

Remarks given by David Freedberg at Tartina on April 11, 2024 (expanded and edited for publication)

I'm totally moved. How wonderful to see so many of you here, so many faces I haven't seen for so long! Thank you so much for coming to this event this evening. I'm doubly happy because it also gives me a chance to offer my personal thanks to the many of you present tonight who produced such amazing and heartwarming contributions to the beautiful Festschrift which Claudia Swan labored so hard to put together but which we couldn't celebrate because Covid prevented us from having a suitable party. Too many adjectives in that sentence, I know, but this loquacity is just a further sign, like tears of pleasure, of how touched I am already.

But let me begin with Zainab and the two Michaels – Cole and Waters – who were, I think, the chief instigators and organizers of this event (along with our wonderful office staff). They told me that I should say a few words, but that I need not go on for too long. Some hope on such an occasion! Especially since I can think of at least a thousand things to say in gratitude to each one of you present this evening, dream on!

Columbia has been my intellectual home for forty years now, and what I really want to put on record this evening is how much it has meant to me and in particular how much our Department of Art History and Archaeology has meant to me. Above all I want to thank my students and especially all my graduate students from whom I have learned so much. I continue to feel very guilty about those of you whom I neglected over the years more than I can be excused for and certainly much more than their wonderful and stimulating work deserved. My confession would be too long and I'm not sure I'd be entitled to absolution. But enough of that.

Despite their warning, I hope Michael and Zainab and Mike Waters will allow me just a bit more

time than they envisaged, in order to tell you why and how Columbia has meant so much to me and some of the steps in how I got here in the first place.

Many of you probably know already that when I was obliged to leave South Africa just after my eighteenth birthday, and the American Consul succeeded in persuading Yale – which I'd not really heard of previously – to give me a scholarship to go there. But they forgot to offer me a passage there, so I wrote to the three shipping lines that then plied cargo between Cape Town and New York, and within a few weeks Moore-McCormack Lines offered me a free passage on a small cargo ship (a small family of Adventist missionaries and myself being the only passengers) across the Atlantic. After four and a half weeks we sailed – I suppose one should say steamed – under the Verrazano Bridge into New York Harbor. I got off the boat at the 53rd Street Pier, hailed a taxi to Grand Central Station, and took the train to New Haven. I spare you the shock of my first impressions of Yale. I'd never been to America before and the wealth of the place, especially of Yale, took me aback.... At first it was all very exciting but then – to cut a long story short – I suppose some kind of late '60s disillusionment set in and then – to cut the Yale story short – I managed to persuade the Yale administration to let me go after three years and then I went to Oxford.

I'd graduated in classics at Yale and I decided to write a thesis in the field of Latin literature – on Ovid in particular. That was in 1969 and then, though I loved Oxford in many ways – it was certainly a beautiful place – I began to realize what a good basic education I'd received at Yale: not the first time in my life that I'd been forced to re-evaluate the grounds on which I'd made a life decision – and not the last either.

Within a couple of years, Oxford – and to be perfectly honest, the field of classical studies as it was then – slightly bored me (it was an area that perked up shortly afterwards, especially in France following 1968, when new, more anthropological approaches began to take over the field).

In fact, it was already one day in the fall of my junior year in 1969 at Yale while sitting in a graduate seminar on Iamblichus and the anonymous sophists – if you can believe it – that I suddenly realized that what I really wanted to do in life was become an art historian. A conversion had been brewing for some time, and soon classics yielded to art history. That was reinforced by my reading of the old German scholars like Erwin Panofsky, Richard Krautheimer, E.H. Gombrich, Edgar Wind, and even – since Sumner Crosby had given rather wonderful classes on Saint-Denis and Chartres, Adolf Katzenellenbogen and the great Ernst Kantorowicz.

