

Matt Phillips, master of the monotype print, dies

By Sam Whiting, March 6, 2017



Matt Phillips "Frieze" 1988 collage/monotype 10 x 30 in



Matt Phillips, an artist and academic credited with reviving and promoting the monotype style for making singular impressions on paper, died Wednesday at age 89. Mr. Phillips, a longtime resident of Emeryville, died at Alta Bates Summit Medical Center in Oakland from congestive heart failure, said his son, Joshua Phillips of New York City.

"Matt helped foster a new regard for the monotype as an artistically viable medium," said his ex-wife Sandra S. Phillips, curator emerita of photography at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. "He also made eloquent work of his own in monotype and painting." These works are in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Art Institute of Chicago, and 156 works are in the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

Mr. Phillips taught literature and philosophy at the American University of Paris, and later built up the art department at Bard College in upstate New York, where he taught for 27 years. "He often described himself as a 'painter-poet,'" said his youngest daughter Miriam Phillips, a professor of dance at the University of Maryland. "He was also a magician and a world traveler. He loved color and markets and would always carry sketchbooks and pencils with him." When he returned from a trip, he'd fill in these sketches in watercolor. Then he would use a sketch as a study to paint a picture on a copper plate. Finally, the image was pressed onto rice paper to create the finished artwork.

"He was known as the master of monotype," said his daughter. This mastery was recognized by Stanford University, which acquired all of his sketchbooks, spanning 50 years, for the Special Collections at Stanford University Libraries. It was introduced with an exhibition in 2001, and a catalog titled "Matt Phillips: The Magic of His Prints." In 2002, *The Chronicle* described Mr. Phillips' workday as starting at 5:30 a.m. with the ancient martial art tai chi, and all his art thereafter was also done in the ancient way.

"My one concession to a mechanical tool is an etching press," he told *The Chronicle* in 2002. "I don't have a computer or email. I stand by the No. 2 pencil. It has served me well." Born in New York City and raised in Atlantic City and Philadelphia, Mr. Phillips began his art education at the Barnes Foundation in Pennsylvania. He earned a master's in literature at the University of Chicago, in 1952, and also did graduate work at Stanford.

Mr. Phillips first taught at Penn State, then answered a call for expatriate professors to the American University of Paris. It was here that he transitioned from a man of letters to a visual artist. In 1964, he returned to join the art department at Bard College in New York, where he met the former Sandra Sammataro, who was on her way to a doctorate in art history.

They were married in 1968, and Mr. Phillips retired in 1987. That same year his wife was hired by SFMOMA, and they moved to San Francisco. They divorced in 1989. For 20 years, Mr. Phillips has shown his work at Meyerovich Gallery in San Francisco's Union Square. The most recent exhibition of his work was "Matt Phillips: I Am Not Done With My Changes," in the fall of 2012. "He was very brave, very creative, very consistent and very committed," said gallery owner Alex Meyerovich. "He loved to be part of the art world, and he belonged to a very important generation of American artists."

His first marriage to Lois Shapiro, who championed him in his early painting career, ended in divorce in 1967. She died in 2007. His daughter, Elizabeth Phillips, a renowned dealer of avant-garde artist books, passed away in 2015. Mr. Phillips was also married to paper conservator Susannah Hays, his collaborator on limited edition art books. They divorced in 1997, after six years of marriage, but maintained their artistic collaboration.

Survivors include his partner, poet Elizabeth Chapman of Palo Alto, daughters Kate Phillips of Oakland and Miriam Phillips of Washington, D.C., a son, Joshua Phillips, of New York City, and a brother, Alan Phillips, of Seattle. Services are pending. *Sam Whiting is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer.*

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