

FREDERICK BROCKWAY DEKNATEL

MEMORIAL MINUTE ADOPTED BY
THE FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES
HARVARD UNIVERSITY
JANUARY 14, 1975

FREDERICK BROCKWAY DEKNATEL

BORN MARCH 9, 1905

DIED NOVEMBER 3, 1973

Frederick Brockway Deknatel, for 40 years a major figure in Harvard's Department of Fine Arts, died November 3, 1973 in Boston in his 68th year. He had retired only at the end of the preceding academic term. In October he had gone into the hospital for correction of a damaged hip and was recovering normally when he was stricken by a fatal heart attack. Virginia Herrick Deknatel, whom he married in 1931, and their three sons survive him.

Frederick Deknatel was born in Chicago in 1905. He prepared for college at Lawrenceville School in New Jersey, and then attended Princeton, majoring in the field of history. Following his graduation in 1928, he came to Harvard to study at the Law School, but after an only brief experience he decided this was not his proper calling and transferred to the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences. At Princeton, the teaching of Professor Charles Rufus Morey had already deeply engaged Deknatel's interest in the medieval world, and especially in its expression in the visual arts. At Harvard in the late 1920's there was another figure of extraordinary stature working in the

field of medieval art, A. Kingsley Porter. Porter's influence combined with the example of his colleague, Chandler Post, to fix Deknatel's attention on the medieval art of Spain. It was in this field that he wrote the dissertation, *The 13th Century Gothic Sculpture of the Cathedrals of Burgos and Leon*, for which he received his doctorate in 1935. He had already, in 1932, received his first teaching appointment in the Department of Fine Arts as an Instructor and Tutor.

Among Deknatel's earliest teaching responsibilities was one outside his choice for specialization, assisting Professor Paul Sachs in his courses on the history of 19th- and 20th-century painting. Deknatel discovered in this contact, and subsequently in the course of traveling abroad, an increasing sympathy with the art of the 19th and 20th centuries. For some years after the beginning of his teaching career he worked in both medieval and modern art, responsive to the kinship he felt between them in forms and in spiritual values. More and more, however, his interest in modern art became the dominating one. Though Deknatel on occasion would take on a supervisory role in Harvard's instruction in medieval art, particularly after the retirement of Wilhelm Koehler in 1953, it was

with the teaching of the history of 19th- and 20th-century art that Deknatel was mainly concerned for the latter 30 years or so of his career.

In 1940 Deknatel was appointed to tenure on the Harvard faculty as an associate professor. During the Second World War, from 1942 to 1945, he served as Assistant Dean of the College. In 1946 he received full professor's rank. He served a five-year term as chairman of the Department of Fine Arts, from 1944 to 1949, and during this critical period played a major role in the reconstruction of the department following the War. His service on the Board of Directors of the College Art Association culminated in his election to the presidency of that organization for 1947-48. In 1950, in recognition of his publication of a major work on the important Norwegian Post-Impressionist painter Edvard Munch, the Norwegian government awarded Deknatel the Knight's Cross of the Order of St. Olaf, first class. At Harvard the merit of his service was confirmed by his appointment in 1953 to the senior endowed chair in his department, the William Dorris Boardman professorship. A later academic honor was the L.H.D. conferred by Alfred University in 1966.

Throughout his career Frederick Dek-

natel's dominating purpose was to share his knowledge and understanding of art through teaching. His distinction derived less from his published work — important but relatively sparse — than from his teaching, through which he exercised an influence that was both extensive and profound. Literally thousands of Harvard undergraduates were led to their first comprehension of the art of the 19th and 20th centuries by Frederick Deknatel. The consequence of his work with graduate students was even more wide-ranging and important. In his field, almost always the most in demand among graduate students as well as undergraduates, he was for over 30 years the principal guide of a substantial portion — often a majority — of Harvard's graduate students in fine arts, who were in their turn to become teachers or to work in the modern field in museums, giving nationwide resonance to Deknatel's ideas.

The impress of Deknatel on these generations of pupils has been enduring, not just because it was the result of his sensitivity and wisdom in the field, but because his teaching partook of his character. He was neither dramatic nor dogmatic. As sure as his own thinking might seem to him, he was nonetheless continuously open to the ideas of his stu-

dents — flexible and welcoming of the differences and new directions in their thought. He was responsive in the same way to the material he taught, even the most recent and experimental. Quietly alert yet profoundly reflective, he showed a rare ability to discriminate between mere novelty and true innovation. To the end of his life his judgment concerning the most controversial aspects of his field was sought by the ablest students, scholars, and collectors.

It was not only in intellectual discourse that Deknatel was receptive and understanding. In all his relationships, with colleagues and friends and family as well as students, he was sympathetic, gentle, and unselfish. He was too modest to consider that the vast service he performed for the University was exceptional, but he would in any case have thought of it as given, not to any institutional abstraction, but to the individuals with whom he had to deal.

Deknatel's students were the beneficiaries of the same responsiveness and sensibility he exercised toward works of art. Beyond his teaching, he demonstrated that sensibility in what he would have disclaimed was the role of a collector. The depth of understanding and the validity of taste he showed in the classroom

were proved in his own home with real works of art, each one a reflection, in its quality, of that of the collector. Deknatel's way with art was one with his way with people — informed with wisdom, judgment, and love.

John P. Coolidge

Charles Kuhn

Agnes Mongan

Sydney J. Freedberg, *Chairman*