

James Ackerman (1919–2016)

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James Sloss Ackerman, author of two of the most influential books on Renaissance architecture in the English language, *The Architecture of Michelangelo* (1961) and *Palladio* (1966), died in the last hours of 2016.¹ He was ninety-seven years old and had been active as an art historian since 1949, publishing his last book in the fall of 2016.² He was a student of Richard Krautheimer, Erwin Panofsky, and Karl Lehman at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts and came to be thought of as the living link to the generation of German émigrés who founded modern American art history. It was an honor he earned by his own considerable achievement, much of which aimed to push the profession beyond the lessons of his teachers.³

Ackerman came from an affluent German Jewish family that settled in San Francisco during the California gold rush of the mid-nineteenth century. His interest in art was nurtured by his mother, an amateur potter and patron of local artists, and by the instruction in fine arts that he received in the prep school to which he was sent. At Yale he wrote a senior thesis on abstraction in Paleolithic painting. It was rejected for honors by the department, but, as the inscription in a book he received from visiting professor Henri Focillon put it, he was encouraged to “remain faithful to our studies for which you are so well suited.” He went to the Institute of Fine Arts at NYU in 1942 to study classical sculpture, but within a year he was in the army.

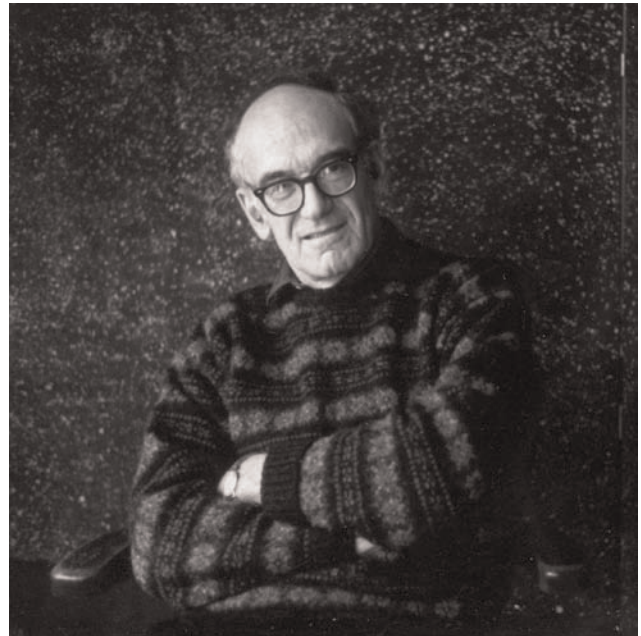


Figure 1 James Ackerman (photo courtesy of Bill Burke).

Ackerman served in a mobile intelligence unit in Africa and Italy that decoded intercepted communications and traveled in the wake of the Allied front.⁴ It was this experience that oriented Ackerman to Italy and to the Renaissance. His first article, in the Institute of Fine Arts's student publication, *Marsyas*, was on the Certosa of Pavia, a building complex that he came to know as a soldier transferring documents from storage there back to their Milan homes after the fighting had moved on to France and Germany. It was on his passage up the peninsula that he became the “liberator of Mantua.” With his unit bivouacked in the countryside, he and a friend hitched a ride to the nearby town, which revealed itself to be Mantua. The streets were empty and the monuments shut.

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People appeared only slowly, warily, and then joyfully to welcome the first Allied troops to enter the city.

Ackerman's career began spectacularly. The article that he wrote while still a graduate student on the controversies surrounding the late fourteenth-century construction of Milan Cathedral remains one of his most widely cited works.⁵ The article is based on documents that record a decade of debate between the local builders who began the project and architects from France and Germany invited by the Duke of Milan, Gian Galeazzo Visconti, to save it. The heart of the article is Ackerman's analysis of the positions of the two sides, but its conclusion is about art historical method. The article rejects the interpretation that had dominated the criticism of Gothic design since Eugène Viollet-le-Duc—that Gothic architecture derived exclusively from structural necessity—as a view based only on a modern idea of science and an overriding prejudice for rationality. It shows that the medieval *scienza* of the article's title did not exercise that kind of systematic control over the project. Ackerman declared a commitment to a method in which contemporary evidence rather than modern theory had to be the basis of interpretation. It was a position he adhered to throughout his life.

