

Princeton University

Honors Faculty Members
Receiving Emeritus Status



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

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Faculty Members Receiving Emeritus Status

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James Seawright



Sculptor James Seawright will retire this semester after 40 years at Princeton. He was born on May 22, 1936, in Jackson and grew up in Greenwood, Mississippi. After taking a degree in English from the University of Mississippi, he entered the Navy, serving as an operations and engineering lieutenant. On board ships, he used his skill with machines to teach himself the fundamentals of sculpture.

Quickly recognizing his vocation as an artist, Jim moved to New York City when he was discharged. There he utilized his technical expertise first assisting the choreographer Alwin Nikolais by composing electronic musical scores and lighting effects for his dances, then as technical supervisor of the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center, while he studied at the Art Students League. Some of his early works drew upon his experience in the sound laboratory to generate audio effects as well as movement. He continued to work with sound and lighting for several decades as the technical director of the dance company headed by his wife of 49 years, Mimi Garrad. In 1966, the prestigious Stable Gallery offered him a one-man show as soon as they saw what he had been doing in his small studio on the Lower East Side. That initial solo exhibition was so successful that he immediately earned recognition as one of the leading makers of kinetic sculpture. On the basis of that show he was invited to participate in the 1967 Whitney Annual, and Edmund Keeley invited him to teach at Princeton, where he stayed, directing the Program in Visual Arts for three decades and overseeing two renovations of the studios and the creation of the James M. Stewart '32 Film Theater. During his directorship he orchestrated the transformation of status for artists working at Princeton by introducing tenure and

professorial ranks where “lecturer” status had been the rule when he entered the University. He expanded the Program in Visual Arts to include film and video as well as digital photography. He was the first faculty member to offer a course in computer-assisted imagery. In 2004, he was honored with the Howard T. Behrman Award for Distinguished Achievement in the Humanities.

In 1969, the Guggenheim Museum, the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C., and the Institute for Contemporary Art in London were exhibiting kinetic pieces Jim made. After his second show at the Staples Gallery in 1970 (the same year he had a show at the Princeton University Art Museum), he began to receive so many commissions for large public works that he was largely unable to make smaller pieces for private collectors for many years. Those sculptures of his that are portable have been shown internationally and collected by major institutions including the Guggenheim Museum, the Wadsworth Atheneum (Hartford, Connecticut), and the Whitney Museum of American Art. The Princeton University Art Museum is currently in the process of acquiring one of his most recent sculptures.

In the 1980s, the challenges museums faced in maintaining moving sculpture led him to transfer for a while the motion at the heart of his work from within the sculptural object to its observers, by constructing static objects out of intricate designs of mirrors. For the most part these were large works commissioned for public spaces, such as the airports of Seattle-Tacoma and Boston. In the past decade he has returned to making kinetic sculpture. Jim and Mimi were among the pioneer artists who first moved into Soho in New York. Together with the Paula Cooper Gallery, they purchased and renovated a building on Wooster Street, where they maintained a sculpture studio and dance studio as well as their residence until 2007, when they relocated their home and work space to Middletown, New York.