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By Sam Whiting, Chronicle Staff Writer

Mark Stock – figure painter well known for series on butlers

Mark Stock, a realist figure-painter, best known for a series on butlers in tuxedos and white gloves that suggested 1940s movie stills, died Wednesday night in Oakland. Mr. Stock had been taken to Alta Bates Summit Medical Center where he died of natural causes due to an enlarged heart, according to the Alameda County Coroner's Office. He was 62.

At the time of his death, Mr. Stock was preparing for a major gallery show to open May 1 at Modernism in San Francisco. The show is in celebration of the silver anniversary of Stock's most famous painting "The Butler's In Love - Absinthe." A portrait of a man with slicked-back hair staring at an absinthe glass smudged with lipstick, the painting hangs over the piano at Bix, a San Francisco Restaurant, where it has been since April 17, 1989. "The Butler's In Love - Absinthe" has been used in movies and was the subject of its own short film, made by David Arquette.

Transcends trends

"Mark was a narrative painter out of step with modern painting when he started, but now he will emerge as this unique painter who transcends Modernist trends," said art historian Barnaby Conrad III, author of "Mark Stock: Paintings," published in 2000. Conrad, who lives in Virginia, had flown to San Francisco Wednesday night, with plans to interview Mr. Stock for a new book, updating his career in the last 14 years.

"Mark has remained completely original to himself," said Conrad. "There is no school that he is part of. He's not a Cubist or a New Geo. He paints a personal



Painter Mark Stock

world that brushes up a little bit against Charlie Chaplin and it brushes up against film noir."

Mr. Stock was born in 1951 in Frankfurt, the son of an officer in the U.S. Army. His family moved frequently before settling in St. Petersburg, Fla. He received a bachelor's of art degree from the University of South Florida in 1976 and moved to Los Angeles to work as a lithographer for Gemini G.E.L., making prints for the likes of Jasper Johns, David Hockney, Robert Rauschenberg and Roy Lichtenstein, according to Mr. Stock's website.

Mr. Stock first painted the human figure in 1983, and discovered his main theme after being jilted by a woman in Los Angeles. It was his boss' daughter at the printing house.

"He not only painted 'The Butler's in Love,' he was 'The Butler's in Love,' " said Conrad. "The painting came out of his own personal feelings when he was in love with a woman in the '80s who he felt was a class above him."

Mr. Stock had been working the butler motif for years when Modernism owner Martin Muller saw an image in a newspaper and was so struck by its "emotional charge" that he spent a year tracking Mr. Stock to a studio in industrial Los Angeles.

Later, Muller asked Mr. Stock to create a painting based on Conrad's book "Absinthe" for a publication party being thrown at Bix, a stylish joint on a brick alley in Jackson Square. Mr. Stock's spin was to put a bottle of absinthe on the table and have the butler staring at the lipstick mark, obsessing on the lips that had touched the glass.

Its unveiling was at a black-tie party attended by San Francisco society, and shortly thereafter Mr. Stock moved north and joined that society. He lived in Oakland and could often be found at the bar at Bix, always well dressed and often entertaining friends with sleight-of-hand tricks.

Magic tricks

"His floating dollar bill was legendary," said Doug Biederbeck, owner of Bix and two paintings by Mr. Stock. "Mark, the person and his work, were a treasured part of the culture of our restaurant."

In addition to his work as an amateur magician, Mr. Stock was a golfer with a two-stroke handicap.

He had been in Los Angeles earlier this week and on Wednesday night appeared at a fundraiser at the Roxie, where he had donated use of a painting for a poster for the upcoming Film Noir festival.

"He was signing posters, doing magic tricks and just being the great guy that he is," said Elliot Lavine of the Roxie.



Mark Stock's "Butler's in Love - Absinthe," 1989, oil on canvas, hangs over the piano at Bix Restaurant in San Francisco.

Survivors include a brother, Don Stock of Florida, and longtime girlfriend Sharon Ding of Los Angeles.

As a public memorial, the entire Modernism Gallery will be dedicated to the career and life of Mark Stock, starting May 1.

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