Ackerman went to Rome with a thesis project chosen in New York: the reception of Vitruvius in the Renaissance. Once in Rome, however, he began to question the wisdom of traveling to Italy to do a library project. Exposure to the collection of architectural drawings in the Uffizi showed him a more congenial direction. Drawings remained a lifelong interest, and they also gave him a new thesis topic: the Cortile del Belvedere in the Vatican. The project was an archaeology of sorts. Its aim was to reconstruct the original project of Bramante, Julius II, and their immediate successors partly buried under the less than sympathetic additions of later popes. Drawings, printed views, and archival documentation provided the instruments of excavation. Ackerman was the first to understand the perspectival structure of Bramante's design (with an ideal viewing position in the papal apartments), the origin of the scheme in the reconstruction of ancient villa architecture, and the importance for subsequent villa and garden design of the relationship between architecture and nature pioneered in the Cortile. The documents were essential, but not enough. Scholarship, as Ackerman would insist in many essays, demanded interpretation.

Michelangelo is Ackerman's most complete work. It takes the great sculptor seriously as an architect, treating the projects as design problems, not personal expression. It emphasizes function, materials, and structure. It examines style building by building and eschews the whole question of mannerism. A monograph structured around the interpretation of individual projects, it is also a collection of essays on major issues of Renaissance architecture. The preface presents the "revolution" in architecture inaugurated by Bramante. The

first chapter is about Michelangelo's "theory." The project chapters also have themes. Ackerman takes the discussion of the library of San Lorenzo in Florence, surely one of the most elegant designs of the sixteenth century, as the opportunity to confront the then commonly held belief that Renaissance architecture was exclusively about form. He marshals the correspondence between Michelangelo and the Medici pope Clement VII to show that utility preoccupied both architect and patron. Ackerman even demonstrates that the most notorious element of the elevation—the immured columns of the vestibule—respond directly to structural necessity. The narrative of the chapter flows without the encumbrance of the scholarly apparatus. That receives full treatment in a separate catalogue volume. Both volumes are beautifully written—"lucid, natural and swift" was Richard Pommer's description of Ackerman's style in his review of *Michelangelo* in the *Renaissance News*.⁶

Palladio, published in 1966, is a very different book. Where *Michelangelo* is about architectural culture, *Palladio*, organized by building type, embeds the buildings in society, emphasizing their relationships to economies, urban environments, and the cultures of their patrons. The most telling characterization in the book contrasts Palladio's villas with the villa culture of central Italy. Cardinal Ippolito d'Este's villa at Tivoli was a country retreat, easily accessible from his main residence in the city; Palladio's villa at Maser was located far from Venice and was the principal residence of its patron, Daniele Barbaro, humanist scholar and patriarch of Aquileia. And while the Villa d'Este was located in the hills, where it could enjoy a view of the landscape from which it was separated not only by distance but also by a high garden wall, the Villa Barbaro was in the fields and as much a working farm as it was a palace. *Palladio* is the book that all architecture students read. It is they who were Ackerman's constant companions in the classroom, from his first semester at Berkeley to his last at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, and he shared with them his conviction that good architecture is about elegant answers to practical questions.⁷

In his long lifetime of publication Ackerman treated no subject more frequently than questions of art historical method. He rejected his teachers' dismissal of questions of method and theory and challenged the practice of the contemporary discipline. He began polemically as the young editor of the *Art Bulletin* in an address to the plenary session of the 1958 meeting of the College Art Association: "Like the scientist and businessman, [the American historian] does not twist facts to fit a theory, because for him facts are sacrosanct." But facts and objectivity are not enough. "As we cannot do without facts, so we cannot do with facts alone." "Without theory . . . we cannot evaluate works of art or interpret them."⁸ But what theory? In the 1979 essay "On Judging Art without

