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ORIENTATIONS

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'THE FORBIDDEN CITY: INSIDE THE COURT OF CHINA'S EMPERORS' AT THE ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

Chinese Paintings from Japanese Collections at Los Angeles County Museum of Art

The Selden Map and Other Treasures from Oxford University at the Hong Kong Maritime Museum



John Max Rosenfield (1924–2013)

In the course of his career as Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Professor of Japanese Art, John M. Rosenfield served as chair of the Department of Fine Arts at Harvard; acting director of the Harvard University Art Museums; a trustee of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; a member of the Board of Directors, Japan Society of New York; chair of the editorial board of *Archives of Asian Art*; an adviser to the Sainsbury Institute; and chair of the Metropolitan Center for Far Eastern Art Studies. Everyone knew that he would always go the extra mile, lending a helping hand. If asked to serve, Rosenfield was, one might say, Japanese: he could not say 'no'. James Cahill, the eminent historian of Chinese art, whose death followed Rosenfield's by two months, put it in more exalted terms. When he learned that Rosenfield was dying, Cahill wrote to friends:

John, with whom I have been a close friend for decades, has been known as a 'bodhisattva' from his way of doing work for other people.

Rosenfield's accomplishments were nationally and internationally recognized. He received, from the Japanese government, the Order of the Rising Sun for services to mutual understanding between the United States and Japan (1988); from the Osaka Prefectural Government the Yamagata Banto Prize (2001); and from the Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution the Charles Lang Freer Medal for distinguished contribution to the knowledge and understanding of Oriental civilizations as reflected in their arts (2012). Rosenfield himself, however, was extremely modest about these accomplishments; at the end of his career, he signed his letters simply as 'Pensioner of Japanese Art' or (in reference to his Texas roots) as 'Cactus Jack'.

Born in Dallas on 9 October 1924, Rosenfield attended the University of Texas, Austin, but during World War II he enlisted in the army, learned Thai under army instruction, and served in the Burma–India theatre. After his time in the army, he received his Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of California, Berkeley, and then, contemplating a career



John Rosenfield, after receiving the Charles Lang Freer Medal in 2012
(Courtesy of Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution; photograph by Neil Greentree)

as a painter, he went on to earn a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Southern Methodist University (1947) and a Master of Fine Arts from the University of Iowa (1949). Few visitors to his home in later years, though, ever knew that the paintings on the wall were largely from Rosenfield's student days. In 1950–51 he was recalled into the army for service in Korea and Japan, and after completing this service he entered the graduate programme at Harvard. His subsequent approach to art, informed by his experiences in Asia, was always to put the works into a living context—social, political, religious. In 1959 he received his PhD, with a dissertation not on a Japanese topic—he did not begin to study the Japanese language until the following year, when he was 36—but on the art of the Kushan empire in South Asia formed in the first century of the Common Era. The book, *The Dynastic Arts of the Kushans* (1967), that resulted from this dissertation and an essay entitled 'The Dated Images of Sarnath', are still widely cited in literature on Indian art.

Rosenfield's wide-ranging publications on Japanese art include a series of studies of the

spiritual aspects of early Japanese portraiture sculpture: *Traditions of Japanese Art: Selections from the Kimiko and John Powers Collection* (with Shimada Shūjirō, 1970); *The Courtly Tradition in Japanese Art and Literature: Selections from the Hofer and Hyde Collections* (with Edwin and Fumiko Cranston, 1973); *Journey of the Three Jewels: Japanese Buddhist Paintings from Western Collections* (with Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis, 1979); and *Extraordinary Persons: Works by Eccentric, Non-Conformist Japanese Artists of the Early Modern Era (1580-1868) in the Collection of Kimiko & John Powers* (3 vols, with Fumiko Cranston, 1998). Retirement permitted Rosenfield to focus on his own work. In 2011 he completed what he termed his 'doctoral dissertation in Japanese art'—*Portraits of Chōgen: The Transformation of Buddhist Art in Early Medieval Japan* (2011)—and by the time of his death on 6 December 2013 had completed the manuscript for another book, *Preserving the Dharma: Hōzan Tankai and Early Modern Japanese Buddhist Art* (forthcoming), to be published by the Tang Center for East Asian Art and distributed through Princeton University Press.

Inevitably, most readers of *Orientations* will think first of Rosenfield as a scholar, and perhaps even most people who knew him personally think of him as a teacher of graduate students who today have become leading scholars, but he was also a beloved teacher of undergraduates, a man who regularly declined to attend professional meetings if they would require cancellation of a class. Furthermore, he was a fastidious editor of term papers, unnerving students with his numerous comments and suggestions until they realized that these were the labour of a dedicated teacher. And the dinners at his Arlington Heights home prepared by 'sweet Ella Ruth', as Rosenfield lovingly called his wife, were invitations to be treasured. The testimony of a single former undergraduate makes the point memorably: Arthur Golden, in the acknowledgements accompanying his best-selling novel, *Memoirs of a Geisha* (1997) pays tribute to his teacher:

John Rosenfield taught me Japanese art history as no one else can, and made a university as gigantic as Harvard feel like a small college. I'm grateful to him for helpful advice all along the way.

Graduate students universally speak of being inspired by his warmth and by his breadth of interest. Though he worked primarily with early Japanese Buddhist art (8th–14th century), he encouraged students who were

interested in later Japanese art, including the art of the 20th century. As one commented: 'He kept [his graduate students] on a "long leash". [We] had room to move but the security of a fixed point.'

Teaching was not, for Rosenfield, simply a matter of delivering lectures in classrooms or even holding conferences in his office. Students enthusiastically recall chance encounters in galleries of the Fogg Museum, where they were invited to comment on works on display, and impromptu meetings in the museum's storeroom, where, seated on folding chairs, they were invited to offer opinions—and second and third opinions—about whether the museum should buy some object that was being considered for purchase. Such an encounter was an *insutanto kyoshitsu* ('pop-up classroom'). Likewise, Rosenfield made sure that the old Rübel Library, in the basement of the Fogg, with its unique combination of access to books, to offices, and to works of art, reinforced the sense of community among students and scholars of Asian art history.

Similarly, students recall with gratitude that when he edited a series of English translations of texts about Japanese art, Rosenfield invited them not only to translate the Japanese but also to adapt the books to a Western audience, an audience uninformed of certain things that the Japanese authors, writing for an educated Japanese audience, took for granted. His students, as translators, thus improved their skills in the Japanese language and simultaneously learned that, as teachers, they must put their material into a form that suits the needs of a specific audience.

In short, John Rosenfield was very much a scholar-teacher in the great tradition of Chaucer's 'clerk of Oxenford', whose character Chaucer sums up thus:

And gladly wolde he lern and gladly teche.

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