

Nathan Allen Pattillo

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Nathan Allen Pattillo joined the Cornell faculty in 1946 as an instructor in the relatively new Department of Fine Arts, as the History of Art Department was then known in the College of Arts and Sciences. Only the second appointment in the department, he went on to become an assistant professor in 1948 and an associate professor in 1954 before retiring as a professor emeritus in 1966. For twenty years Allen Pattillo devoted himself to teaching and research at Cornell in a discipline that he had come to late in life, in the midstream of an academic career that had begun two decades earlier in an entirely different field of study, that of economics. When he retired from the university he left behind him a record of dedicated teaching in art history that, in terms of breadth of subject matter, few could hope to match today.

Allen Pattillo was born in Harrisonburg, Virginia, in 1899. He remained a Virginian throughout his formative years and took his undergraduate degree at Randolph-Macon College in 1919. He was attracted sufficiently to the field of economics, then one of the major areas of academic study, that he ventured north to begin graduate training at the University of Chicago. He transferred to Harvard University a year later, in 1921, and there earned his master's degree and eventually his doctorate in economics in 1929. He returned to the South in 1924 to begin his teaching career in economics at Trinity College of Duke University and then at the College of William and Mary. After he completed his doctorate he took an appointment at Saint Lawrence University, where he taught until 1940.

As was the case with so many of his generation, World War II marked a major turning point in Allen's life. Because he was fluent in Italian he volunteered to serve in the armed forces as an interpreter and translator, and he worked for a time with Italian prisoners of war. In that capacity he not only came to know a number of Italians with whom he retained a friendship that was to prove useful later in his career, but he came to know Italy as a country that had produced some of the world's greatest artistic monuments, and that was to alter his life in a very fundamental way. His wartime experience of Italy turned him in the direction of art history, and after the war Allen decided to abandon completely his earlier career in economics and return to graduate school at Harvard to take up the study of art history. He spent nearly two years at the Fogg Museum of Art pursuing his newly discovered love of the Italian Renaissance with Chandler Post. At the same time he became acquainted with the arts of Asia through the teachings of the great Langdon Warner. What he learned from those two famous teachers at Harvard was to serve

Allen well when he came to Cornell to organize the first courses at this university devoted exclusively to the arts of Renaissance Italy and of Asia.

Throughout the decade of the fifties Allen Pattillo remained firmly attached to the arts of Italy and attended assiduously to the teaching of Renaissance virtues to hundreds of Cornell students. But his contribution to the teaching program of the department went well beyond the Italian Renaissance, for he was instrumental in developing the second half of the survey of Western art, a course that he offered as an alternative to the regular yearlong department survey that was always oversubscribed. More than any one thing he did at Cornell, that course, History of Art 104, sums up what Allen Pattillo wanted to be known for at the university: it was a truly civilized course, one that students took with complete confidence that they would move among the visual wonders of Europe in the company of a man who loved its cathedrals, monuments, and museums and who spoke about them with deep respect and precision of detail. For several generations of Cornell students Allen Pattillo's introductory survey became the equivalent of the grand tour that once was the dream of all college youth. When Allen retired in the mid sixties, the course no longer served its original purpose, for Cornell and its students had changed, both now more sophisticated in the ways of Europe. But in his time Allen Pattillo was the perfect man for a particular task that was noble in its definition.

A confirmed bachelor, Allen was a familiar figure around the basement of Goldwin Smith Hall late at night, where he worked every evening, preparing his lectures with a meticulousness that matched his dignity of bearing and his correctness of attire. A man of very orderly habits, he traveled to Europe every summer, ending his tour in Italy, where he said he always was able to refresh his eyes and correct his notes. There he also continued his lifelong research into color theory in Italian Renaissance painting. His absorption in Italy never wavered, but neither did his love for his native state of Virginia. Unfailingly courteous to all, he remained throughout his life the exemplary Virginian gentleman, and we have memories of him nodding and tipping his hat to everybody he met. He took great pains to learn something about every student who took his courses, even when enrollment in those courses numbered in the hundreds. His uncanny ability to remember faces and names, and his inquiring after the smaller details of a particular student's life—a sister or a brother who may have graduated earlier, a fraternity or sorority event long past—was the stuff of which campus legends are made. And Allen Pattillo was indeed something of a legend, at least in that part of the university campus that he trod regularly in his careful, measured steps. A quiet and intensely private man, reserved even among his close colleagues, Allen will be remembered by us as someone who expressed himself the fullest when he was before his students and before the work of art. And by those

students he will be remembered warmly as the quintessential guide to the great treasures of Europe, a traveling companion without peer.

When he retired from the university and returned to Lynchburg, he said of himself that he was ready to begin the third chapter of his life. He looked forward to going home to his beloved Virginia after two very distinctly different academic lives. We were fortunate that one of those lives was spent with us at Cornell.

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