Absolutes” he proposed an articulate subjectivity, interpretation based on personal experience and clearly expressed values. Ackerman aimed at a method “that would combine openness to the values of the works themselves with an awareness of the values I impose.”⁹ He refined that formulation in the 1984 essay “Interpretation, Response: Toward a Theory of Art Criticism” by adding a distinction he took from Claude Lévi-Strauss’s *The Savage Mind*. Between rational interpretation and subjective response he now made room for works that did not conform to established principles and that, by their power, forced the viewer to expand his or her interpretive stance. It is the capacity to adjust that gives criticism its vitality.¹⁰ In one of his very late essays, “My Passage to India,” a freewheeling tour of the iconography of Western churches stimulated by his first exposure to Hindu and Jain temple architecture, he gave an object lesson in what new experience could mean for interpretation.¹¹

Since the 1960s Ackerman had been preoccupied with the problem of integrating the interpretation of architecture with the rest of human history. *Palladio* set out the economic and cultural base of the architect’s work. The 1972 essay “The Gesù in the Light of Contemporary Church Design” examined church design in relation to Counter-Reformation liturgical reform.¹² But this kind of contextual history—the statement of a program, however broadly defined, and the examination of its realization in architecture—did not satisfy Ackerman. He frequently wrote that Marxist interpretation got closer to an organic relationship between architecture and the fabric of life. But because it submerged individuality and the uniqueness of the individual work, he resisted it.¹³ It was the scholarship of Manfredo Tafuri that showed him how he could bring the Marxist view into his own work. Tafuri’s treatment of the concept of ideology gave Ackerman the tool he sought to understand a more fundamental relationship between buildings and everything else. No longer dependent on the explicit intention of the builders expressed in a document, ideological interpretation worked with deeply held attitudes pervasive in the culture. For Ackerman this meant that the historian need no longer accept uncritically the values embedded in a building program; everything—culture, program, building—was open to criticism. The Mellon Lectures that Ackerman delivered in 1985 at the National Gallery of Art—in which he examined the myth of idealized country life held by city dwellers over millennia—represent his most extended application of the new method.¹⁴

Ackerman could be an intimidating figure: tall, austere, socially awkward, distracted when he was thinking through a project. He was also open, generous, and genuinely interested in the work and welfare of his students and colleagues. And, as Phyllis Lambert put it, “Jesus he was a handsome man.”¹⁵ He made extraordinary efforts to connect—“Jim, not

Professor Ackerman.”¹⁶ He rode his bicycle to work, wearing the dorky helmets and trouser clips of the 1960s, brought his brown-bag lunch of raw vegetables to the student lounge, invited students to his house, introduced them to his family. He played tennis with students (all played badly) and brought them to his farm in Vermont. The farm was not on the Cape, with its summer society. No drinks, no dinner parties. Swimming was in a farm pond, and by rule everyone swam naked. Ackerman worked every day, but he also collected mushrooms (which he tasted at breakfast and served, if he hadn’t gotten sick, later in the day), baked bread (famously dense), tended the kitchen garden, and helped his neighbors with seasonal jobs. He cut hay like a man born to the work. The farm was spare, like the Cambridge house, in defiance of family wealth. He rusticated, like the villa builders of his Palladio, with the books but without the salon.

He was patient with his students and loyal. He had a clear-eyed view of their strengths but also recognized their weaknesses, and if called on for a letter of recommendation (of which there were hundreds) he told the whole story, but always in a way that his affection came through and his conviction in the student’s ultimate success predominated. Letters to students, often around drafts of thesis chapters, came on recycled paper, with the text of somebody else’s manuscript on the other side. There is some disagreement about the character of Ackerman’s comments. At his retirement party, students recalled receiving them with trepidation. His reaction: “I was astonished to hear the stories about studying under my iron fist; I always thought of myself as an indulgent paternal type, with only a few fidgets about the English language and about the capitalization of titles in different languages.”¹⁷ The letters could also be quite warm and personal, none more so than his response to Steven Tobriner’s account of the difficulties of working in the Sicilian town of Noto. An archivist who hid documents, a senior scholar with a team of assistants competing for the same material, and the Mafia were only part of the problem. “Dear Steve: Good God. You ought to be a novelist; to hell with Art History; too risky a profession.”¹⁸ In a way, the students never left. He read endless manuscripts, including the 789 pages of Bill Curtis’s history of modern architecture. It kept him in touch.

