

Theodore Rousseau

1912-1973

*Remarks by Thomas Hoving
at the Memorial Service, February 13, 1974*

TED ROUSSEAU, my dear friend and colleague, was a man of extraordinary humanity. He had a sense of universal politeness that enabled him to be totally at ease with the broadest diversity of people and they with him. His intelligence was intense and deep, his curiosity boundless. His wit was quicksilver, sharp enough to break the skin of pretense and sham, which was about the only thing he disdained, yet gentle and sensitive at the same time. Ted was a truly civilized human being: elegant, agile, and urbane.

He had around him a special glow of vitality. His presence literally illuminated a room or a gathering. When as a student I first met Ted, I was profoundly impressed by his personal magnetism and his acumen.

I was supposed to comment on a drawing by Ingres. I didn't know what to say and was terribly embarrassed. Ted deftly ignored my state of awkwardness. He gently drew me out so that through my perception of the work of art I was able to be at ease with myself and, at the same time, to observe a work of art in a way I had never believed possible.

Years later, when I was Director and Ted my Curator-in-Chief, we were standing together before a splendid Dürer watercolor. A remark by Ted allowed me to see the object, suddenly, with greater clarity, and I then held forth about it. At the end he made that wonderful wry, humorous smile of his and said, "That was better than the Ingres." I was stunned, and I must say a sharp remembrance of youthful awkwardness began to flood back inside me. And still smiling and with that quick shrug so typical to Ted, he quietly remarked, "You weren't so bad, even then."

Ted's achievements in his long career at this great institution are without parallel. His exhibitions—Van Gogh, Gauguin, Masterpieces of 50 Centuries, the tapestry exhibition that presently graces our galleries—will always be indices of the highest quality.



The great works of art that Ted caused to come to the collections will doubtless remain unsurpassed: the Badminton Sarcophagus, the Cloisters' Apocalypse, the splendid Vision of St. John by El Greco, the magnificent Tiepolos, the Juan de Pareja. These and many others are well known. Other achievements of Ted's are not so well known. When Robert Lehman had made his final decision to leave the incomparable Lehman collection to the Metropolitan he told me: "You know this would never have happened without Ted Rousseau. You see, for a long while he was the sole thread that kept me linked to the Museum."

As a curator, Ted was a connoisseur of a near faultless eye, with a universal sense of *grand goût*.

He was renowned by his colleagues for these things. His friend Xavier de Salas, Director of the Prado, observed recently, "Theodore Rousseau belonged to a breed of human being that is disappearing. There still lived in him the 'aesthetic' spirit of the connoisseur of past centuries who was highly endowed with good taste. Ted Rousseau had something quite apart from a scholar's factual erudition; he had those qualities that make you value only what has the highest degree of excellence."

For me, personally, Ted's connoisseurship also had a great measure of pure contentment and joy. He would say to me: "There is *no* activity in life quite so entertaining and pleasurable as this." He was passionately fond of what he did in life—its pleasant moments, even its hard times—the people, the scene. His was the rare assurance of being able to know that his place in the world of art was perfect. He pooh-poohed the status aspect of his position, and he resisted various attempts to try to make him Director. We were able to work together as a harmonious team. His contentment was the strong balance in our mutual activities. His enthusiasm sparked the task.

As a connoisseur and as a human being, one of Ted's most valuable attributes was his courage.

From the moment we learned that Velázquez' masterwork Juan de Pareja would be sold, through the incredibly tense activities that led to its acquisition, Ted would say: "We *must* have it"—and because of his gentle and courageous persistence we were able to have it.

In the last months of his life, Ted's deep courage—his gallantry—supported not only himself but his friends. Those close to him gained strength by *his* example of grace, humor, courage, and compassion. It was pure Ted Rousseau to have done that. Neither this institution nor any one of us will ever forget him.

Theodore Rousseau at the Museum by *Margaretta Salinger*

OUR FRIEND and colleague Theodore Rousseau died on New Year's Eve, the day before he was to have assumed a new role as a trustee of the Museum. In losing him the institution is deprived of a dedicated worker who would have brought great gifts of vision and judgment to his new responsibilities. Though born in America, he received his early education in England and France, returning to this country to study history of art and architecture at Harvard, where he obtained his Bachelor's and Master's degrees. After a period of teaching, he held a traveling fellowship from Harvard, studying manuscript illumination in England and France. His career as a museum man, which began in the newly founded National Gallery in Washington, was interrupted for more than five years by World War II. As a Lieutenant Commander he served in Europe and the Far East. As Operations Officer of the Office of Strategic Service, he brought all of his education and experience to his work of arresting and interrogating looters in the occupied countries. The information that he gathered made possible the recovery of many works of art and provided important evidence for the war crimes trials in Nuremberg.

For his war work his own government honored him with the Legion of Merit, and many foreign governments subsequently recognized his contributions with their decorations. He was an Officer of the French Legion of Honor, a Knight Officer of the Italian Order of Merit, and he received the orders of Orange-Nassau and Alfonso el Sabio from the Dutch and Spanish governments. He was also a corresponding member of the Royal Academy of San Fernando.

Theodore Rousseau's career in the Metropolitan Museum,

which began in 1946, embraced twenty-two years in the Department of European Paintings, as Associate Curator, Curator, and finally Chairman. His acquisitions during these years included George de La Tour's *Fortune Teller*, Rembrandt's *Aristotle with the Bust of Homer*, Monet's *Terrace at Sainte-Adresse*, and Tiepolo's three large decorations celebrating the victories of the Roman general Marius. Under his curatorship many splendid exhibitions came to the Museum. During the last five years, in which he held an administrative post as Vice-Director and Curator in Chief, he was enormously valuable in shaping the Museum's new international exchanges of exhibitions.

He was a curator in the strictest and most fundamental interpretation of the title. He believed that it was his responsibility to ensure by every means in his power the protection and preservation of the works of art in his charge. But he also laid upon himself the even more demanding task of making their beauty and significance available to every kind of person who saw them. He regarded publication at all levels as important—from summaries of salient facts destined for press notices to the sort of specialized studies written for this *Journal*, which he enthusiastically supported and indeed played a large part in founding.

When he published a newly acquired picture or wrote the introduction to an exhibition of paintings he always knew before he began exactly what he thought must be said. Strictly honest with himself and sensitive to the faintest overtone of falseness or pretension, he never strung words together with the hope that something convincing would emerge. With his knowledge of many languages he could delve directly into sources: he knew and remembered what was listed in Rembrandt's inventories, drew conclusions from the paintings enumerated by El Greco's son, and read Pacheco and Palomino for what they could reveal about Spanish artists and their methods. This examination of contemporary documents and records enriched his reconstructions of the past, supporting his conclusions with facts, and helped him to uncover and make vivid the personality of an artist as an aid to understanding his work, as he did so notably in his essay on Gauguin.

His tastes were extraordinarily catholic. When the exhibition of French paintings of the seventeenth century came to the Museum he was profoundly moved by the poetry of Poussin's tiny, exquisite *Death of Adonis*, and when Rembrandt's *Aristotle* was bought he felt strongly its human meaning and its universal power.

Theodore Rousseau had warmth and courage. Great works of art stirred him, and when he spoke or wrote about them he was not afraid to praise their quality and to invoke the absolutes, beauty and truth.