



John Henry Plummer

December 15, 1919 - September 24, 2019

John Henry Plummer passed away at the age of 99 on September 24th, 2019, at his home in Tucson AZ. John was born on December 15th, 1919, in Rochester MN, the son of Corena Popple Plummer and William Albert Plummer, the latter a physician at the Mayo Clinic during its early years. He was also the nephew of renowned physician Henry Stanley Plummer, a pioneer in the formative years of the Mayo Clinic. His grandfather Albert Plummer was an assistant surgeon in the Civil War.

John's thoughts and memories in later life would often reach back to the freedom of his Minnesota childhood. He enjoyed recounting the carving of sandstone into imaginary places, sailboat racing on the frozen Mississippi, and sledding down the ice-covered inclines of Rochester streets. He also showed early signs of a questioning mind and inventive ingenuity, stimulated in part by his "Uncle Henry", who had designed the early clinic Plummer Building that incorporated many highly innovative medical devices and systems, tools and equipment, and John would spend time tinkering in the large metal and wood shops of Henry's house atop "pill hill", where he could see his uncle return at lunchtime to fabricate surgical tools to use that same day. Another memory staying with him was the cross-country trip made with a friend in a model-A convertible to the west coast and southwest, keeping cool in the Arizona summer by wrapping wet towels around their heads.

Following graduation from Carleton College in Northfield MN in 1941, he entered the Coast Guard Academy at the outset of World War II, and later become a decorated Lieutenant in the Navy for the duration of the War. He served as operator and wave commander of Higgins boats used to convey combat soldiers onto landing beaches, and took part in many European invasions including Salerno in Italy and D-Day in France, followed by island invasions in the Pacific.

He married Charlotte Griswold Wing of Evanston IL in 1944. They had graduated the same year from Carleton, and following the War and over the next fifty-eight years of marriage, they lived in New York City NY, Shanks Village NY, Blauvelt NY, and Princeton

NJ.

John entered Columbia University in 1945, studying under the great medievalist Meyer Shapiro, and in 1953 completed his doctorate on the thirteenth-century English manuscript known as the Lothian Bible. While in graduate school and until 1956 he held the position of Lecturer and then Instructor at Columbia University (Columbia College, Barnard College, General Studies Program, and the Graduate School), teaching courses not only on medieval art but at times modern painting, a dual interest shared by Shapiro.

John Plummer's career as an art historian focused on medieval painting and illuminated manuscripts, primarily at the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York City. At the Morgan, he was Research Associate 1955-56, and then Curator of Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts from 1956-91. In addition he periodically returned to teaching: in 1961 and 1964-73 as Adjunct Professor at Columbia University, and in 1963 as Visiting Lecturer on the Fine Arts at Harvard College. To accommodate his research activities his title at the Morgan was expanded to Research Fellow for Art from 1965-91.

John's academic career shifted to Princeton University in 1973 as Visiting Lecturer with the rank of Professor, and then Professor of Medieval Art from 1976-85, retiring in 1985 as Professor Emeritus. After 1992, he continued to work at the Morgan Library as Curator Emeritus of Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts and Research Fellow for Art Emeritus. He served at the same time as advisor, consultant, or participant in various exhibitions in the U.S., Canada, and Europe, as well as for a number of museums, libraries, collectors, dealers, and auction houses.

He was twice a member of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton NJ in 1970 and 1977, named Fellow of the British Academy in 1980, and Guest Scholar at the J. Paul Getty Museum in 1985. He served on the Visiting Committee for the Medieval Department at the Metropolitan Museum of Art 1970-99, and the Advisory Committee of the International Center of Medieval Art from 1975-78 and 1985-88. In 1986 he was awarded an Honorary Degree as Doctor of Humane Letters at Carleton College.

Among the many acclaimed exhibitions he organized and mounted at the Morgan Library, two especially stand out, the first presenting the utterly captivating fifteenth-century illuminated manuscript "The Book of Hours of Catherine of Cleves", considered the greatest Dutch illuminated manuscript in the world. Its pages are adorned with a series of tiny, exquisitely executed paintings, some of the most beautiful illustrations of biblical subjects ever made. Originally forming a single unified volume, its leaves had been shuffled, reassembled, and sold during the 19th century as two different books. In

comparing the two separately owned volumes, John discovered they were two halves of the same work. In the fall of 1964, using a highly innovative method that he had devised, the Morgan exhibited both these halves side by side, presenting each leaf through a color transparency lit up from behind in its own lightbox.

