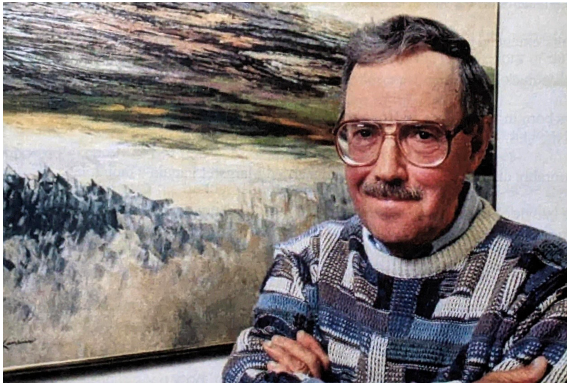


## Richard Kaneiss: illustration to abstraction

### A career in illustration in Milwaukee



Born in Milwaukee in 1929, Richard Kaneiss attended Boys Technical High School before serving four years in the U.S. Air Force, 1947-1951. Family members report that Richard recognized he had an early gift for drawing and artistic endeavors and he honed his talent on his own. After his honorable discharge from the Air Force in 1951, Kaneiss married and began working as an

illustrator for the *Milwaukee Journal* and *Milwaukee Sentinel* newspapers. He drew hundreds of images for advertisements, news, and feature stories each year.

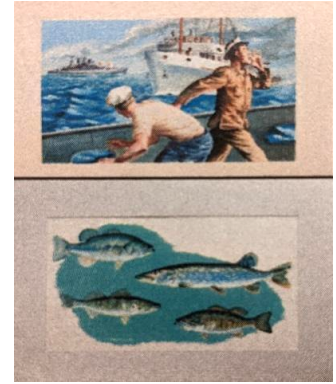
Kaneiss, shown in an undated family photo, was recognized for his portraits of athletes, entertainers, and politicians during his time with the Milwaukee newspapers. His hand-drawn portraits of famous figures such as John Lennon, Bob Hope, and Martin Luther King, Jr. at important milestones in their lives were a complement to illustrations that were landscapes, wildlife, or local scenes and landmarks. At the Green Bay Packer Hall of Fame, one can also find Richard Kaneiss hand-drawn portraits of Vince Lombardi and Bart Starr.

The career of Richard Kaneiss at the Milwaukee newspapers spanned 37 years, during which he progressed from staff illustrator to editorial illustrator and eventually as one of the art directors of the newspaper. This transition was marked by his increasing influence over the publication's visual direction and his mentorship of younger artists.

One of those younger artists was Robert Helf, now a Cedarburg resident, who started his illustration career at the *Milwaukee Journal* in 1978 and was mentored by Kaneiss in his first ten years at the newspaper. Helf recently wrote "Dick was instrumental in shaping and helping to guide me in honing my craft and abilities as an illustrator. He was a great coach, inspiration, and mentor. He and I connected with our discussions about wildlife art and duck and deer hunting. We loved to discuss famous wildlife artists. Mostly I cherish [our] friendship, and I was humbled by his kindness and willingness to embrace new talent."

## Generous gift to Cedarburg Art Museum forms the exhibition

A generous donation of 24 artworks from the artist's family to the Cedarburg Art Museum in 2025 provides the basis of this exhibition. It is fitting that these artworks should come "home" to this community as Kaneiss and his family lived in Cedarburg for 33 years starting in 1973. Five of the works in the exhibition are illustrations for the newspaper. "Fight" and an untitled illustration of Wisconsin fish, pictured here, show Kaneiss' expertise in gouache on illustration board.



These illustrations were published in the Milwaukee newspapers sometime before 1989, probably in the 1970s, and are a contrast to Kaneiss' larger scale abstract paintings. Kaneiss occasionally entered his large oil paintings in public exhibitions during his lifetime and sold his work at Wisconsin art fairs. This posthumous exhibition shows a range of his abstract and non-objective paintings, not shown together earlier and not known to his newspaper colleagues.

## Kaneiss participates in non-objective and color field painting



Several of the artist's large oil paintings featured in this exhibition present abstracted landscapes; however, a greater majority are pure abstraction, or non-objective artwork, offering thoughtful explorations of color and form. During the 1950s and 60s American artists were advancing a movement in painting called abstract expressionism, and its mature form in color field painting. While many of Kaneiss' artworks are undated, eight dated paintings were executed in 1964 and are explorations in color and form such as Kaneiss' *Composition #53* (51.25 x 43"), pictured here. In America during the 1950s and 60s, other artists such as Mark Rothko and Clifford

Still or Adolph Gottlieb with his Burst series were creating art in the color field movement. Kaneiss' paintings like *Environment #1* or *Untitled (pink and red abstract)*, shown below,

reflect Kaneiss' interest in and influence from the American color field movement that was a bold departure from the earlier regionalist art or social realism of the 1930s and 40s and Kaneiss' own career artwork. Artists began to use color for its simple emotive effect.

## Kaneiss' legacy in the arts

Richard Kaneiss's legacy extended beyond his professional contributions as an illustrator to include significant mentorship within the illustration field. In addition to his professional mentorship, Richard was dedicated to inspiring young people through art. He frequently gave talks about art at his children's schools, including James Madison Junior/Senior High School in Milwaukee and Cedarburg High School. These talks fostered an appreciation for the arts among students and reflected his commitment to nurturing creativity in the next generation.



In August 2013 Richard Kaneiss passed away after making his mark by influencing younger illustrators and sharing his passion for the arts with others. In addition, these recently revealed artistic treasures provide new insight into the mature, private artwork of Wisconsin artist Richard Kaneiss.

### References:

- Mary Louise Schumacher, "A discovered history of the Journal Sentinel art collection." *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, April 4, 2014. Accessed online December 30, 2025.
- Don Behm, "Illustrator Richard Kaneiss did portraits of Vince Lombardi, John Lennon" *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, August 18, 2013. Accessed online August 10, 2025.
- Robert Helf's statement received in email on January 2, 2026.
- Information from the artist's daughter Patti and her husband John Grivas received by email on January 5, 2026 provided details about the artist's self-taught drawing skills and Patti's father's talks in the schools.