

JAKOB ROSENBERG

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

MARCH 8, 1983

JAKOB ROSENBERG

BORN September 5, 1883

DIED April 7, 1980

At a meeting of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences on March 8, the following Minute was placed upon the records.

Jakob Rosenberg was born in Berlin on September 5, 1883. He died in Cambridge, Massachusetts, after a brief illness, on April 7, 1980.

Rosenberg's youthful plan to enter his family's art and antiquities business was interrupted by the outbreak of the First World War, when he joined a cavalry unit of the German army. In 1915 he was wounded and captured in France, and sent to Scotland. An exchange of war prisoners brought him to Switzerland where he was free to study art history, first at Bern University and then at Zurich. In Zurich he rented a room, bare as a monk's cell, whose former tenant had left without a word or trace. It was a while before Rosenberg learned that the previous occupant was Lenin, who had boarded a sealed train for the Finland Station. The Soviets later reconstructed the room using every bit of furnishing they could buy from the landlady. Pedantic piety invites error. Rosenberg, whose concern for establishing the correct provenances of objects was professional, maintained that it is his coffee cups, his ash tray, his flower vase that are now enshrined, grossly mislabeled, in the Lenin Museum in Moscow.

After the war Rosenberg returned to Germany and apprenticed himself to an art dealer in Munich. He never regretted the experience. In his words: "It helped open my eyes." However, he soon decided that his temperament was ill-suited for the art trade and he resolved to resume his academic studies at Munich University.

Heinrich Wölfflin, then *ordinarius* of art history at Munich, became Rosenberg's teacher. His impact on his student was decisive. Rosenberg's unwavering dedication to a visual rather than a literary approach to art history and to the study of the phenomenon of style was based on Wölfflin's teaching. Although he later rejected some of his professor's oversimplified concepts, he often stressed his fundamental debt to this giant among the founders of modern art history.

Rosenberg received his Ph.D. degree *summa cum laude* from Munich in 1922. His dissertation on Schongauer's drawings was

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published in the following year. Its topic signalled what was to remain his foremost lifelong interest. In the study of master drawings he made his greatest contribution to connoisseurship.

In 1922 Rosenberg married Elizabeth Husserl, a fellow-student at Munich and daughter of Edmund Husserl, the leader of the school of phenomenology in German philosophy. During the course of their long life together he recognized her as one of his most perceptive critics. She died on October 1, 1981.

After receiving his degree Rosenberg began work in the Berlin Print Room where he remained until 1935 when he resigned because he found life in a German museum intolerable under the Nazis.

When he joined the Berlin Museums, Wilhelm von Bode was almost 80 years old and still their Director-General; Max J. Friedlander was director of the Print Room and in his prime. Rosenberg only saw Bode from a distance, but his contact with Friedlander was close. His expertise gained enormously from Friedlander's generous impulse to allow others to share his rich experience. There was much to share. During the course of Rosenberg's years at the Print Room Friedlander wrote his triumph of connoisseurship, the 14 volumes of *Die altniederländische Malerei*.

Friedlander had proclaimed that connoisseurship was a matter of intuition and he did not believe that analysis of works of art could establish very much. Rosenberg disagreed. He helped demystify connoisseurship by repeatedly demonstrating in his later publications and teaching that what one of its greatest practitioners called a matter of intuition is, in fact, a bit of intuition buttressed by a sharp and perceptive eye, a vast storehouse of historical and technical knowledge, close firsthand familiarity with innumerable works of art, a formidable visual memory, and incessant practice.

After his student years Rosenberg's heart sent him to the 17th-century Dutch masters for his specialized research, but never to the exclusion of artists of other schools and periods. His first article appeared in 1925; it was on an unpublished late Rembrandt drawing (Benesch 1036). Seminal studies on Cornelis Vroom and Hobema quickly followed. In 1928 his classic monograph and catalogue of Jacob van Ruisdael's paintings and drawings was published. He did the lion's share of work on the monumental catalogue of Berlin's Netherlandish drawings, a joint effort of its curators that appeared in 1930. The standard volume on Cranach's paintings that Friedlander and he wrote in collaboration was published in 1932. The revised and enlarged edition of it, which

appeared five years ago, was prepared and seen through the press by Rosenberg himself when he was an octogenarian.

Rosenberg made notable acquisitions for the Berlin Print Room while he was its keeper from 1930 until 1935. He also helped save some of its key holdings when he was informed after the Nazis came to power, that Goering planned to visit the collection to select some choice works by Durer, Schongauer, and Cranach for what his outrider euphemistically called an extended loan. In preparation for Goering's visit Rosenberg conspicuously displayed an assortment of 18th-century French prints depicting themes which cataloguers then categorized as *sujets libres*. Upon his arrival Goering became so enamoured with the exhibited French prints that he made his selection from them, and then happily departed. He never got to the Durers, Schongauers, and Cranachs.

