

Richard Edwards

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Richard Edwards, Pacifist and Historian of East Asian Art, Dies at 99

Richard Edwards, a prominent historian of Asian art, and among the very first to specialize in Chinese painting in American academia, died on 25 March 2016. At the time of his death he was Professor Emeritus of Far Eastern Art at the University of Michigan where he taught from 1960-1986. Prior to this he was on the faculty at Brandeis University and Washington University in St. Louis. His route to Asian art history was shaped by his deep belief in pacifism and his role as a conscientious objector during World War II.

Richard Edwards was born on December 30, 1916 in Auburn, New York. He came from a family of strong tradition, but charted his own course. He was the second child of Deane Edwards, a protestant minister, and Margaret Dulles Edwards, a church school educator and sister of John Foster Dulles, Secretary of State under President Eisenhower, Allen Welsh Dulles, the first director of the Central Intelligence Agency, and Eleanor Lansing Dulles, an economist and State Department specialist on post-war Germany. Edwards was also a descendent of the 18th century theologian, Jonathan Edwards.

Richard Edwards attended Deerfield Academy where he was fondly called "Pony" because of his skills in Latin translation. He then attended Princeton University where he was on the varsity soccer team and from which he graduated in 1939. He began graduate studies in Art History at Harvard University. Although intending to focus on Italian Renaissance Art History, World War II interrupted his studies. Wanting to do his part but in keeping with his strong belief in pacifism, he applied for and received conscientious objector status, and eventually served as an ambulance driver and stretcher-bearer with the American Field Service in North Africa and the China Convoy of the British Friends Ambulance Unit.

Richard Edwards' war experience had a defining influence on his life. In leaving the US for Africa where he was to serve, his boat was torpedoed by a German U-boat. All on board survived in lifeboats and were eventually picked up by an already overloaded Norwegian ship and brought to Halifax, Nova Scotia. When they next set sail it was on a Danish ship, which sailed swiftly and zigzagged, turning quickly to avoid torpedoes. Eventually they made it around the Cape of South Africa, north along Africa's east coast to join the North African Campaign with the French Foreign Legion and British troops as they fought their way westward. Richard Edwards led a team of four stretcher-bearers rescuing the wounded and bringing the dead back from the front lines.

Even in the midst of war he saw humanity in the enemy. When his boat was sunk by torpedoes Edwards commented that the U-boat captain had waited until all had jumped to safety and only then sent the final salvos sinking their ship. In North Africa when the British troops had advanced in the wake of the retreating Germans, he discovered a fleeing soldier had left behind a book by Mahatma Gandhi, champion of non-violence. Edwards frequently commented that "The guy you are fighting against is just like you, he just wears a different uniform."

His opportunity to go to China came at the close of the North Africa campaign, when he was billeted in Italy and the lack of action there spurred him to request a transfer to the Far East. He responded readily to the British Friends Ambulance Unit request for volunteers to drive medical supplies destined for civilians over the perilous eastern extension of the Burma Road in China. From 1944-46 he drove charcoal powered trucks over the mountain switchbacks between Kutsing and Chungking. The convoys delivered much needed relief, estimated to have provided 80% of the medical supplies for civilians living in unoccupied China.

There he fell in love with the green landscape of the western mountains, a stark contrast to the deserts of North Africa. When he returned to Harvard he decided to change his focus to Asian art. His advisor, Prof. Benjamin Rowland, very wisely advised if this were the case, Richard needed to learn Chinese and he thus was sent off to Yale, which had one of the few Chinese language programs. There he studied Chinese with Vee Tsung Ling from whom he received an "A." He was completely enchanted by Vee; on their first date they met on the steps of the Metropolitan Museum. When asked what he saw at the museum, Richard responded "I don't remember, I was too taken by my companion to notice the art." They married in 1947 and became an enduring and quintessential scholarly couple.

Richard Edwards pioneered the application of the monograph to Chinese painters starting with his Ph.D. thesis dissertation on Shen Chou (The Field of Stones published in 1960) and continuing with exhibitions and comprehensive catalogues on the Painting of Tao Chi (1967), The Art of Wen Cheng Ming (1976), and his final book, The Heart of Ma Yuan: The Search for a Southern Sung Aesthetic published in 2011 when he was 94. He also explored the dynamic between the artists rendering and the actual landscape in his 1989 publication The World Around the Chinese Artist.

As a scholar Edwards felt that seeing the original was vital to understanding art. Throughout his career he traveled to encounter the great monuments and collections of Asian art directly. He was a Fulbright Scholar in Chengdu, China from 1948-1950 and was witness to the birth of the People's Republic of China. When he left, he was not to return until 1974 when he and Vee were invite back to China in reciprocation for Vee's role in ping-pong diplomacy as an interpreter for the team. Edwards subsequently held Fulbright Scholarships in Japan (1958-59), and Taiwan (1963-64) where he worked on cataloguing and documenting the unveiling of the Chinese treasures from the Palace

Museum, which had been stored in caves during the war. To this day those documented photographs are the main reference collection for these paintings. Finally in 1980-81 funded by the Committee of Scholarly Communication with the People's Republic of China, he and Vee traveled throughout China. During this trip they could finally see the original paintings and the landscapes that inspired them, the originals of the originals.

As a teacher, his training approach relied heavily on viewing objects and paintings directly. To this end he took his students on an annual weeklong trip to the Freer Gallery in Washington, DC, with additional trips to museums and galleries in New York City, Cleveland, Kansas City and San Francisco to view the great collections of Asian Art in this country. His former student Prof. Louise Yuhaus recalled that during these trips "we walked...and walked... and walked. Despite our ostensible youth and vigor, Dick outlasted us all with his inexhaustible energy and tireless eyes."

Prof. Yuhaus also comments, "Always central to Richard Edwards' studies of Chinese landscape painting—regardless of period or tradition—is the person of the artist and his relation to the natural world." In his own life, observing nature was a wellspring of inspiration and renewal. In the north woods of Isle Royale, along the shores of Lake Superior, and on his worldwide travels he was a meticulous note taker. A pen and pocket-sized spiral notebook were always at hand as was his camera recording the endless fascination of nature and the visual world. His second word as recorded in his baby journal was "see." This as a scholar, teacher and father he entreated us to do.

He is survived by three of his children, Margaret Dulles Edwards (Rhoads Murphey) of Ankara, Turkey, Joan Edwards (David C. Smith) of Williamstown, Massachusetts, and R. Lawrence Edwards (Melissa A. McDonald) of St. Paul, Minnesota. Also surviving him are a sister, Mary Parke Manning, and five grandchildren: R. Alexander Smith, Oliver R. Murphey, William Q. Murphey (Morag), Louise Ling Edwards, and Eliza M. Edwards. Vee Ling Edwards, his wife of 45 years, predeceased him in 1992 as did a daughter, Edith Foster Edwards who died in 2004.

A memorial service will be held at 2 pm, Friday, May 20th 2016 at the First Presbyterian Church, 1432 Washtenaw Avenue, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104. There will be a reception at the church following the service. In lieu of flowers contributions gifts Memorial donations may be made to the Richard and Vee Ling Edwards Fund (792326), University of Michigan History of Art, 855 South University, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1357. Gifts to endowment funds will be administered as a permanent endowment under MI law and University policies.