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LIFE

Terrence Coffman shepherded MIAD into a Historic Third Ward fixture



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For 20 eventful years, Terrence J. Coffman shepherded the [Milwaukee Institute of Art & Design](#), turning it into an accredited educational institution that helped galvanize the Historic Third Ward as an arts district.

But during all the fundraising and deal making, Coffman insisted he had to keep teaching a class and making his own art.

"I'm a painter before I'm an arts administrator. It's at the core of my being," he told [Journal Sentinel](#) art critic James Auer in a 2003 interview.

[Coffman died](#) Jan. 15 at a nursing home in Highwood, Illinois. He was 80 years old. The cause of death was dementia, said his partner, Nell Forbes.

He was born Jan. 29, 1945, in Virginia and grew up in that state. He studied at the Corcoran School of Arts & Design in Washington.

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Coffman was serving as president of the Maryland College of Art & Design when he was recruited in 1983 to lead [MIAD](#), which was founded in 1974 by former faculty members of the Layton School of Art. During Coffman's tenure as MIAD's president, which continued until he retired from that post in 2003, the school earned accreditation, established international exchange relationships, moved into

its current main academic building at 273 E. Erie St., and acquired other nearby buildings.

In a 1995 article, Auer described Coffman as MIAD's "buoyantly optimistic, almost defiantly upbeat president." Listing all the projects Coffman was working on, both for the school and in his own artistic practice, Auer described him as the "one-man equivalent of a creative self-help book."

"Terry Coffman had a monumental impact on the arts, arts education and the college," current MIAD President Jeff Morin wrote in an emailed statement. "Among his many achievements as president, Terry passionately advocated for the recognition of art and design education as an accredited model of higher education and learning, while also mentoring and supporting the aspirations of MIAD students," Morin said.

Discussing his approach to leadership, Coffman told Auer in a 1995 interview: "You don't manage artists. You try to help. I think that's probably the key to it. You try to somehow be a conduit that allows them to express themselves. (We're) working with a very talented group of artists as faculty members. They have their own sense of vision. You have to do it as a team player."

As a painter, Coffman was not static. In his early Milwaukee years, he was known for his realistic watercolors and still lifes.

"He has exquisite detail, the silverware is gleaming and the glassware reflecting light," art dealer Tory Folliard said in a 1994 interview. "It's captivating."

But circa 2000, Coffman shifted to more of an abstract-expressionist approach, "a champion of light, color and texture," Auer wrote.

In 2003 Coffman told Auer that he was an abstract painter when younger before moving to realism. When realism became "no longer challenging, exciting or fun," he returned to abstraction.

While energetic optimism seemed to be Coffman's default setting, he also knew heartbreak. His son, Toby, died by suicide as a teenager. "The worst thing in the world that could ever happen to me has happened," he said in a 1994 Milwaukee Sentinel interview.

Making art helped Coffman deal with the loss of his son, he explained to Auer during a 1995 interview. For example, fallen tulip petals in a still life were angel wings in Toby's memory, the artist said.

Coffman painted until nearly the end of his life, stopping only when painting became too physically demanding, Forbes said. Even then, he continued to draw regularly in a notebook.

In addition to Forbes, survivors include his daughter Cori and his brother Tim.