

Kenneth Baker, Chronicle Art Critic
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Painter Paul Wonner, long associated with the tendency known as Bay Area Figuration, died Wednesday in San Francisco of natural causes on the eve of his 88th birthday. Mr. Wonner, acclaimed for his distinctive mature style of still life painting, had numerous solo exhibitions in New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco. Major museums throughout the United States have collected his work. For all the recognition accorded him, Mr. Wonner enjoyed a high reputation for his personable manner. "Of all the artists I've worked with, he was perhaps the kindest. Just a wonderful human being," said Gretchen Berggruen of the John Berggruen Gallery in San Francisco, which represented Mr. Wonner exclusively for many years. "He was not about anything but the art itself." Born in Tucson in 1920, he received much of his art training in Northern California and settled in San Francisco in 1976. Mr. Wonner moved to the Bay Area for the first time to study at California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland (now California College of the Arts), where he earned a bachelor's degree in 1941. After military service in Texas, Mr. Wonner moved to New York, where he worked as a package designer and briefly continued his training at the Art Students League. He returned to the Bay Area in 1950 and by 1953 completed bachelor's and master's degrees in fine arts at UC Berkeley. Mr. Wonner worked as a librarian at UC Davis in the late 1950s, until his move to Southern California, where he taught at the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles and UC Santa Barbara during the 1960s. He enjoyed collegial support for his work from originators of the Bay Area Figurative style, including David Park (1911-1960) and Richard Diebenkorn (1922-1993). He painted in a brushy manner similar to theirs until the late 1970s, when his style turned crisp, emphasizing bright light and sharp shadows, and he concentrated on still life themes. The Dutch Baroque still life tradition served as a historical source for Mr. Wonner, but he typically painted objects from everyday contemporary life. His mature pictures distinctively portray things as separated by almost surrealistically vacant distended spaces. In recent years, he returned to painting human figures in vaguely allegorical arrangements and settings. "With the passing of Paul Wonner, San Francisco has lost one of its finest painters and a truly lovely man," said San Francisco Museum of Modern Art senior curator Janet Bishop. "In 1981, SFMOMA had the honor of organizing 'Paul Wonner: Abstract Realist' - a traveling retrospective of the artist's work that showed his painterly path toward the quiet and exacting still life paintings for which he became best known." Mr. Wonner is survived by a sister, Dorothy Kendall of La Mesa (San Diego County), and his longtime companion and fellow painter, Theophilus Brown. No memorial service is planned.