

SYDNEY JOSEPH FREEDBERG

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

February 10, 1998

SYDNEY JOSEPH FREEDBERG

Born: November 11, 1914

Died: May 6, 1997

Sydney Joseph Freedberg died on May 6, 1997, after an illness that he had long overcome with valiant determination and good humor. He was born in Boston in 1914 and graduated with distinction from the Boston Latin School. What seemed to him an incongruity between his origins and the cosmopolitan world of art scholars, connoisseurs and collectors into which he quickly became absorbed no doubt prompted him to create in dress and in speech an image of fastidious refinement; his celebrated accent, perhaps initially intended to be British, effectively erased the Boston connection, and never failed to promote discussion. He was always willing to joke about it himself, invariably describing it as "pure affectation." His prose — and lecture — style, perfectly suited to his nuanced penetration into paintings and drawings, was also a consciously nurtured construction of a Henry-Jamesian complexity.

Apart from a period of teaching at Wellesley College, his career before retirement was tied to Harvard; He received his B.A. *summa cum laude* in 1936, his Ph.D. in 1940, and he published the majority of his books with the Harvard Press. After receiving his doctorate he served for four years in the Army, while attached to a British naval intelligence unit accountable directly to the British War Cabinet, he risked disciplinary action by refusing as a matter of conscience to work on intelligence about Rome, fearing that any information gained would be used in a military operation against the city which might damage works of art there.

From the Harvard University Gazette
Volume XCIII No. 27, April 23, 1998

Despite this, he was awarded the Order of the British Empire. His many other honors include two of the most prestigious decorations of the Italian Republic as well as the International Galileo Galilei Prize.

Sydney served Harvard for twenty-seven years, from 1954 to 1983, in the last three years as the first Arthur Kingsley Porter Professor of Fine Arts. His legendary lectures and seminars, like his other contributions to art history, were predicated on the unshakable belief that our own humanity has been generated from the dim, distant past in an uninterrupted chain. In the study of the links that constitute the chain, he maintained, there is not only the explanation of what and how we have come to be, but the opportunity to relive portions of past time. The links that concerned him above all were those formed by the galaxy of painters active in Italy during the sixteenth century and the first decades of the seventeenth. He profoundly experienced the artistic individuality of artists active from the time of Leonardo, Raphael, Michelangelo and Titian to Caravaggio and the Carracci, and had a genius for communicating his reactions, controlled by his expert knowledge, in his always scrupulously nuanced language. Another strength was his passion for teaching advanced students the principles of connoisseurship: how to identify objects, determine their quality, and assess their character. His students now constitute a large percentage of those teaching Italian Renaissance art in research universities. These accomplishments served him as a collector in his own right, and he was the *defacto* curator of the Fogg Museum's Italian Renaissance and Baroque art. Sydney's intimate knowledge of the Fogg Museum collections and of the place of the Museum in the structure of the University led to his appointment, in 1978-79, as acting Director of the Museum, at the time of a major capital fund drive.

His two best-known books *Painting of the High Renaissance in Rome and Florence* of 1961, and *Painting In Italy, 1500-1600*, (in the Pelican Series in the History of Art), 1971 (both

followed by several revised editions), were written at least partly in the spirit of public service – an extension, as it were, of teaching; they were major reference works on their subject in the ensuing years. The last book, *Circa 1600: A Revolution of Style in Italian Painting*, of 1983 reached beyond the close reading of pictures to discuss the impact of religious and political ideas of the period.

For almost four decades, Sydney was involved with the Harvard Center for Italian Renaissance Studies at Villa I Tatti. From its inception he was influential in defining its mission, shaping its policies, advising its Directors, and choosing its fellows. Sydney loved I Tatti from the days when it was the home of his mentor, Bernard Berenson; in its intellectual and sensuous surroundings he chose his specialty and forged his professional identity. It was his Italian home, where he seemed happier and more fulfilled than almost anywhere, and his affection was reciprocated by its fellows and its staff. In 1966, after the catastrophic floods in Italy, he served as national vice-chairman of the Committee to Rescue Italian Art, and later joined the Board of Directors of Save Venice.

On retiring from Harvard in 1983, Sydney accepted an invitation to join the staff of the National Gallery of Art in Washington as Chief Curator. Over the next five years he effectively carried out a mandate to raise the standards of curatorial appointments, scholarship and publishing, acquisitions and exhibitions. The highlight of his tenure was the organization, with John Pope-Hennessy of the Metropolitan Museum in New York, of a comprehensive exhibition of Italian art in the period of his main interest: "The Age of Correggio and the Carracci: Emilian Painting of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries." For his career achievements he was awarded, in 1988, the National Medal of the Arts, the only scholar to have received this decoration.

He is survived by his wife, the former Catherine Blanton (Harvard Ph.D., 1981), their son, Sydney Jr. (Harvard B.A.,

summa cum laude, 1995) and by William (Harvard B.A., 1964), Kate and Nathaniel, children from earlier marriages.

Sydney's capacity for friendship was, among those lucky enough to be his friends, legendary; in this he was as discriminating as in all his other enthusiasms; but once one was chosen, one was given without reservation his life-enhancing companionship. The friends whom he gathered around him on evenings in Channing Place, or at the I Tatti villino were drawn not merely from his professional circle but also from a more extended, comprehensive congregation.

Respectfully submitted,

Walter Kaiser
Seymour Slive
Arthur Solomon
John Wilmerding
James S. Ackerman, Chair