



IN MEMORIAM

Henry Dorra

Professor of History of Art and Architecture, Emeritus
Santa Barbara
1924 — 2002

Professor Henri Dorra (1924-2002) was a member of the History of Art and Architecture Department from 1965 until his retirement in 1994. During that period a small combined department of art historians and artists split up, and the Art History Department grew into a major, Ph.D.- granting art history program. In this history, Henri Dorra played a central role.

Dorra was a leading scholar of French Symbolist art. He wrote the indispensable catalogue raisonné of Seurat (1959), which remains a basic reference work and which was one of the first such studies of a post-impressionist artist. Along the way he published important studies on the Nazarenes, American art, and many other subjects, as well as a well-received introductory textbook, *Art in Perspective*. His last two books, *Symbolist Art Theory* (1994) and *Exotica, Erotica and the Great Dilemmas of Man: The Symbolism of Paul Gauguin* (forthcoming), both with University of California Press, returned to his first interests and mark out new territories. *Symbolist Art Theory*, like his book on Seurat, has established itself as a basic reference work (although that does not do justice to its intelligence and sophistication) and no doubt his new book will have a real impact as well. His scholarship was marked from the first by a sense of passionate involvement with both images and texts, in an interdisciplinary fashion that was quite remarkable in his generation.

Henri was a figure of great culture, committed to tradition and the highest standards in the liberal arts. He was always elegantly dressed, in remarkable contrast to many of his colleagues. He collected some major drawings and other works of art, and in their home, he and his wife Mary were famed for the quality of their entertaining. But as his choice of research subjects suggests, there was a lot more to him than his elegant manner suggested, a certain daring and even a touch of hotheadedness. His complex character was arrived at honestly. Born in Alexandria, Egypt, in 1924 and raised in France, he fled that country in 1939. During the war he worked as an apprentice engineer outside London, and studied for his engineering degree, earning a B.S. at the University of London in 1944. Immediately after the war, he emigrated and became an American citizen in 1947. He continued his studies at Harvard, but crucially discovered the pleasures of art history, and within four years of completing his engineering degree in 1950 he had gained a Ph.D. with a dissertation on Paul Gauguin. His career began in museums, as a curatorial fellow at the Metropolitan Museum, and he had many years experience as a senior administrator at the Ringling Museum, the Corcoran Gallery and the Herron Gallery in Indianapolis. Like all museum people, he, of necessity, developed very broad interests.

Dorra arrived at UCSB in 1965, after two years as head of the UCLA Art Galleries. He served at UCSB during a tumultuous period, and more than held his own in many a departmental tempest. Dorra was also a prominent member of the Santa Barbara community, serving for many years on the Board of the Santa Barbara Museum of Art.

With such a complicated background, it is not surprising that Henri was always full of surprises as one made his acquaintance. He appeared the epitome of cultural sophistication, someone devoted entirely to the arts, and yet he was one of the very first members of the department to embrace the newest technologies: I think he was the first to use email, back in the 'dark ages.' His instincts as an engineer were never entirely forgotten, just as his experiences in the war were never fully erased. He was always more than your usual art historian.

Bruce Robertson