

Princeton University

HONORS FACULTY MEMBERS
RECEIVING EMERITUS STATUS



May 2016

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

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JEROME SILBERGELD



Throughout his career, Jerome Silbergeld brought a keen eye, a sharp wit, and a deep intellect to the field of Chinese art history. He was the P. Y. and Kinmay W. Tang Professor of Chinese Art from 2001 to 2016 at Princeton University and the founding director of Princeton's Tang Center for East Asian Art. Before coming to Princeton, he was the chair of art history and director of the School of Art at the University of Washington in Seattle, where he taught for 25 years. After teaching for over 40 years, he will transfer to emeritus status at the end of this academic year.

Jerome's deep interest in Chinese art came about somewhat unexpectedly. Jerome grew up in southern Illinois and St. Louis County, Missouri, with little exposure to Asian art. At Stanford University, he majored in American history and graduated in 1966 intent upon pursuing a Ph.D. in constitutional history, in particular, the legal history of American racial politics. He won a postgraduate summer job in 1966 as an intern in the United States Senate working for Stuart Symington of Missouri, who was on the Armed Services Committee. Steeped in Washington politics, he started his graduate program in American history also at Stanford University. During his second summer internship in 1967, Jerome reached his limits with Washington politics and abandoned his studies in American politics in favor of Chinese art. His lunch hour during his Washington internships proved to be transformative. The political turmoil of the period had inadvertently driven him to find solace and peace among the Chinese and Japanese paintings and calligraphy at the Freer Gallery, the Smithsonian's national collection of Asian art. He took his M.A. in history at Stanford in 1967 and then began his lifelong journey in Chinese art history.

Jerome's accomplishments during his fifteen-year tenure at Princeton alone are remarkable. Under his directorship, the Tang Center grew into one of the leading centers for Asian art in the United States. After its first year, when there was the ability to organize only one lecture, the Tang Center has not only organized over twenty symposia and countless lectures but also published twelve scholarly

books on Asian art history, several of which include essays by Jerome and one of which is his own book on Chinese cinema. Under the auspices of the Tang Center, Jerome was cocurator of “Outside In: Chinese × American × Contemporary Art” (2009), a groundbreaking exhibition at the Princeton University Art Museum that addressed the complicated issues of ethnicity, artistic styles, and contemporaneity. Jerome’s own scholarly accomplishments are equally prodigious. During this time period, he not only wrote several scores of articles, book chapters, exhibition catalogues essays, and books, but he also presented or participated in over 100 lectures, panels, and symposia and curated nine museum exhibitions.

Jerome’s level of activity is staggering, but emphasizing his scholarly record masks other equally meaningful and important contributions to the field, his colleagues, and his students. His engagement with others is characterized by an unflinching sense of fairness and a sophistication of intellectual thought. His “Chinese Painting Studies in the West: A State-of-the-Field Article” (*Journal of Asian Studies*, 1987) is a masterful analysis of the field of Chinese art history that continues to serve today as a model of judicious criticism. A more dramatic version of his encouragement, indeed exhortation, to argue civilly and to discuss differences of opinion respectfully was his performance at the 1999 symposium at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, “Issues in Authenticity in Chinese Painting.” As suggested by the symposium title and *The New York Times* art critic Holland Cotter’s article “On Trial at the Met: The Art of the Connoisseur” (December 5, 1999), the event promised to be controversial. Reputations and money were at stake as scholars of Chinese art gathered to debate the authenticity of a painting. Was it by the artist in question? When was it dated? No one could or would agree, and scholars were ready to come to blows. To bring order and to try to stave off bad behavior, Jerome, as moderator, took the stage and then to everyone’s surprise proceeded to disrobe, revealing under his jacket and shirt, a second outfit — that of a referee, complete with whistle. He analyzed the arguments and put forth a set of rules by which meaningful discussion might be possible. Jerome was deadly serious in addressing controversy, but he did so with even-handedness and humor.

Jerome relishes engagement with students, scholars, docents, connoisseurs, and those interested in Chinese art. He took an interest in mentoring junior faculty and colleagues and performed many peer

reviews. In the classroom, he taught traditional and contemporary Chinese painting, architecture and gardens, and Chinese cinema and photographs. He was among the first to write about art in times of political upheaval and conditions of intense censorship. As a young scholar, he delved into the aesthetics of old age in Chinese painting. Throughout his career, he quietly challenged perceptions and misperceptions of historical change, reevaluating the canon of art history inherited from centuries of writings by Chinese literati artists. He also addressed other topics such as “bad” art and the articulation of the negative, the relationship between architecture and paintings of architecture, regional diversity in Chinese gardens, zoomorphic and anthropomorphic iconographies, and cinema’s relationship to the premodern arts of China. He not only inspired students but also drew inspiration from them, believing that students have a way of looking at art anew and questioning assumptions. He enjoyed teaching so much that in fifteen years at Princeton he took only two semesters’ leave. He was awarded a teaching prize by the Class of 2011.

People and places mean a great deal to Jerome; he revisits and retraces his steps among familiar places. He has three degrees from Stanford University, earning his third degree, a Ph.D. in Chinese art history in 1974. But sandwiched between his M.A. in American history and his Ph.D. in Chinese art history are a short stint as a graduate student at Princeton University and a second master’s (1972) in art history at the University of Oregon in Eugene. While at Princeton, Jerome studied Chinese art history in the Department of Art and Archaeology under Professor Emeritus Wen Fong, whose position Jerome eventually took fifteen years ago in 2001. In June, Jerome will be moving back west, to Eugene, Oregon, where he received an M.A. and where, as a visiting professor, he taught Chinese art the first time.