

**Princeton University**  
Honors Faculty Members Receiving  
Emeritus Status



June 2007

The biographical sketches were written by  
colleagues in the departments of those honored.

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# John Wilmerding



Born in Boston, Massachusetts, John Wilmerding attended St. Paul's School before earning undergraduate (1960) and graduate degrees (1961, 1965) at Harvard University. Prior to arriving at Princeton in 1988 as the inaugural Christopher Binyon Sarofim '86 Professor in American Art, John taught at Harvard, Yale, and Dartmouth. He served as curator of American art at the National Gallery of Art from 1977 to 1982, and then as its deputy director from 1983 to 1988. While at the National Gallery, he taught courses at the University of Maryland and the University of Delaware.

From 1992 to 1999 John served as chair of the Department of Art and Archaeology, guiding it through a period of expanding programs and the hiring of new faculty, as well as overseeing a major renovation of McCormick Hall. He has been an active participant in Princeton's Program in American Studies, and has offered numerous classes in this subject area, including the courses he taught during the spring semester of 2007: a freshman seminar on "Cultural Revolutions of the Sixties" and an American Studies seminar on "Defining Moments in American Culture."

During his tenure at Princeton, John held an appointment as visiting curator in the department of American art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He has also given generously of his time to other institutions, acting as trustee or serving on the boards of the Guggenheim Museum, the National Portrait Gallery, Monticello, the Smithsonian, the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts, the Terra Foundation for American Art, and many others. This activity reflects John's dedication to both the academy and the museum world and to cultivating a symbiotic relationship between the two, something manifested

by the time and energy he dedicated to the Princeton University Art Museum by documenting and developing its American collection and substantively reorganizing its American galleries.

Immediately upon his arrival at Princeton, John began to build what became under his watch one of the premier programs for the study of American art in the country. Through his research and teaching, he has also made a definitive and lasting contribution to the wider field of American art history. Authoritative studies of major 19th- and 20th-century American artists such as Fitz Henry Lane, Winslow Homer, Thomas Eakins, John Peto, George Bellows, Andrew Wyeth, and Richard Estes along with thematic considerations of a range of topics—including landscape painting (such as the groundbreaking exhibition and catalog *American Light: The Luminist Movement*, 1989), American cultural and intellectual history (in *Compass and Clock: Defining Moments in American Culture*, 1999), and artists' signatures and autobiography (in *Signs of the Artist: Signatures and Self-Expression in American Paintings*, 2003)—have established him as a preeminent scholar of American artistic traditions and have been essential to the development and knowledge base of the field.

John's writing combines the closest attention to the material character of a work of art—from an artist's choice of pigments to the manner in which that artist organizes colors and forms—with an expansive view of the significance of these material qualities within American culture, history, and society, thus enlivening in the most captivating of ways the past and present of American art. His current and former graduate students hold positions at esteemed universities, colleges, museums, galleries, and auction houses and, following John, they have helped to make the field what it is today. These students, along with his undergraduate students and advisees, describe him as a dedicated and spirited teacher and his lectures as breathtaking and revelatory. His courses in the art and archaeology department and for the Program in American Studies

have been consistently popular offerings, with the undergraduates frequently filling the large auditorium in McCormick Hall for his lectures and describing him in their course evaluation booklet as a “true art god.” John has also been an untiring ambassador for the field of American art, traveling extensively each year to speak to a wide variety of audiences.

John’s contributions to the study of American art have been widely recognized. In 2006, he was presented with the inaugural Maine in America Award by the Farnsworth Art Museum and was elected to the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia. In 1998 the Archives of American Art awarded him the Lawrence A. Fleischman Award for Scholarly Excellence in the Field of American Art History; in 2000 his *Compass and Clock* was given honors by the New Jersey Council for the Humanities; and in 2001 he received the Eastman Johnson Award from the Union League Club of New York.

Apart from his scholarly activities, John has been a devoted collector of 19th-century American art for 40 years, assembling a superb collection that was exhibited at the National Gallery of Art in 2004. At the opening of the exhibition, he announced the donation of his collection to the gallery, giving the National Gallery its first work by George Caleb Bingham, its first watercolor by Thomas Eakins, and its first oil study by Frederic Edwin Church, among other significant pieces. More recently, John has concentrated on American Pop art, assembling an intriguing collection of works by such acclaimed figures as Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and Tom Wesselman. This body of work is at the core of the exhibition on Pop currently on view at the Princeton University Art Museum, and once again, in a characteristic act of great generosity, John has decided to donate this collection to the museum.

John will continue to be very active in emeritus status, giving a series of lectures at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the fall of 2007 and continuing work on two substantial projects: a monograph on the Pop artist Tom Wesselmann, for

Rizzoli, and an exhibition on Robert Indiana that will open at the Farnsworth Museum in Rockland, Maine, in the summer of 2009. He will also continue to serve as a commissioner of the National Portrait Gallery, as well as on the board of trustees of the National Gallery of Art, the Guggenheim Museum, and the Wyeth Foundation for American Art. In addition, he will continue to serve on the Committee for the Preservation of the White House, a presidential appointment.

John's colleagues at Princeton admire him for his intellectual rigor, collegiality, consistent fair-mindedness, generosity of spirit, and good humor and are immensely grateful for his contributions to this institution over the course of the past 19 years.