



John Michael Kohler Arts Center

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Ruth DeYoung Kohler II (1941 – 2020)

Long-time Director of internationally renowned John Michael Kohler Arts Center and tireless champion of under-recognized artists, art-environment builders and art forms

SHEBOYGAN, Wisconsin – Tuesday, November 17, 2020 – Ruth DeYoung Kohler II had a deep appreciation and passion for the works created by under-recognized artists and art forms and as the long-tenured Director of the John Michael Kohler Arts Center (1972-2016), she grew the Sheboygan, Wisconsin arts center to an internationally recognized institution presenting contemporary art, the work of vernacular artists, performing arts, and the work of art-environment builders.

Ruth died Saturday, November 14, at her home in Kohler, Wisconsin, at the age of 79. She was the daughter of Herbert V. Kohler, Sr. and Ruth DeYoung Kohler, and younger sister of current Kohler Co. Executive Chairman Herbert V. Kohler, Jr.

At the time of her passing, Ruth held the title of Director Emerita at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center – a testament to her tremendous contribution to the fields of art environments and self-taught and folk art as well as contemporary art. Ruth was also a major shareholder in privately held Kohler Co., headquartered in Kohler, Wisconsin.

Ruth was a tireless champion of under-recognized artists and art forms. She saw the arts as a driver of positive social change, upholding the pillars of diversity, inclusiveness, and community involvement. She believed passionately that the arts, in all its iterations, reveal who we are as a people: past, present, and future.

Through landmark exhibitions at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center and in partnership with Kohler Foundation Inc., she worked to change how art environments are perceived, preserved and valued by the arts world and the public. Under her direction, the Arts Center collection grew to include over 25,000 works by more than 30 art-environment builders.

Her final endeavor was serving as Director of Strategic Projects focused on the design and building of the Arts Preserve, west of Sheboygan, Wisconsin, which will open to the public in June 2021. This institution will celebrate art-environment builders and house an expanding collection of works dedicated to the study of the art form and the conservation, preservation, and presentation of the works.

“Art energizes public spaces, emboldens thinking and enriches communities. Art is indispensable to who we are as people, our quality of life, and our success in business, and has guided our company for generations. Ruth Kohler was an early visionary and a diligent catalyst in bringing together the arts and industry. She advocated strongly for this unique exchange of ideas between artists and production associates, which often drove innovation and created an open dialogue that encourages mutual inspiration,” said Ruth’s brother, Herb Kohler, Kohler Co. Executive Chairman.

The Arts/Industry collaboration between Ruth and her brother, Herbert, is a truly one-of-a-kind alliance, celebrating manufacturing with the pure expressionism of contemporary art that allows artists to present their work and encourage viewers to consider, react, and respond. This unique intersection of industrialism and the arts was forged in 1974, and more than four decades since the first artists created their works on the Kohler Co. pottery factory floor, nearly 500 residents have benefitted from Ruth and Herbert’s vision that artists and industrial craftspeople can make stunning art pieces when blending creativity with craftsmanship and technical expertise.

Ruth also served on the Kohler Foundation board from 1969-2019 and as the Foundation’s President from 1999-2006. She made it her mission that the preservation of art environments, folk architecture, and collections by self-taught artists was always a major focus of the Kohler Foundation.

“Through her work at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center and Kohler Foundation, Ruth has promoted equitable and inclusive access to the arts in her local community, her home state of Wisconsin, and on national and international levels,” remarked Ruth’s niece, Laura Kohler, Senior Vice President-HR, Stewardship & Sustainability. “She has been a guiding force behind the selection and conservation of many outsider arts sites and collections. Without Ruth’s vision and curatorial guidance, the Kohler Foundation would not be in a position to save these significant works of art for the public to appreciate and experience.”

Her contributions to arts across Wisconsin and the U.S. are numerous, including serving as Chairman and member of the Wisconsin Arts Board, on the National Endowment for the Arts as a Visual Artists Organization panel member and past site evaluator. Ruth also created the Preservation Committee of Kohler Foundation, Inc. and established the philosophy and protocols for identifying self-taught and environment builders in need of protection and conservation.

Among the many awards and honors Ruth has received are: Honorary Fellow, American Craft Council, New York; Governor's Award for the Arts, Wisconsin; Visionary Award, American Craft Museum, New York; Visionary Leadership Award, Center for Intuitive and Outside Art, Illinois; Visionary Lifetime Achievement Award, Museum of Art and Design, New York; Visionary Award, American Folk Art Museum, New York; and honorary doctorates from various institutions of higher learning.

To learn more about Ruth Kohler's countless contributions to the arts and well-deserved accolades, visit John Michael Kohler Art Center's tribute at RuthKohlerTribute.com and Kohler family's tribute at CelebrateRuthKohler.com

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John Michael Kohler Arts Center Hours

Wednesday, Friday, Saturday: 10:00 AM - 4:00 PM
Thursday: 10:00 AM - 7:00 PM
Sunday: 11:00 AM - 4:00 PM

Location

John Michael Kohler Arts Center: 608 New York Avenue, Sheboygan, WI
Art Preserve: 3636 Lower Falls Road, Sheboygan, WI

About the John Michael Kohler Arts Center

Founded in 1967, the John Michael Kohler Arts Center (JMKAC) is dedicated to generating creative exchanges between an international community of artists and a diverse public. Central to its mission is promoting understanding and appreciation of the work of self-taught and contemporary artists through original exhibitions, commissioned works of art, performing arts, community arts initiatives, and publications.

The Arts Center's collection focuses primarily on works by artist-environment builders, self-taught and folk artists, and works created in the Arts/Industry residency program. JMKAC is the world's leading center for research and presentation of artist-built environments. Beginning in August 2020, its collection of 25,000 individual works of art by more than 30 art-environment builders can be viewed year-round at the Art Center's new satellite campus, the Art Preserve.

The John Michael Kohler Arts Center is supported by corporate and foundation donors, government grants, and its many members. The Arts Center is not an entity of Kohler Co. or its subsidiaries. The John Michael Kohler Arts Center is located at 608 New York Avenue, Sheboygan, WI. The Art Preserve is located at 3636 Lower Falls Road, Sheboygan. Admission to both is free. For information, call 920-458-6144, or visit jmkac.org and [Twitter](https://twitter.com/jmkac).