When I got to Oxford my first supervisor there was the wonderful and slightly enigmatic ancient historian at Balliol, Oswyn Murray, who could not have been more hospitable and encouraging, even after realizing soon enough that I wanted to switch to art history. At the same time, I went to Francis Haskell to seek his advice about becoming an art historian, and though he immediately told me that I should really be at the Warburg Institute in London – that great place dedicated to what people then called the Survival of the Classics (really the afterlife of antiquity), and still populated by some of the great German émigré art historians like Gombrich himself and Otto Kurz, I was immediately assigned, because of my growing interest in Flemish and Dutch art (bolstered by the fact that I'd been bilingual in English and Afrikaans) to the extraordinary and extraordinarily kind “Bob” Delaissé, now a bit forgotten in the field as a whole, but known to all manuscript scholars as one of the great experts on fifteenth century Dutch and Flemish book

illumination, as well as a founder of the modern field of codicology. But one day, to my horror, I heard that he'd shot himself. I was devastated, I had no idea who my supervisor would be – but Francis Haskell thoughtfully set me up with Ellis Waterhouse, the great expert in Italian art, who had a particular interest in Anthonis Mor, more or less as he joked in a typically British way. I skip more Oxford stories, since I know you have been patient enough this evening so far. In any case, by then I'd already left Oxford and moved to London to be at the Warburg.

Those were marvelous years. Oswyn had immediately set me up with Michael Baxandall, who soon encouraged me to write my first article for the Warburg Journal of 1971. Cryptic and taciturn as he often was, one could not have wanted a more stimulating figure to guide one through the complexities of history and art history and disciplinary awareness. Soon the encouragement of that austere but brilliant figure was supplemented by that of E.H. Gombrich. What a privilege that was for a very young scholar! For some reason, he was always willing to talk with me, and often invited me to his home in Golders Green for dinner, a kind of giant compliment for the young and rather raw scholar I was then. His impact on me was enormous. He was kind and generous, and I still remember many of the many more mistakes I undoubtedly made in the German language. They are engraved in my psyche (perhaps fittingly in the case of conversations with someone who was proud of recounting how in his youth he abandoned the lectures of Heinrich Wölfflin to go to those of Sigmund Freud).

It was really under Baxandall and Gombrich that my dissertation took shape (even though both Delaissé and Waterhouse were unexpectedly significant figures in its development, different as my choice of final subject was). And it was at the Warburg that I first decided that the dissertation should be about the earliest illustrated editions of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a

topic which obviously combined my old work in classics and my new commitment to art history. For some reason no one ever told me – perhaps because they thought I already knew – that that was precisely the topic which Warburg himself had wanted to write his dissertation on, but that I only found out years later.

I soon came to love the Warburg and its magical proximity to what was then still called the British Museum Library. There one could leaf through and read or look at more editions of the works of Ovid than anyone could possibly have imagined elsewhere, and soon I became interested in – indeed gripped by – the censorship of those early editions of Ovid and of the influence of the Reformation on what art could and could not represent, whether for moral or religious reasons (or both). Swiftly the issue of censorship led to me the study of iconoclasm in the Netherlands, and the motives for the destruction of art more generally. It was a rich field, as yet pretty much wholly untouched by art historians. In fact, most of my colleagues and friends – except for the Byzantinists of course – thought that the subject was wholly unsuitable for the history of art, for reasons which I've written about quite enough.

And then, almost as soon as I got my PhD, and on the verge of having to move because of the expiration of my British visa (I still only had a South African passport in those days), to my utter astonishment I got a job at Westfield College of the University of London teaching art history. I felt like a fraud, a charlatan. I'd never taken a course in art history except for a short one with Rab Hatfield on fifteenth century Florentine painting and one on Cluny and Romanesque art with Sumner Crosby years earlier at Yale, and I'm still ashamed that I was too snobbish to take a course with the enormously popular Vincent Scully, whose work on American and Pueblo architecture I have come to admire enormously. I'm also still ashamed that at my interview I assured the committee, with all the self-confidence of youth,

that I could teach Italian Renaissance art as well as Dutch medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque art.

