The unique Canadian Hamburger

An eightieth birthday tribute to William S. Heckscher

William (Wilhelm) Sebastian Heckscher was born in Hamburg, Germany, on 14 December 1904. Almost half a century later, he became a naturalized Canadian citizen. Essentially, though, he is a supranational citizen of the civilized western world.

Educated in the universities of Hamburg, New York, and Oxford, he has advanced the education of others at universities in Canada (Saskatchewan, Manitoba), USA (Iowa State, Duke, Princeton), and the Netherlands (Utrecht); also at learned institutions in Germany (Karl August Bibliothek, Wolfenbüttel), France (Collège de France, Paris), USA (National Gallery of Art, Washington DC), and elsewhere. ('What! Will the line stretch out to the crack of doom?

His publications, like his peregrinations, have covered much more ground than might be expected. From an art historian, there is nothing surprising about such titles as Rembrandt’s anatomy of Dr N. Tulp, Ancient Art and its echoes in post-classical times, and Holbein’s portrait of Erasmus at Longford Castle, or about his spell as editor of the Netherlands yearbook of art history. More arcane titles—for example, Genesis of iconology and Renaissance emblems—are indications of some of the particular aspects of art history in which he is acknowledged as one of the outstanding experts. But what of such a study as Shakespeare and the visual arts? It was this work, I believe, which led to his being awarded a Fellowship of the Folger Shakespeare Library. (He is also Benjamin Franklin Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, London.) His mind is always reaching out into new territory; on the one hand, a member of the Advisory Board of the Journal of medieval and renaissance studies; on the other, the author of Goethe and Weimar and of Discussions with Albert Einstein.

It is not as an art historian but as an indexer that we know him best. And what an indexer! Those who have thoroughly examined his ‘theory of the unconventional index’ must still, I think, be digesting its implications. He has led us beyond existing limits and shown us how the art of indexing can be enriched in ways that few if any of us had thought possible.

Indexer, art historian, artist, polyglot, philosopher, almost as deaf as Beethoven and probably no less inspired and inspiring, William Heckscher is the most loyal of colleagues, the warmest of friends, modest to the point of self-mockery. Highly significant that his favourite book is Erasmus’s Praise of folly. ‘You are old, Father William,’ the young man said; ‘why don’t you fade and droop like the rest of us? Birthday greetings, William. I guess you’re going to enjoy being an octogenarian.

John Ainsworth Gordon