

*At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on October 19, 2004, the following tribute to the life and service of the late John K. G. Shearman was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.*

## **JOHN K. G. SHEARMAN**

BORN: June 24, 1931

DIED: August 11, 2003

John Shearman was born in Aldershot, England, the son of an army officer, in 1931. He was drawn to the history of art by a master at his public school, and received his bachelor's degree at the Courtauld Institute in London, and, under the tutelage of Johannes Wilde, his doctorate. He joined the faculty there and became Deputy Director before moving to Princeton (1979-1985) and in 1987 to Harvard, becoming two years later the William Dorr Boardman Professor of Fine Arts and in 1994 Charles Adams University Professor.

Italian Renaissance painting was John's principal interest as a historian and in particular the so-called High Renaissance. Raphael was a focus throughout his career, as was Michelangelo, the subject of his celebrated Core course at Harvard. He was a counselor and defender of the cleaning and conservation of Michelangelo's frescos in the Sistine Chapel of the Vatican, an undertaking that astonished specialists as well as the general public by revealing a spectacular range of color that had for centuries been obscured by a dulling gray screen resulting primarily from deposits of candle smoke. He also made major contributions to our knowledge of the architecture of the period.

John's involvement in the practice of painting, which began in his school days, may have prompted him to write his dissertation on color practice in late fifteenth and early sixteenth century Italy, and subsequently an innovative article on Leonardo da Vinci's color and *chiaroscuro* and in 1965 an impressive two-volume monograph on Andrea del Sarto, whose previously undervalued career he helped to elevate.

John's most widely read book was the Penguin paperback entitled Mannerism (1967), which boldly (and, according to his later judgment, rashly) undertook to redefine the previously loosely-applied term referring to the arts of the mid-sixteenth century based on subtle reading of the critical texts of the period.

In addition to his widely acknowledged teaching and writing accomplishments, John was also a forceful advocate of art conservation, attempting throughout his career to strengthen the ties

between art historians, conservators and scientists. He became interested in these separate fields while he was a student at the Courtauld in the 1950s, when Stephen Rees Jones headed the Technology Department; under his instruction John intensified his interest in the physical aspects of paintings and became fascinated by the potential of scientific investigation.

He became directly involved in restoration after the 1966 floods in Florence and encouraged many conservation projects, taking a lively and critical interest in the technical examinations that accompanied them.

John's desire to create links between the different disciplines was reflected in the 1983 Raphael Symposium he helped organize at Princeton subtitled "Science in the Service of Art History," and also in the class he co-taught with staff at The Straus Center for Conservation called "Science and the Practice of Art History." His argument was clear: "the historian whose inclination it is to use the evidence of the conservator and the scientist, needs to engage in a dialogue; passive acceptance is not enough."

John was a devoted teacher always eager to meet with students, both undergraduate and graduate. A seat in his Core course on Michelangelo was perhaps the most sought after in the University; it had a large enrollment the first time it was taught but his success as a teacher was apparent the second time, when around 1400 students tried to squeeze through the lecture room's doors. John was never satisfied with the idea of being known only by his authoritative and subtly crafted lectures and insisted on leading a section in every class he taught so that each student would have the opportunity to meet with him during the course of a semester. His graduate seminars were an ongoing conversation among students and faculty in all fields. These were workshops in the truest sense. John never chose a topic in which he was deeply immersed, but insisted that the seminar participants choose the subject of inquiry they wished to pursue. His home was an extension of the classroom, as he took great pleasure in offering students access to his impressive library, which contained rare volumes unavailable in even this university's great collections.

John was Chair of the Fine Arts Department from 1990-1993 and served on the Faculty Council and also as a Curator for the renovation of the Faculty Room, taking great pleasure in the latter responsibility. He retired in 2002.

John defined his credo as an art historian in the introduction to his 1988 Mellon Lectures at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, published as Only Connect: Art and the Spectator in the Italian Renaissance. In the fiery manifesto of the Preface, he defended himself against critics who had implied that he was a positivist unconcerned with interpretation. Though he was an implacable and often impolitic opponent of many of the effects of recent critical theory, he rightly claimed that the wide-ranging and profound scholarship that went into his every publication itself demanded and generated interpretation.

John's last and, regrettably, posthumous, work, was the two-volume, 1700-page gathering of the Renaissance documents and references relating to the life and works of Raphael. To achieve this, he traveled at every opportunity to large and small archives and collections across Europe and contacted every scholar who might have come across an unrecorded notice of the artist. This apparently mechanical enterprise is actually informed, as no mere collection could have been, by judgments and interpretations based on a career-long engagement with this exceptional artist, and it is definitive in a sense that few undertakings of the sort in art history can claim to be. Another task that had absorbed decades of preparation, a volume on Early Renaissance painting commissioned for the Pelican History of Art, unfortunately survives only in his voluminous notes.

John died on August 11, 2003 from a massive heart attack at the wheel of his car while vacationing in western Canada with his wife of five years, Kathy Brush. He is also survived by four children from his first marriage, and a sister, Jeane Duffey.

Respectfully submitted,

Ioli Kalavrezou  
Katherine Olivier  
Stephan Wolohojian  
James S. Ackerman, Chair