Despite a conservative family background, Ackerman’s liberal politics go back to his early adulthood. Immediately after World War II he joined the American Veterans Committee, a left-wing group. He attended its national conference in 1947, but with the communist members outmaneuvering everybody else, Ackerman realized he was out of his depth. In 1969 the student takeover of University Hall split the Harvard faculty, with a conservative faction advocating the expulsion of the student activists. Ackerman was elected to the Faculty Council for the liberals. He sympathized with the students

but was appalled by the lack of an intellectual base for their revolutionary action. He decided he had to ask himself the questions that he believed they ought to have been asking him. So he began discussing the issues of the day within the context of the material of his classes. Could the history of art be relevant in a period of turmoil? It was in this period that Ackerman “took a vacation” from scholarship to write about issues of critical choice and education in the arts.¹⁹

It is for these qualities of moral integrity, openness, and generosity as much as for his accomplishments as a scholar that Ackerman was admired. His devotion to his wife Mildred (née Rosenbaum), disabled by polio in the early 1950s, was inspiring. She had been a dancer and was always a powerful figure. None can forget him carrying her into the Fogg Museum for a reception or up flights of stairs to attend a dinner in a student apartment. His total engagement with the sculpture of Jill (Slosburg-Ackerman), whom he married after Mildred’s death, and the perennial youthfulness he enjoyed in her company were equally wonderful.

In 1989, on the occasion of Ackerman’s seventieth birthday, his students selected a collection of his essays for republication.²⁰ For each essay, he prepared a postscript. These pieces show that Ackerman remained engaged with questions he had first addressed as much as forty years earlier and that he could be as critical of his own work as he occasionally was of the work of others. The postscripts set the essays in the intellectual climates of the moments in which they were written and assess the literature that superseded Ackerman’s own. They also examine the contemporary status of the questions raised in the original texts. In the postscript to “Transactions in Architectural Design,” an essay that argues for the moral necessity of considering not just the interests of the building patron but also those of the population that would be affected by the work, he laments “the neglect in current discourse of the social implications of architecture.”²¹ But he could also be playful. The postscript to “Ars sine Scientia” tells the reader that the article, written before he began his dissertation, “has been more frequently cited than any I have written as a certified professional. Would this imply anything about the value of the Ph.D.?”²² Remarks like this pepper Ackerman’s occasional writing. My favorite is in a review of Chastel’s *Le Palais Farnèse*, where he recommends that “anyone who owns the catalog volume of my *Architecture of Michelangelo* can now tear out the section on Sangallo’s work at the Farnese” and read only the essay by Christoph Frommel published there.²³

For a scholar who died at ninety-seven, it would be surprising if contemporary practice had not pushed beyond the positions he pioneered fifty and sixty years ago. His calls for clarity about method, consciously subjective response, and a more organic integration of architecture and the social, economic, and political fabric of contemporary life have been absorbed into contemporary practice. It is the beauty of the

prose, “lucid, natural and swift,” the imaginativeness of the interpretation, and the ability to make architectural history relevant to a general audience that define Ackerman’s reputation today. But the discipline within which he worked, and from which his books and articles stand out, would not be what it has become without his moral and intellectual example, his exploration of its most fundamental questions, and his balanced advocacy of both tradition and progress.²⁴