When Rosenberg first visited Harvard in the spring of 1936 his professional reputation was already secure. He was warmly welcomed at the Fogg, and it is not surprising that he found in Paul J. Sachs a kindred spirit because of their shared passion for the graphic arts. At the suggestion of the German medievalist Adolf Goldschmidt, who had taught as a visiting professor at Harvard, and through Paul Sachs's offices, Rosenberg received an invitation to teach in the University's summer school program that year. Rosenberg, who had no experience as a teacher and had done little—if any—lecturing, accepted the challenge, choosing as his subject 17th-century Dutch painting. The course was an unqualified success. Indeed, when he returned to Germany at the end of the term, it was with an invitation to return to summer school in Cambridge the following year.

In 1937 Rosenberg immigrated to the United States with his wife and their two young children, Wolfgang and Ruth. For the following two years he was research fellow and lecturer in the Department of Fine Arts. An appointment in the Fogg Museum came in 1939 when he was made curator of prints, a post he was to occupy for 25 years. In the following year he was appointed associate professor. He received a permanent appointment at the University as professor in 1948 when he was 55 years old. Harvard awarded him an honorary doctor of arts degree at his retirement in 1964.

As curator of the Fogg's print department Rosenberg used its modest purchasing funds to expand significantly the range of an already notable collection with selected works of the highest quality by modern and older masters. His expert knowledge and enthusiasm for the graphic arts extended to the art of his own day. Thus, in the 1940s, when works of the German Expressionists, thrown

out of German public collections as "degenerate," first began to appear on the market, he secured outstanding examples at rock-bottom prices. He also worked closely with Professor Charles Kuhn, then curator of the Busch-Reisinger Museum, and helped strengthen that museum's remarkable holdings of 20th-century central European art.

The man who never taught before coming to Harvard became one of the University's most successful and beloved teachers. He did not establish a school but his method of analysis, his concentration on quality, and his keen appreciation of the importance of technical examination for a fuller understanding of works of art left a lasting impression on the generations of students he taught. After his retirement, he kept a study in the museum where he received visitors and worked until the last weeks of his life. His callers included students who were eager to make contact with the leading scholar and connoisseur who had known, and now seemed the peer of, Wolfflin, Friedlander, and Frits Lugt. Curators, collectors, and dealers continued to come for his decisive, yet never dogmatic opinions. Some of his most influential teaching was done in these informal meetings.

At the Fogg, Rosenberg became affectionately known as *der heilige Jakob*—not because he was especially devout or of a saintly innocence of the ways of the world. Neither was the case. Other qualities earned him this title. His temperateness was beyond that given to ordinary mortals and even passing experience of the gentleness he radiated was like a laying on of hands. Charity marked his appraisal of people as well as works of art; in judging both he searched for the good before the less good. He was quite capable of sharply adverse judgment—he did not easily suffer fools or fakes—but it was his nature to criticize with uncommon tact, and he could be a supreme master of the art of damning with faint praise.

His scholarly activity never slackened at Harvard. In 1948 his monograph on Rembrandt appeared, the culmination of his long devotion and intense study of Holland's greatest artist. Though the production of books about Rembrandt has become a heavy international industry since his monograph was published more than a generation ago, it remains the most lucid and balanced study of the master's art. Rosenberg's *Great Draughtsmen*, which condenses his enormous knowledge of eight major artists ranging from Pisanello to Picasso, appeared in 1959. His full-dress monograph on Cranach's drawings was published in 1960. He was co-author of the painting section in *Dutch Art and Architecture: 1600-1800* that

appeared in the Pelican series in 1966. The following year he published *Quality in Art*, which offers a survey of the criteria of excellence used by earlier critics and a discussion of his own. It is also his *credo*.

Until the end he kept abreast of the scholarly literature and new trends. He recognized that in recent decades technical investigation has made considerable progress and iconographical research has made a contribution to the discipline. But he was skeptical of the efforts now being made to bring safe solutions to often vexing art-historical problems by committee work. For Rosenberg the quality of perception of the individual judge and his direct relationship with the work of art were all-important. The quality of his own perception was perhaps his greatest gift and his direct relationship with works of art could hardly have been closer. They are the constructive and controlling forces of Jakob Rosenberg's writings and the collections he helped form, which will endure as rich sources of pleasure and knowledge for students, scholars, and the wider public.

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