

Lauren Soth 1934 - 2022

Professor Emeritus Lauren Soth, 87, a beloved, but formidable presence on the Carleton College campus for four decades, died Tuesday, May 24, 2022 in Madison, WI, from causes related to advanced Parkinson's disease. His devoted wife, Nancy, and two sons were close at hand. A dedicated scholar and engaging instructor, he inspired many to go further in Art History, and many, many more to form a lifelong appreciation for art and architecture.

Lauren Soth was born November 29, 1934, the only child of Phillip Sullivan Soth and Bernice Freiberg Soth in Seattle, Washington. He grew up in the Magnolia neighborhood a mere block from Puget Sound, with a view of Mount Rainier from the home's second floor. He graduated from Queen Anne High School in 1952 and proceeded to Yale University, where he majored in history and took classes from legendary architectural historian Vince Scully.

Upon graduation in 1956, he moved to New York City where at a party of mutual friends he met Nancy Britton, another recent graduate drawn to the city. They would marry in September of the next year in Nancy's hometown of Kansas City, shortly before Lauren began service in the U.S. Army. Deployed to Germany, the couple enjoyed their first years of married life in Heidelberg, using it as a base to explore much of Europe by car.

After military service, they returned to their beloved New York City, and Lauren began doctoral studies at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts. The couple lived on St. Mark's Place in the East Village, and the city lived forever in their hearts as a cultural touchstone. Nancy and Lauren would return to the city almost annually, sometimes with their two sons, and visit frequent haunts, like the Met, MOMA and the Leo Castelli gallery. Back at home, *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, and *New York Magazine* could always be found on the coffee table, or piled on the floor next to an Eames chair.

While living in New York, Lauren taught at the Parsons School of Design, and son Christopher was born in 1962. In 1964, Lauren joined the Art Department of Carleton College in Northfield, MN, just as the first wave of baby boomers was beginning their higher education. The next year, son Andrew joined the family. Shortly after, they would purchase a large Victorian home a block from campus across from the college president's residence, where they made their home for more than fifty years.

In 1968, the Soths had the opportunity to live in London, and again travel was a priority. This time it was a family affair, motoring by VW bus across North Africa and into Eastern Europe, then under Soviet domination. Years later, Lauren would recall one of his happiest memories was watching his sons play together in a plaza in Dobrovnik in what was then Yugoslavia. He would continue to travel the world, taking thousands of pictures of art and architecture to fill the department's slide library. This, of course, was long before the Internet made any image instantly accessible. A one man World Wide Web, Lauren Soth and his travels became the subject of a college geo-location project showing the places he'd been and the pictures he'd taken.

Through his academic career, Lauren took scholarly interest in the painter Coreggio, the architects Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright, and the married mid-century modern Minnesota architects Elizabeth and Winston Close. But, long before the current tourist fad, Lauren Soth was immersed in the work of Vincent Van Gogh. He authored multiple articles and guest-lectured frequently, including at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, in 1988. Recently, he donated his collection of Van Gogh books, three boxes worth, to the Oberlin College Art Library, where granddaughter Lucy is a third year Art History major.

But teaching, and especially lecturing, were Lauren's passions. Before the advent of laser pointers, he would wield a long pointing rod, whacking it on the screen to emphasize a point, and perhaps waking sleep-deprived students who could have drifted off in the darkened lecture hall. Woe to those who might be caught asleep, or disrupt a class by a late arrival. If Professor Soth called attention to these behaviors, it was to communicate the seriousness by which he took his discipline, and the respect it deserved. Many non-majors expecting the intro Art History survey course to be an easy A may have been disappointed, but ultimately glad for the education.

One student who herself went on to a distinguished Art History career was able to categorize Lauren's lectures into three types: The Classic Compare/Contrast, The Shock Value, revealing long forgotten scandals and the importance of understanding art in its time, and The Neatly Crafted Circle, "wherein the conclusion established the first seemingly irrelevant point he'd made to be the most important."

Often remembered as one of Carleton students' favorite teachers, Lauren was recently voted by alums of the 1980s as that decade's most "transformative" teacher. He was happy to learn of the honor, even if "transformative" seemed a touch hyperbolic to his ear.

Lauren's facility with language was laser-sharp, concise, and often revealing of a dry, sharp wit. For years the back pages of *New York Magazine* ran a competition of wits to submit quips, puns or clever bon mots around a weekly theme. The entries from L. Soth, Northfield, MN, won frequently enough to keep the magazine coming through free subscription for years.

His economy with language was second only to his personal economy. Frugal to a fault, he could be seen frequently biking around Northfield, stopping in at garage sales. This led to his notably eclectic wardrobe. His career may have been devoted to understanding aesthetics and the evolution of visual style, but his own expression of fashion most frequently began with socks worn with sandals and did not improve much from toe to head.

Lauren's biking to neighborhood sales sometimes led to his returning with another bike, and there were always three or four in the garage. Cycling was his favorite form of transportation whether for his short commute to campus or into the nearby countryside. Frequently, he biked to Andy's out-of-town soccer matches, usually the only parent in attendance. At the end of an NEH Fellowship at Yale in 1976, he dispatched the family back to Minnesota in a Dodge Colt wagon

and biked all the way home from the East Coast. At a small Indiana town, a little girl unused to seeing the full beard that was a fixture for Lauren since the sixties, asked if he was Santa Claus.

He competed in triathlon events and was a regular at the college open “noon ball” games, usually followed by multiple laps in the pool. While Parkinson’s robbed him of his favorite physical activities, it never took his determination. He always strove for his mobility and agency, never once complaining about the many scrapes and bruises that came from frequent falls.

A lifelong sports fan, Saturdays in fall, if not at a Carleton home football game, he would multitask, the Metropolitan Opera on the radio, college football on the television, the *New York Times* in hand, which he would peer over with perfect timing to catch each play. Largely, he was an impartial observer, like the sports journalist he had aspired to be when he was a stringer reporting on Yale football games for the *Times*. The only team for which he was a true fan, which originated as short for fanatic, was the University of Washington, his parents’ alma mater where he had worked as a teenage beer vendor in Husky Stadium. Even at age 86, while waiting for one of too many doctor visits, he was able to recount every highlight of the 1960 Rose Bowl and the exploits of its hero, George Fleming.

If not the Huskies, then he would root for the underdog in any contest to emerge victorious, as always happened in the sports pulp fiction he devoured in his youth. He even included an example title, *The Fullback from Nowhere*, in a college publication that surveyed faculty about their favorite literature. If an upset victory appeared imminent, be it in the Final Four or the Minnesota State Girls Basketball Tournament, he might call out to Nancy, “Sports Emotion!” summoning her to witness one of her favorite things in the world, people expressing joy.

Nancy and Lauren experienced joy together and with family for a lifetime. His death came just months short of their 65th wedding anniversary. He will be remembered as an influential educator with a powerful intellect and steel-trap mind, a loving father and husband, and a man of the highest integrity.

Lauren Soth is survived by wife Nancy Soth, sons Christopher Soth and Andrew Soth, daughter-in-law Ruth Flanagan, granddaughters Amelia Soth and Lucy Soth, all of Madison, Wisconsin, and a granddaughter Madison Soth of Noosaville, Australia.

Plans for a community time of remembrance will be announced at a later date.