To the surprise of the Morgan's then director, Frederick Adams, the exhibition was a great success, attracting thousands of visitors. Publisher George Braziller was so dazzled by the manuscript that he published an unprecedented facsimile of it, with text and commentaries by Plummer. When the book came out in the fall of 1966, Plummer remounted his exhibition. The facsimile of "The Hours of Catherine of Cleves" became a Christmas bestseller and, translated into multiple languages, was instrumental in introducing the field of medieval manuscript illumination, previously considered esoteric, to a wide and appreciative public.

In his review of the Cleves exhibition in the New York Times, art critic John Canaday wrote that this "Morgan exhibition, arranged by John Plummer . . . is a landmark." Whereas manuscript illumination had been long thought a secondary form of painting, "Mr. Plummer's exhibition changed all that . . . in as beautiful a show as New York had seen in a long time." Unlike one person having to look page by page at the book, "an unexpected result of Mr. Plummer's efforts" was that "this pleasure was approximated for literally thousands of people across the country, some of whom had never seen an illuminated manuscript."

John Plummer's second major Morgan exhibition, with accompanying catalogue and book, was the groundbreaking overview of late medieval and early Renaissance French illumination entitled "The Last Flowering: French Painting in Manuscripts, 1420-1530" (1982). In recognition of this contribution to French manuscript illumination, and to our appreciation of this aspect of French culture, the French government appointed him Chevalier of the Ordre des Palmes Académiques in 1983.

Due to the central importance of the Morgan collection to medieval and renaissance manuscript studies, it became the crossroad for an international range of manuscript scholars, many becoming his lifelong friends. Among those colleagues who became family and well as professional friends were Francis and Honoria Wormald in England, and Carl and Cecilia Nordenfalk in Sweden, who would host each other when traveling overseas.

He and Charlotte traveled extensively for John's scholarly research, and to visit countless art museums and works of architecture. For several periods they lived abroad with their children, the last in London (1956-57) while John conducted research in the British Library

and British Museum and other manuscript collections.

Two of his lifelong passions were drawing and painting, and while living in Princeton he shared a studio in nearby Hopewell with his wife Charlotte, an accomplished painter and printmaker, who died in 2002. His ink drawings involve humorous caricatures of people, their appearance as well as ways they see themselves and each other. His paintings on canvas and paper changed from cubist-like images in his early work to highly abstract compositions in luminous colors, some derived from memories and others being pure constructions of color, but generally built up out of curving lines of varied thickness and shape, yet always interactive and vibrant. He leaves behind countless drawings and paintings.

Among his daily enjoyments at home, and perhaps at work, was spirited conversation. He loved to think out loud, to provoke new thoughts in others, and especially at the dining table, to suddenly shift his point of view to take a different and often opposing argument about a subject. Another pleasure at times was cooking, particularly scrambled eggs that we would whip in the pan, and scallops that he would cook one at a time, very carefully on each side with a stopwatch.

John was the beloved patriarch of his entire family. He is survived by two children, son Henry Sheppard Plummer of Urbana IL and Tucson AZ, and daughter Barbara Plummer Jasinski of Durham NH, as well as his daughter-in-law Patty Graffius Plummer. His son-in-law Stephen Chester Jasinski passed away in 2018. He is also survived by four grandchildren: Christopher Plummer, Sarah Jasinski, David Jasinski and David's fiancé Siobhan McKenna, and Emily Jasinski Beaudoin and her husband Matthew Beaudoin, three great grandchildren, Samuel Plummer, Sophia Plummer, and Korah Palumbo, along with many cherished nieces and nephews, and his companion over the past ten years, Mary Morris Schmidt, of Tucson AZ.

A private funerary observance was held in Tucson on September 27, 2019.

Comments



“ To our dear neighbor, John Plummer. How nice it was visiting with you as I walked my dog, Brahmsie, on Summer Set Hill. Brahmsie enjoyed your petting and I enjoyed our brief, yet always interesting conversations. We Miss You Professor, Nancy Ressler

Nancy Ressler - October 21, 2019 at 12:20 PM



“ To my beloved John Plummer, It was both an honor and a pleasure to have known you - what a marvoul 3 plus years. I'll miss our talks, drives around town, visits with your kind family, the nice vacations, your paintings, your intellect, and so much more. Lieutenant professor, as I would sometimes affectionately call you. With Love, John Donovan

John Donovan - October 14, 2019 at 07:43 PM



“ 1 file added to the album Memories Album



Evergreen Mortuary, Cemetery & Crematory - October 08, 2019 at 11:57 AM