

**JOHN PHILLIPS COOLIDGE**

**MEMORIAL MINUTE  
ADOPTED BY  
THE FACULTY OF ARTS  
AND SCIENCES  
HARVARD UNIVERSITY**

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JOHN PHILLIPS COOLIDGE

BORN December 16, 1913

DIED July 31, 1995

John Phillips Coolidge was born in Cambridge in mid-December, 1913. The precise date of his birth is difficult to fix because his parents could never agree on the day. Each found an official record supporting their position. It gave John pleasure to pronounce the only thing he had in common with Beethoven was each was born on December 16th, question mark - question mark because both Ludwig and John may have been born on the 15th.

More certain is knowledge that John was born with Harvard in his blood. His father was Julian Lowell Coolidge, a Harvard mathematics professor who became first master of Lowell House, named for the small army of Lowells closely associated with the University and to whom John was related. Among them is John Lowell, class of 1760, a long-time member of the Corporation and founder of the dynasty of Lowells who served the University. Others are the poet cum critic and diplomat James Russell Lowell, a member of this faculty for more than thirty years, and President Abbot Lawrence Lowell who established the College's house and tutorial system. Jefferson Laboratory is the legacy of John's granduncle Thomas Jefferson Coolidge, and Archibald Cary Coolidge, initiator of the world wide scope of Widener Library's collections, was his uncle.

Instead of giving Charles River fever to John, these and other Harvard connections seemed to immunize him from it. After receiving a B.A. from Harvard in 1935 he left for Columbia to study architecture, a profession he decided to follow before he was ten. For him, studying architecture at Harvard was out of the question. At the time its department was thoroughly *beaux arts*. John was not. As an undergraduate

and for the rest of his long life he was enamored with modern architecture and art. During the mid-1930s Columbia, John believed, had the only department in this country dedicated to the International Style.

A year of graduate work convinced John he did not have the talent to be an architect. He then turned to art history. Following the advice of close friends, in 1936 he enrolled as a graduate student at New York University where a small group of scholars from Nazi Germany were among the refugees making radical changes in the study of art history on this continent. At the time, NYU's chairman said Hitler shook the tree and he picked up the apples. His gathering was choice: Erwin Panofsky, Karl Lehman, Richard Krautheimer, Walter Friedländer. John studied with all of them.

His first book, *Mill and Mansion* (1942), a work grounded in the social and economic history of Lowell, Massachusetts, was based on research for his master's degree and became a classic in the history of American architecture and urbanism. Stimulated by study at NYU with Krautheimer, he turned to Italian Renaissance architecture for his Ph.D. dissertation on the mid-sixteenth century architect and theorist Giacomo Barozzi da Vignola, to whom he convincingly attributed the little domes of St. Peter in the Vatican, which Michelangelo was thought to have designed.

Work on his Vignola dissertation was virtually completed when he entered the navy as an ensign in 1943. He was assigned to communications, served in Washington and Bletchley Park near London, and was mustered out as a lieutenant senior grade in 1946. In the same year he was appointed to teach art history at the University of Pennsylvania. In 1947 he returned to Harvard as an Assistant Professor and in the following year was named Associate Professor and director of Harvard's Art Museums. In 1955 he was appointed Professor of Fine Arts.

During John's twenty years as the Fogg's director he strengthened its collections, particularly of Islamic and contemporary art. He trained dozens of students intending museum careers and promulgated the principle of using the Fogg as a laboratory for teaching art history. Characteristic was the encouragement he gave students to organize provocative exhibitions of recent art and write publishable catalogues for them. At the same time he acquired the Fogg's first *avant garde* works by artists who made their mark in 1950s and 1960s. John has the distinction of buying the very first Morris Louis for a museum. Louis' widow said his pioneer purchase made her decide to give the Fogg all Louis drawings in her husband's estate.

After John returned to Cambridge a prime scholarly interest was the accomplishment of Henry Hobson Richardson, the architect of Harvard's Sever and Austin Halls. John's *Patrons and Architects: Designing Art Museums in the Twentieth Century* (1989), an examination of six American museums that represent innovation in our time, is greatly enriched by his experience as the Fogg's director. The design of the Sackler Museum inevitably became the final chapter of that book. With *Gustave Doré's London* (1994), a study of the artist's harrowing scenes of the slums of London at the height of the Industrial Revolution, he returned to his early interest in the social interpretation of urban history.

John's dynamic style of teaching architectural history was most effective on the run, moving about buildings, showing students how they were put together, the messages they conveyed, and always stressing the role clients played. His field trips exhausted students, who rarely matched his energy. Many who survived have become distinguished architectural historians.

His was a powerful voice in support of building conservation and his deep sense of responsibility to his profession made him a co-founder of the Society of

Architectural Historians, an active member of the Society of New England Antiquities, a trustee of Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, and that museum's president from 1973 to 1975.

John died on July 31, 1995 at the age of eighty-one. He is survived by his wife, Mary Elizabeth, affectionately known as Polly, to whom he was married for sixty-one years, his daughter Mary-Elizabeth, and two grand- children. Even at age eighty-one, John had plans to convert a room in his Cambridge home into a play room for his three great-grandchildren, with whom he loved to talk and play, and who sense, what we know: how special their elder was.

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