



NEWS

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Rutherford John Gettens 1900-1974

On 30 May 1974, at the annual meeting of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, Rutherford John Gettens urged that steps be taken to compile a history of conservation in the arts. On the day following, he was made the first honorary member of AIC. The meetings were held in Cooperstown, New York. After them, he and his wife journeyed north to Mooers, New York, around five miles from the Canadian border. He had been born at Mooers on 17 January 1900. He died there, suddenly, on 17 June 1974. While at Mooers he had been writing what he could remember about the history of conservation.

His memory would have held substantial chapters, for knowledge of conservation had occupied him for fifty years (Bachelor of Science, Middlebury College, 1923; Master of Arts, Harvard University, 1929). He was appointed to the staff of the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard in 1928. In 1949 he became Chief, Museum Technical Research; in 1951, Associate in Technical Research, Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D. C.; in 1961, Head Curator, Technical Laboratory, Freer Gallery of Art. From 1968 to 1974, he was Research Consultant to that laboratory.

A founding Fellow of the International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, he became a Council Member of that Institute, a Vice-President, and, from 1968 to 1971, the President. For the International Council of Museums he had been Coordinator of one Working Group on Reference Materials and of another on the Preservation and Restoration of Outdoor Sculptures. From 1960 to 1970 he was a member of the Board of Consulting Fellows, Conservation Center, Institute of Fine Arts, New York University. In 1971 he was Fulbright Lecturer to Greece for advice on establishment of a National Conservation Laboratory for Art and Archaeology.

His full legacy to conservation in the arts rises above calculation, a structure impalpable and blurred by the mist of dawn. Plain and tangible, however, lie his published writings. Between 1932 and 1974 the titles can be numbered by the score. Within thousands of printed pages is the book, The Freer Chinese Bronzes (Vol. II, 1969). Within them, also, is Painting Materials; a Short Encyclopedia (1942) which ran to many editions, the last a translation into the Japanese (Tokyo, 1973). Often his treatises reported studies conducted in collaboration with other persons. The latest appears in the current number of Studies in Conservation. With Elizabeth West FitzHugh and Robert L. Feller he had made an exhaustive compendium on 'Calcium Carbonate Whites'. This was the ninth in a series which had been prepared under his editorship since 1966 on 'Identification of the Materials of Paintings'. Besides preparing records of his own investigations, he had been Associate Editor of Technical Studies in the Field of the Fine Arts, 1935 to 1942, and Editor of IIC Abstracts, 1962 to 1968.

Over the field of conservation he had been an early explorer. Each of his ventures went as far as reagents, radiations, and lenses would allow, as far as mind and machine could take him. The aim of the undertakings was to learn about things, how each was formed and how it came to be as it was. The thing might have been a lump of clay, a fragment of metal, or an artifact that was renowned across the continents. Those persons who worked with him trod in modest comfort as they helped him beat a track into the wilderness of things. The ground might be rough and steep, but the pace remained tolerable. The air was fresh, spiced by adventure. The air was clean, free from jealousy and strife; free from rancour and from guile. The company was genial, often merry. If a wrong step was taken, each blamed only himself. The friend who led them knew where they were bound. He would find the way. GEORGE L. STOUT.

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