

At a Meeting of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences on March 6, 2018, the following tribute to the life and service of the late James Ackerman was placed upon the permanent records of the Faculty.

JAMES SLOSS ACKERMAN

Born: November 8, 1919

Died: December 31, 2016

James Sloss Ackerman, Arthur Kingsley Porter Professor of Fine Arts, *Emeritus*, in what was the Department of Fine Arts at Harvard, died on the last day of 2016 at the age of 97. For decades, from the mid 1960s, he was the most widely read architectural historian in America. His books on Michelangelo (1961–1964) and Palladio (1966), beautifully written and closely argued, appealed as much to a lay public as to specialists.

Ackerman was from an affluent German Jewish family whose forebears had immigrated to San Francisco during the gold rush. Sent east, he became one of the first art history majors at Yale, where French scholarship—ranging from medieval archeology to the grand sweep of Henri Focillon's *Vie des formes*—set the tone. Drafted in 1942 after a year of graduate school at the Institute of Fine Arts of New York University, he trained in cryptology before being shipped to the Mediterranean theater. He had time between Algiers and Florence for sketching as well as decoding, before stumbling, almost by accident, into Mantua as the first of the American liberators. His work for the allied monuments service at the Certosa in Pavia nudged him into the study of the Renaissance. He returned to New York to study under German refugee scholars such as Erwin Panofsky and the great medievalist Richard Krautheimer. As the first fellow in art history at the American Academy in Rome, from 1949 to 1952, he unraveled the tortuous history of the Renaissance wings of the Vatican palace, that is, the statue court of Julius II and the endless corridors down which crowds rush today to the Sistine Chapel. The *Cortile del Belvedere*, published by the Vatican in 1954, was a milestone in the study of Bramante and his successors in this never-ending palace-villa-theater-museum.

Ackerman's first position, at the University of California–Berkeley from 1952 to 1960, was split between architecture and art history. He would never lose his commitment to the education of architects and there are few American (or Italian) architects who have not grown up on his books. His *Architecture of Michelangelo* came out soon after his move to Harvard. It is really two books, one for specialists, examining every scrap of evidence in exacting detail,

and one for an intelligent general readership, explaining the change from the geometrically grounded aesthetics of the early Renaissance to Michelangelo's kinetic sense of design. It became a classic, never out of print, and it remains the first place one sends students to to learn how to look at older architecture. *Michelangelo* was followed in 1966 by the paperback *Palladio*, which opened up the villas of the Veneto and the great Palladian churches in Venice to a wider public. Ackerman included a map in the book on the assumption that it might inspire readers to visit the villas in person; many thousands have. *Palladio* initiated a fifty-year relationship with the Centro Internazionale di Studi di Architettura Andrea Palladio in Vicenza, where he served on the scientific council and editorial board into his nineties. When he won the Balzan Prize in 2001, he turned over part of the funds to the American Academy in Rome and part to the Centro Palladio to support books by emerging scholars.

Ackerman was Slade Professor at Cambridge in 1969; the Harvard he returned to in 1970 was convulsed by protests over the Vietnam war. Elected to the Faculty Council on the liberal side, he sympathized with the students but was appalled by the lack of an intellectual base for their version of revolutionary action. He entered a period of doubt and questioning both as citizen and as academic. In his own field, he had long sought a counterbalance to the positivistic methodologies of his Germanic training and a theoretical justification for the methods of art history. This search now intensified. Back in the Renaissance by the mid-seventies, however, with built-up energy, he produced a series of searching articles on science and the visual arts, on Alberti and optics, on Leonardo and the eye, and on color theory. His 1985 Mellon lectures at the National Gallery in Washington, published in 1990 as *The Villa: Form and Ideology of Country Houses*, brought him back to Palladio and his influence in Britain and America, especially the architecture of Jefferson, but also to the villas of antiquity, to Medici *villeggiatura* around Florence, to the picturesque villa in Britain and the Romantic villa in America, and finally to Wright's Fallingwater and the villas of Le Corbusier. It remains a wonderfully readable integration of literature, architecture, and garden history.

Selections of his 140 papers and articles were collected in 1991, 2002, and 2016 in volumes that show the impressive breadth of his interests. Recurrent themes are art and science, the conventions of architectural drawing, Palladio, and Jefferson. It seemed natural to this interrogator of Leonardo's eye to turn to the camera lens to write on the picturesque in British and French landscape photography. In the months before his death at 97, students and friends visiting his Cambridge home found him in his wheelchair correcting—almost fondling—proofs of his last book, which includes digital reconstructions of three lost Palladio church facades; an essay on the new Louis Vuitton museum in Paris by Frank Gehry; and another

essay on the Jain Adinatha Temple at Ranakpur, prompted by a visit to India sixteen years after retirement.

A brilliant teacher at all levels, Ackerman was recognized by the College Art Association with its Distinguished Teaching of Art History Award in 1991 and by the Renaissance Society of America with its lifetime achievement award in 1998. Continuously productive in his long retirement, he nevertheless found time to work for local charities; the Community Learning Center of the city of Cambridge named him Volunteer of the Year. He was a man of unceasing questing and great integrity.

Respectfully submitted,

David Friedman (MIT)

Alina A. Payne

Joseph Connors, Chair

For more information, see “In Memoriam” by David Friedman, *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 76, no.4 (December 2017): 449–53,
<https://doi.org/10.1525/jsah.2017.76.4.449>.