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Charles Martin Robertson, 1911-2004

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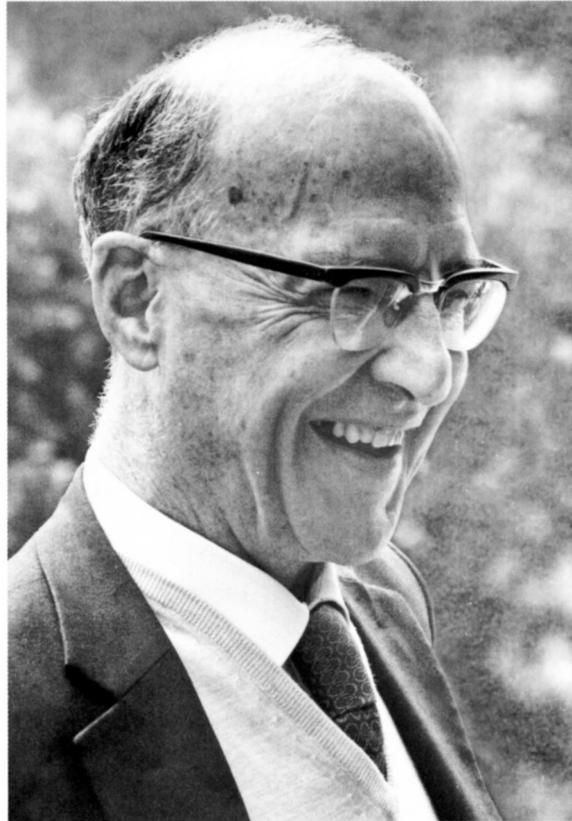
Charles Martin Robertson, 1911–2004

BRUNILDE SISMONDO RIDGWAY

On 26 December 2004, the Archaeological Institute of America lost one of its most distinguished foreign members. Martin Robertson, as he was usually known, died at age 93 in his home city of Cambridge, England, where he had moved after retiring as professor emeritus from the Lincoln Chair of Classical Archaeology and Art at Oxford in 1978.

Professor Robertson was born on 11 September 1911. His father, Donald, was Regius Professor of Greek at Cambridge, and his brother Giles was a professor of art history at Edinburgh. Martin seems, therefore, to have combined both strands of family interests by becoming a classical archaeologist—a scholar with some field experience and a deep respect for material evidence but also a keen connoisseur of ancient art, sensitive to its aesthetic appeal and convinced of its relevance for the study of Greek culture.¹ That he was also a published poet² and a widely ranging student of literature and the arts of later periods only added to Martin's depth and to the enrichment of his pupils, colleagues, and all who came in contact with him through the years, in England and abroad.

While a student, Martin took part in Humfrey Payne's excavation at Perachora, Greece, in 1930,



and attended the British School at Athens for two years (1934–1936). Like Payne, he too could apply his unerring sense of style and visual memory to the study of sherds and painters' hands,³ as well as to large-scale sculpture and more monumental art. His eloquent writing served him well in both pursuits.

Martin's first appointment (1936) was as assistant keeper in the Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities at the British Museum, but he soon relinquished it for war service. He returned to the position in 1946 but eventually yielded it to his colleague Denys Haynes, and in 1948 accepted the Yates Professorship at University College, London. Yet Martin's affection for

the British Museum treasures and his intimate knowledge of them never diminished, as evidenced, for instance, by the remarkable publication of *The Parthenon Frieze*,⁴ where his commentary provided further value to Alison Frantz's splendid photographs.

During his 13 years of teaching at University College, Martin deepened his knowledge of Greek vase painting. It has been said of him that he "fleshed out" Sir John Beazley's skeletal lists of vase painters, making us "see" each master's style, so that even students (as I remember from my own experience) could recall and identify distinctive traits.