After two happy years of teaching at the University of London's Westfield College in the Departments of History (under the direction of yet another great German exile scholar, Nicolai Rubenstein) and Art History (under David Bindman) I received an offer from the Courtauld Institute, whose famous director, Anthony Blunt, had just retired. I was absolutely terrified. It seemed to be altogether too grand a place for me, that stupendous Adam building on Portman Square known as Home House. I had barely dared to set foot there, despite all its art historical resources. In fact, the summer before I began teaching there in October 1975, I used to go to Home House simply to get used to those beautiful spaces. At least the building was almost empty when the students and faculty were off on vacation, mostly, it seemed, in Italy doing their work or going to the Courtauld's famous summer school. I went there just to accustom myself to the feel of the space, to understand how best to comport myself in those extraordinary Adam rooms and to practice going up and down the spectacular double curved staircase off the entrance lobby as I tried to imagine myself, descending the staircase in the manner of tall, lean, and handsome Anthony Blunt and the military figure of John Shearman.

At the time I was at the Courtauld, John Shearman was still on the staff (as we called the faculty in those days), and so were Michael Hirst, for whose book on Sebastiano del Piombo we were always waiting, and Peter Kidson, for whose book on medieval Chartres and French sculpture we were also always waiting, and the silent John Golding, great authority on Picasso and Cubism, and the mysterious Christopher Hohler, unquestionably right-wing, I always thought, who embodied the whole set of attitudes which would utterly mystify any young art historian today. He was one of those people with whom one

hardly ever dared speak, and who almost never published anything at all (just like Bob Ratcliffe ever working on Cezanne) – but it was precisely because he never published anything (or very very little indeed) that he, like the other non-publishers there, acquired a reputation for being a genius. I remember very clearly how in my second year there, Michael Hirst asked me how many articles I'd published that year, and I said three. His face turned into a frown as he looked at me and immediately responded "well, and how much teaching did you do?" And I realized that my answer to his question was completely off the mark. In those days in Britain to publish too much was simply to be a show-off. Real scholars got on with their research, and didn't feel the need to publish every original finding of theirs – for that was the message implicit in Michael Hirst's reproof. I left our conversation altogether chastened, and never dared mention a publication of mine again. How things have changed!

In the years I was in London at the Courtauld, I came to feel as committed to the history of architecture as much as the history of art, perhaps because of Inigo Jones and Nicholas Hawksmoor, perhaps because it was always so strong at the Courtauld, perhaps because of the long influence of Anthony Blunt and his students in the field. He had already left the Institute when I arrived, but soon we became friends. At first he seemed an icy and rather terrifying figure, but one day he began consulting me about his research for an article he was writing about Rubens and architecture, and then when I began teaching one of my great loves, Poussin, on whom Blunt was then by far the most distinguished scholar writing in English, we had endless conversations about that most fascinating and challenging of painters. We remained friends until his death, despite the fact that when in 1979 he was revealed as having been a Soviet spy, almost all of my colleagues (most of whom he'd appointed himself) turned on him. They could not understand how he

could have entered into any such relationship with the Soviet Union in the 1930s, especially after the Hitler–Stalin pact of 1940; I thought I could (if that doesn't sound too presumptuous or too wicked). Both he and the reactions to him formed a profound part of my historical and moral education.

In many ways I was content in London. Who would not be grateful to be able to have the privilege to teach not only Poussin and French painting, but also Vermeer and Rembrandt, Bruegel and Bosch, and my beloved fifteenth century Flemish painters (on all of whom some of you here this evening are still working)? And I especially enjoyed having a conservation department alongside the Institute, where one could always talk about the materiality of painting, long, long before that became fashionable even amongst our ever more theoretically inclined field. This is one of the things I've really missed here at Columbia, even though my relationship with the conservation department at the Met has always been strong and has meant a great deal to me.

In London the classical music scene was perfectly wonderful. No one who heard them could ever forget the concerts with the young Barenboim, Jacqueline Du Pre, and the ancient Otto Klemperer, for example – and I hardly ever paid more than 4/6d a go! Then too there were my friendships with all kinds of anthropologists, ranging from the great seniors like Mary Douglas and Raymond Firth to the younger firebrands like the two Stratherens in a field that for a long time informed my own work and enriched my intellectual life.