Notes

1. I would like to thank the following friends and colleagues who have written about their experiences of Ackerman for this essay; I regret that I have not been able to include more of their words in the text: Jill Slosburg-Ackerman, Anne Ackerman, Daniel Abramson, Nicholas Adams, Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, Guido Beltrami, Kathleen Brandt, Horst Bredekamp, Cammy Brothers, Giorgio Ciucci, Joseph Connors, William Curtis, Sam Edgerton, Homa Farjadi, Francesco Paolo Fiore, Alice Friedman, Marcia Hall, Rab Hatfield, Andree Hayum, David Karmon, Thomas D. Kaufman, Rosalind Krauss, Phyllis Lambert, Irving Lavin, Ralph Lieberman, Myra Rosenfeld Little, Joanna Woods Marsden, Sarah McPhee, John Pinto, Brenda Preyer, Natasha Staller, Stephen Tobriner, David Van Zanten, and Rochelle Ziskin. Sources for the life and thought of Jim Ackerman include the following. An extended interview with Ackerman conducted by Joel Gardner in 1994 as part of the Oral History Project of the University of California, Los Angeles, and the Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities is available online at the UCLA Library, Digital Collections, <http://oralhistory.library.ucla.edu/viewTextFile.do?itemId=29985&fileSeq=6&xsl=null> (accessed 10 July 2017). For published interviews, see Nicholas Adams, “Conversazione con James S. Ackerman,” *Casabella* 693 (Oct. 2001), 84–87; “‘A Way Must Be Found to Broaden Our Perspective’: James Ackerman in Conversation with Cammy Brothers,” *Art Bulletin* 94, no. 3 (Sept. 2012), 362–67. An excellent assessment of the significance of Ackerman’s work by Kathleen Brandt and Richard Krautheimer was published as “Xenion: A Bread and Butter Letter” in the first collection of Ackerman’s essays, *Distance Points: Essays in Theory and Renaissance Art and Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), ix–xxi. The texts read at the memorial event for Ackerman at Harvard University, plus “remembrances” sent by students and friends, are available online: “James S. Ackerman: Remembrances,” http://haa.fas.harvard.edu/files/hoart/files/jsa_reduced.pdf (accessed 10 July 2017).
2. James S. Ackerman, *Origins, Invention, Revision: Studying the History of Art and Architecture* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2016).
3. Ackerman was enormously influenced by his thesis adviser, Richard Krautheimer. In the memorial essay he wrote on Krautheimer for this journal, Ackerman attributes many of the most distinctive aspects of his own scholarship to Krautheimer’s example: “What Richard taught me was to seek out surprises and affections, work hard, and get the facts straight. He would not have claimed that following those precepts would make for good art history; they would have to be given meaning by imaginative interpretation, a matter of innate ability that could be encouraged but not be taught or learned. . . . Richard’s unspoken disposition in the study of the arts of the past was toward what could be called *contextualism*: the interpretation of the arts in the light of the intellectual-theological culture that produced them.” James S. Ackerman, in Nicholas Adams, James S. Ackerman, Pamela Askew, Phyllis Lambert, John Coolidge, and Craig Hugh Smyth, “In Memoriam: Richard Krautheimer (1897–1994),” *JSAH* 54, no. 1 (Mar. 1995), 6. The mutual affection between the two men was lifelong. At an event for Krautheimer at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton in the late 1980s, attended by many of

his distinguished graduates, it was Ackerman who brought the aging Krautheimer into the hall.

4. He filled time between assignments making watercolors that recorded the landscapes of his war in North Africa and Italy. A sampling of these paintings appears in James S. Ackerman, "The Liberation of Mantua and Other Unintended Consequences of My Military Service during World War II," in *Origins, Invention, Revision*, 43–56.

5. James S. Ackerman, "‘Ars sine Scientia nihil est’: Gothic Theory of Architecture at the Cathedral of Milan," *Art Bulletin* 31, no. 2 (June 1949), 84–111.

6. Richard Pommer, review of *The Architecture of Michelangelo*, by James S. Ackerman, *Renaissance News* 15, no. 4 (Winter 1962), 319. Ackerman credited the directness of his writing style to his in-house editors: his wives, Mildred Rosenbaum Ackerman and Jill Slosburg-Ackerman, and his daughter Anne.