¹ See "Between Archaeology and Art History: An Inaugural Lecture," delivered at Oxford University in 1962 (Robertson 1963), where Martin claimed to have little aptitude as a field archaeologist but clearly stressed the value of ancient art.

² Robertson 1977.

³ See, esp., Dunbabin and Robertson (1953) as a first attempt to transfer Beazley's method to Corinthian wares. Al-

though Martin's name is most closely linked with Attic vases, he also published the British Museum's share of Greek pottery from Sir Leonard Woolley's excavations at Al Mina, Syria (Robertson 1940), and *Greek, Etruscan, and Roman Vases in the Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight* (Robertson 1987). He also produced a *CVA* (Boardman and Robertson 1979).

⁴ Robertson and Frantz 1975.

He was therefore a natural to complete for publication Beazley's unfinished manuscript, *Paralipomena*.⁵ Martin's own contribution is best revealed in the monumental *Greek Painting*,⁶ where he combined whatever was known at the time on Greek wall painting with its possible reflections in vases and mosaics. Even today, when so much more information has become available through later discoveries, this book provides illustrations and facts about hard-to-find objects.

In 1961 Martin succeeded Beazley to the Lincoln Chair at Oxford. During his tenure there, he published, in two volumes, *A History of Greek Art*,⁷ a very personal and highly readable account of sculpture and painting in which traditional approaches combine with unexpected insights and unusual opinions. When a new version of the book appeared in 1981 (*A Shorter History of Greek Art*),⁸ I was asked to review it and was astonished to note that it was not simply an abridged version of the larger work but rather an extensively rewritten text that, in civilized fashion, took into account some earlier criticism, not to correct "mistakes" but to clarify personal positions.⁹

Any of these publications could be hailed as a major achievement. Yet some might say that Martin's finest work, *The Art of Vase-Painting in Classical Athens*,¹⁰ was written after his official retirement. It remains the most readable and informative account on the subject.

Through the years, Martin's accomplishments were recognized by various honors, including Ordinary Member of the German Archaeological Institute and Life Member of the AIA. He also received many requests for prestigious lectures in England and abroad.

I would be amiss in my memoir of this remarkable man, however, were I to fail to mention something that goes well beyond a series of publication titles, no matter how significant, or a list of distinguished appointments. Martin was an exceptionally kind man. His unflinching support of his students is clearly exemplified by the prefaces he wrote to some of their books and the prominent positions most of them occupy. But even those who could not be considered Martin's pupils always benefited from his genuine interest in their work and from his wise counsel.

I would like to close on a personal note. In 1968 I was at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton as a green, untenured assistant professor attempt-

ing to write my first book, on the Severe style in Greek sculpture. Martin was also in Princeton at the time, and he pointed me out to the editors of the Princeton University Press, so that *they* approached me, rather than vice versa. Martin then offered to be one of the readers of my completed manuscript, which, through his recommendation, was accepted and published. Emboldened by this experience, I then ventured to research and write a second book, on the Archaic style, and was briefly in Oxford during the winter of 1974. Martin met me by chance, asked what I was doing, and insisted that I speak to a Greek scholar, A. Choremis, who was in Oxford to publish a recent and surprising discovery—a sixth-century B.C. sculptured pediment in Corfu. Through Martin's introduction, I was granted permission to view this new find of which I would otherwise have had no notion. I have since learned of many similar stories from colleagues, who in their younger years also greatly benefited from Martin's generosity and willingness to listen and discuss.

Martin's wife of many years died shortly after his retirement. Eventually, he was fortunate in finding a second companion with whom to share his archaeological interests: Louise Berge, an associate curator of classical art at the Art Institute of Chicago, who left her position at the end of the summer 1989 to follow her husband to England. Our deepest condolences go to Dr. Louise Berge Robertson.

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⁵ Beazley 1971.

⁶ Robertson 1959.

⁷ Robertson 1976.

⁸ Robertson 1981.

⁹ Ridgway 1982.

¹⁰ Robertson 1992.

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