Still, when in 1984 I got the offer from Columbia I felt ready to move. Although I'd had a rich cultural, personal, and intellectual life in London, and formed many friendships there, I never really felt at home amongst the English. And when Thatcher was elected as Prime Minister for the second time, I was incredulous. I didn't think

that such a thing could happen twice. I'd left America because of the lack of almost any form of social insurance, and here the British were re-electing Mrs. Thatcher the Milk Snatcher! I'd already been disappointed enough by the ways in which almost all my colleagues – most of whom had been appointed by Blunt – had treated him in the wake of the revelations about him – but this was the last straw. And then too, on a totally different level, I suppose I'd begun to feel a growing impatience when I realized that if ever I were to become a professor, I would have to leave London for the provinces – and I certainly didn't want to do that.

And so, not without trepidation, I accepted the job offer at Barnard and Columbia. Actually, it was only a few days before I left for my interview and lecture in Schermerhorn that I learned from a preliminary discussion with Barbara Novak, who happened to be staying at that grand old London hotel, Claridge's, that my appointment would officially be at Barnard. This was because my predecessor in the Dutch and Flemish fields had been occupied by yet another of the great German Jewish art historical emigrés, Julius Held, there too.

The moment I set foot on the Columbia campus I was happy. Unlike my initial wariness at the Courtauld, I was immediately inspired. One had only to enter the campus to feel positive, and to be filled with ambition about our mission as a university. I was spellbound by the majesty and proportions of the buildings. They made one feel strong and confident as one walked through those beautiful gates down the avenue of trees to the magnificent portico of Low Library and the majestic steps leading up to it. I loved McKim, Mead & White's facades of Avery, the quad of buildings behind it and the lovely East Asian Library in Kent. Even Butler, with its rather pretentious colonnade and the now politically dubious inscription of names above it, continues to inspire one as one gazes across the campus. And even in these troubled times

of encampments, protests, and lock-downs, the architecture of our campus still remains inspiring and – dare I say it? – challengingly full of optimism and the possibility of hope.

I had two offices, one at Barnard and one in Schermerhorn. I gave undergraduate seminars at Barnard and graduate ones in Schermerhorn. I never really understood how the system worked – and I think it still remains a bit obscure. I enjoyed chairing the Barnard department, but it all seemed too complicated. Somehow I managed to persuade the Columbia administration to let me switch full-time to Columbia. I don't think I realized quite how much an upheaval that caused until a few years later.

I loved our department, so full it was of interesting and energetic scholars. I loved going to work and the conversations we used to have amongst ourselves, whether students or teachers, in the old slide-room. I remember with great affection my relationship with David Rosand – such a huge loss he was! – who became one of my dearest friends. Next in warm-heartedness came Jim Beck with whom I briefly fell out toward the end over his famous objections to the cleaning of the Sistine Ceiling and his bloody-minded rejection of one of Rubens's most magnificent paintings, the Samson and Delilah now in the National Gallery in London. (I was always polite about his arguments, but if you didn't support him you were a traitor to the cause). Still, Beck's positions made for stimulating and meaty discussions, all the more so because they were conducted with such fire.

Then there were the very learned and suave Ted Reff, and the introspective George Collins, the architectural historian whose translations of and introductions to the work of Camillo Sitte made such an impression on me. It has continued to affect my understanding of urban architecture, so much so that I remain grateful to Collins every day, even though we didn't

know each other so well. Then Allen Staley, the great expert on the pre-Raphaelites and all things English; then Miyeko Murase – soon to be one hundred – always encouraging and with a warm smile and still with us with those self-same qualities that added such warmth and shrewdness to every moment she was around. Soon the brilliant young Barry Bergdoll, a true Columbian, was appointed, and though I hardly talked to him in the early days, I've been trying to make up lost time ever since. Barry always seemed to be at least two decades younger than I. Shortly afterwards, I think, yet another youngster, Jonathan Crary, moved from Barnard to Columbia as well, and thereby we acquired the best possible of all modernists. Ah, those were the days!

But forgive me, all those dear friends amongst you whose names in the hectic rush of these complicated days I've not mentioned. Then we'd be here all evening and I've already gone on long enough.

