John Gage (1938 – 2012)

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A Wonderful Range of Mind: John Gage has died at the age of 73

On Friday, 10th February 2012, the great art historian, John Gage, passed away. The title of his 1987 book on Turner, A Wonderful Range of Mind, might describe his own intellectual personality. He was a pioneer of many themes that would become prominent in Art History towards the end of the twentieth century - exploring the relationship between art and science, the material conditions that determine artistic creation as well as the history of perception. His first major publication, Colour in Turner: Poetry and Truth (1969) already raised all of these issues. Yet he resolutely refused to be fashionable. It is perhaps partly for this reason that his ground-breaking later books, Colour and Culture (1993) and Colour and Meaning (1999) were also huge public successes, finding a readership well beyond the confines of academia. They will in all likelihood remain the standard reference works on the history of colour for generations to come.

John Gage read History at Oxford where as an undergraduate he came to the notice of the great political philosopher, Isiaah Berlin who invited him to coffee. Not much impressed with this encounter, or indeed with art history at Oxford, John Gage moved on to the Courtauld Institute in London. He began his career, however, teaching English in Italy and Germany. It was there that he acquired the language skills that he would make use of in his wide-ranging research in primary sources on the history of colour from antiquity to the present day. He became a Lecturer at the University of East Anglia before being appointed, in 1979, by the University of Cambridge where he also became a Fellow of Wolfson College. In 1992 he became Head of Department and, in 1998, Reader in the History of Western Art. He retired in 1996 and moved to Italy and Australia, continuing his vigorous and innovative research, turning his attention to such subjects as light and shadow in holography and Aboriginal approaches to colour.

With his boundless curiosity and great love of art John Gage was a truly inspiring teacher as well as a brilliant researcher. In recognition of his outstanding contribution to art history he received many prizes, among them the prestigious Mitchell Prize for Art History in 1994. A year later he was also elected as a Fellow of the British Academy. Yet he believed in the study of art history for its own sake and held considerations of career, status and professional advancement in deepest contempt. His dry sense of humour and subtle irony would bring this home to those who worked with him, while his kindness, generosity, and good nature encouraged students to follow in whatever direction their curiosity would lead them. He was one of the freest and most independent minds that Art History has seen in recent decades and he will be sorely and bitterly missed.

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Reference:
John Gage (1938 – 2012). In: ArtHist.net, Feb 13, 2012 (accessed Nov 2, 2026),
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