

Memorial Minute for James Holderbaum

Read by Helen Searing, Faculty Meeting October 2011

I suspect that few of you in the room today knew Professor James Holderbaum, who retired in 1986 and died this spring at the age of 91. That is a pity, for the internationally distinguished art historian was a fabulously colorful and witty character. The consummate aesthete, passionately committed to encouraging appreciation of the arts, visual and performing, James was as au courant with avant-garde manifestations as with traditional ones. Haunting auctions and flea markets, he amassed innumerable art objects that ranged in origin across the centuries and continents. James had seen more operas than Milton J. Cross, as many ballets as Lincoln Kirstein, yet cherished popular music and had a legendary collection of LPs by such 60s and 70s performers as the Bee Gees, Aretha Franklin, and the Beach Boys. He also was an informed ornithologist and horticulturist and was as enthusiastic about birds and plants as he was about music, dance, painting and sculpture. His enthusiasm was infectious and together with his serious scholarship, enhanced his calling as pedagogue. He was a tireless traveler, so that his little Victorian house on Vernon Street, stuffed with objets d'art, was often vacant because he spent so much time abroad.

James's interest in music was informed by his talent. As a young boy during the depression, he sang on a radio station in his natal city, Buffalo, and was known as "the boy with the pearl in his voice." After graduating magna cum laude from Harvard in 1942, he enlisted in the Navy and was assigned to decode dispatches from the Japanese, a language he had mastered in his undergraduate work in Oriental Studies. On his separation from the service as a Lieutenant, he founded with like-minded friends a company that would record obscure classical music but, realizing that his business acumen did not equal his penchant for the analysis and interpretation of art, he returned to Harvard for graduate work in art history. As he explained, he sought to "convert devotion to art into active and creative service," a calling best fulfilled in the academic world. He commenced his teaching career at Princeton and came to Smith in 1960. A devoted teacher, in 1993 he won the College Art Association's distinguished teaching award. James had experience as the director of Smith's Junior Year in Italy and offered demanding but beloved summer courses for Smith students in Florence.

James was generous not only with his time but also with his art collection. He gave the SCMA a number of sculptures, and lent them incomparable pictures by Jasper Johns, Frank Stella, Roy Lichtenstein and Morris Louis. At a time when the museum was lacking examples of contemporary art, his loans made it possible for our students to see at first hand stellar examples of the latest gallery sensations. His lectures in the fabled and still lamented survey course known as Art 100 were often brilliant and always memorable - once a student had heard James discourse on Giotto or Duccio or Donatello -- and the special intonations he gave each name -- she'd not forget those artists.

A recipient of Fulbright and Guggenheim Fellowships, James's publications were modest in number if profound in impact, for he was quite scornful of those who wrote chiefly to pad their c.v.'s. He was an expert on the sixteenth century sculptor, Giambologna, about whom he made major discoveries. He was frequently invited to contribute to volumes on nineteenth-century sculpture as well and to lecture at the Louvre and other museums on their holdings in that field. After his retirement from Smith in 1986, he divided his time between his homes on the Costa di San Giorgio in Florence and in St. Germain en Laye outside Paris, and continued his research on Italian artists, rescuing from obscurity figures like the sculptor Pierino da Vinci, nephew of Leonardo, and Taddeo Landini, a Tuscan architect and sculptor. A few years ago he was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease and died in May in a nursing home in Massachusetts.