 years, was presented with the Inaugural ArtTable Pioneer Award from Florida's chapter, a large engraved crystal paperweight made to order from Tiffany.

Kohen was born in New York on June 4, 1931. Her parents were Bertha Brantman Lichtman, one of the first women to pass the New York State Bar, and Irving Lichtman, an engineer. After earning a B.A. in English literature from Smith College, she settled in Miami Beach in the late 1950s with her husband Dr. Roland Kohen, a prominent physician and arts patron.

The couple raised three daughters: Amy, Jane, and Elizabeth. Before working for The Miami Herald, she was book editor for The Miami Beach Sun, and had worked with South Florida's public television

station and the Metro-Dade Community Relations Board. From 2010 to 2013 she was Ombudsperson for Art Basel Miami Beach. She held an M.A. in art history from the University of Miami.

When Kohen decided to attend graduate school, daughters Amy and Elizabeth recalled via email that she had initially planned to study history, but the necessary courses were not offered when she wanted to enroll. She studied art history instead. Yet, they continued, “she came to the field as if she was born to it. She was prepared for the curriculum, having been a museum junkie way before she even thought to study art history. Because of her interests, we grew up exposed to art and museums and galleries. It was part our lives, so now it is part of our children’s.”

Predeceased by her husband and their daughter Jane Kohen Winter, she is survived by daughters Amy Kohen Cohn and Elizabeth Kohen Martinez and seven grandchildren.