7. Ackerman's work had a profound effect on architectural history in Italy, where the discipline had been the province of architects "between the library and the drawing board." "Italian books . . . interpreted architectural forms as if they were timeless and with no content." Guido Beltrami, "Remembrance," read at the Ackerman memorial event, Harvard University (see note 1 above). A new generation appreciated Ackerman's writings as "perfetti nell'analisi e nella sintesi: un modello a cui rifarsi" (faultless in their analysis and in their synthesis of the material, a model to which to aspire). Giorgio Ciucci, letter to the author, 29 Jan. 2017. Ackerman, in turn, valued his connection to the architectural history community in Italy. He expressed it best through his dedication to the Palladio Center in Vicenza, where he was a member of the board from 1969 to 2016 and editor of the center's *Annali di Architettura* in 1992–94. He dedicated a large portion of the Balzan Prize that he received in 2001 to the Palladio Center to fund the publication of the first books of young scholars.

8. James S. Ackerman, "On American Scholarship in the Arts," *College Art Journal* 17, no. 4 (Summer 1958), 359, 360, 361.

9. James S. Ackerman, "On Judging Art without Absolutes," *Critical Inquiry* 5, no. 3 (Spring 1979), 469.

10. James S. Ackerman, "Interpretation, Response: Toward a Theory of Art Criticism," in *Distance Points*, 43. This essay was originally published in M. H. Abrams and James S. Ackerman, *Theories of Criticism: Essays in Literature and Art* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1984), 33–53.

11. James S. Ackerman, "My Passage to India," in *Origins, Invention, Revision*, 157–77.

12. James S. Ackerman, "The Gesù in the Light of Contemporary Church Design," in *Baroque Art: The Jesuit Contribution*, ed. Rudolf Wittkower and Irma B. Jaffe (New York: Fordham University Press, 1972), 15–28.

13. James S. Ackerman, "Art History and the Problems of Criticism," *Daedalus* 89, no. 1 (Winter 1960), 263.

14. The lectures were subsequently published as James S. Ackerman, *The Villa: Form and Ideology of Country Houses* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), see esp. 10–14.

15. Phyllis Lambert, email correspondence with author, 7 Mar. 2017. Lambert's remark is a quote from E. E. Cummings's poem "Buffalo Bill's."

16. Marcia Hall, email correspondence with author, 8 Feb. 2017.

17. James Ackerman, letter to the author, 1990 (undated).

18. James Ackerman, letter to Steven Tobriner, dated only 16 Jan.

19. Ackerman, interview by Gardner for the UCLA Oral History Project, 137–41.

20. Ackerman, *Distance Points*.

21. *Ibid.*, 34.

22. *Ibid.*, 264.

23. James S. Ackerman, review of *Le Palais Farnèse*, ed. André Chastel, *JSAH* 43, no. 1 (Mar. 1984), 75.

24. Ackerman was one of the first fellows in art history at the American Academy in Rome (1949–52). He was a Guggenheim fellow (1993), a senior fellow of the National Endowment for the Humanities (1974–75), and a resident scholar at the American Academy in Rome (1974–75). He was a trustee of the American Academy in Rome (1967–84), a member of the Steering Committee of the Centro Internazionale di Studi di Architettura Andrea Palladio, Vicenza (1969–2016), editor in chief of the *Art Bulletin* (1956–60), and editor (1992–94) and member of the editorial board (to 2016) of the Palladio Center's *Annali di Architettura*. Ackerman was a fellow or honorary fellow of learned societies in the United States as well as in London, Rome, Vicenza, Venice, Uppsala, and Munich. He was a Grand Officer in the Order of Merit of the Italian Republic, winner of the Hitchcock Prize of the Society of Architectural Historians and of the Charles Rufus Morey Book Award of the College Art Association for *The Architecture of Michelangelo*, of the Gold Medal of the Istituto di Storia dell'Arte Lombarda (1987), of Institute Honors of the American Institute of Architects (1987), of the Premio Daria Borghese, Rome (1995), and of the 2001 prize in the humanities awarded by the Swiss-Italian Balzan Foundation. He received the Centennial Award of the University of California, Berkeley (1970), the Distinguished Teaching Award of the College Art Association (1991), and the Paul Oskar Kristeller Lifetime Achievement Award of the Renaissance Society of America (1998). He was a professor at Berkeley (1952–60) and Harvard (1961–90) and a visiting professor at Columbia, NYU, Cambridge University, and MIT. In 1985 he gave the A. W. Mellon Lectures at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.