Since I've been in the department for so long, and my time is surely already up, I'd better bring these early recollections to a close and spare you the ins-and-outs of our expansion subsequently. Those who joined us in my second and third and fourth decades are all people who will forever populate the highest levels of the history of the history of art – and I truly mean that. We became theoretically more radical once Ros Krauss came on board, and the group of modernists swelled with distinction and took the department in a slightly different direction from the one on which it was set when I arrived. Things change, as I always tell my students, and in my experience at Columbia, for the better – at least in terms of our department. On the other hand, our movement in more theoretical directions has been in accordance with the times, which is as it should be in New York City at least. For me one of the great things about our department, I feel confident in saying, is that it's grown ever better, and I now think that you, dear colleagues,

constitute the very best department we've ever had – or at least during my time here.

But now I really must bring my remarks to an end. I haven't mentioned what a pleasure it's been to unite my work at the Italian Academy with that of the department (and – whisper it not – to favor our discipline a little). Some of my happiest moments since those early days have been when faculty and students from our department come to our parties at the Academy. Everyone comments on how lively and smart a contingent comes from art history, and that of course just makes me prouder. Still, I've always regretted that so much of my energies have been taken up by the Italian Academy, enjoyable though it's been and which has been a pleasure to run, but I've always felt guilty that I haven't been able to devote all my time to the department since then. I've missed you all!

And speaking of that, let me tell you of how when I went back to run the Warburg Institute in 2015, there was not a day – and certainly not a seminar – when I did not miss my wonderful graduate students over here. You know, when I was completing my thesis at the Warburg in the early 1970s, and then later when I taught at the Courtauld, I remember how we all would joke in a rather superior way or even complain about the superficiality or poor preparation of some of the American graduate students and professors on sabbatical who came over there (though when I look back, I realize that was another youthful mistake and piece of snobbishness too).

What an irony! Things change. By the time I returned to the Warburg in 2015, I discovered a Britain and an Institute that had declined so much from the way I remembered that I was quite taken aback. At the same time the Warburg had barely advanced an inch in the direction of modern contemporary trends in art history, and I have to confess that I longed for my brilliant graduate students and their sparkling and often profound contributions to our seminars in art

history at Columbia. Once one could perhaps say without hesitation that American graduate students didn't know nearly enough Latin or Greek but of course that applies to just about everyone now...

And then, a couple of weeks after we'd held a remarkable and thronged conference celebrating the one hundred fiftieth anniversary of Warburg's birth, Britain voted to leave the European Union. I realized that it would be impossible for me to continue running an Institute that had always been so profoundly dedicated to cultural exchange and interaction – and that was now in a place that had so impetuously decided to return to its insularity by severing its links with cultures that had enriched it for centuries. What a shock! There was little hesitation in my mind. I gave a year's notice and returned to Columbia. My time at the Warburg made me realize how precious my relationship with my graduate students was, and fortunately I never completely severed my links with Columbia while I was away, but kept my seminars in the department going while I was still directing the Warburg – which of course only heightened my sense of difference between the two places. It's clear to me that while British art history has mostly declined, our own department here has simply gotten better and better. I've learned enormously from you, dear colleagues and students, both present and past, both with us and no longer with us. Our pre-thesis oral exams and dissertation defenses have been amongst the greatest learning experiences and intellectual pleasures of my life. I've learned so much from the reading of all your dissertations, from my contacts with you in our seminars, and now I view my future absences from the seminar room with great trepidation. I could not be prouder of all my students who have gone on to become distinguished art historians themselves and I'm so happy that I've been able to help them find positions not only in great universities, but also in so many museums in our country and others.

Although I still have a year or two at the Italian Academy, I already miss you. I mean really miss. I always said that I would retire after fifty years of full-time teaching because it's long been my belief that after such a length of time one should hand over one's position to younger people – so that's what I did. It's imperative to open more places for youth – even though I still can't bring myself to believe that I'm a day older than fifty, if that. But let me not be too quixotic again. I have to admit that the reality is different. I realize that fact of life regretfully, but I'm inspired by the talents of all those who have come here this evening, inspired by your friendship, and inspired above all by your devotion to the commitments we all share to the history of art and the education of all those who realize, however vaguely or precisely, its importance.