



Thomas W. Leavitt

January 8, 1930 – October 14, 2010

Thomas Whittlesey Leavitt, Professor Emeritus and founding director of the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art for 23 years died at the age of 80 on October 14, 2010 in Sanderson, Massachusetts.

Thomas Leavitt was born in Boston, Massachusetts on January 8, 1930, into a distinguished New England family that included the sculptor Bela Pratt. He received his B.A. in American Literature in 1951 from Middlebury College, a master's degree in 1952 from Boston University in art history of the 19th and 20th centuries, and a Ph.D. in 1958 from Harvard University in the history of American painting and sculpture.

In 1968 he came to Cornell after serving as director of Museums in Pasadena and Santa Barbara, California. As director of Cornell's A.D. White Museum of Art before the Johnson was built, he organized a pioneering show on Earth art, installed across campus in February 1969.

Leavitt was the founding director of the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art for 18 years, a professor emeritus of the history of art and a recognized leader in the museum field. Leavitt organized more than 100 exhibitions and wrote numerous articles and catalog essays, ranging from the American portraiture and the arts of New Guinea to Albert Bierstadt, Piet Mondrian and Cornell exhibitions of work by George Kolbe, Georgia Loring Brown and Agnes Denes.

Working with I.M. Pei, John Sullivan and Pei's architectural firm, Leavitt helped supervise the design and construction of the Bauhaus-inspired Johnson Museum building. He served as the museum's director from its inception in 1973 until his retirement in 1991. Tom was the first director appointed to lead the Museum Program of the National Endowment for the Arts and he also served as president of the Association of Art Museum Directors and the chair of the

American Association of Museums. Leavitt received the American Association of Museums' Distinguished Service to Museums Award in 1997, the field's most prestigious honor. Tom also held leadership, board and advisory positions in numerous arts organizations, including the American Art Alliance, American Federation of the Arts, Rhode Island Historical Society, National Air and Space Museum, National Museum Committee for Art Against AIDS and the New York State Council on the Arts.

Franklin W. Robinson, current Director of the Herbert F. Johnson Museum writes,

Tom was a superb director, and what he did here has been the solid foundation for everything since then. He was also a man of kindness and civility, and it was a privilege to know him, and to be his successor in this great museum.

Following Leavitt's retirement, he served as interim director of the Rhode Island School of Design's Museum of Art (1992-93) and director of the Newport Art Museum and the Museum of Our National Heritage. Leavitt was an avid sailor for more than 35 years, with interests in wooden boats and racing. He is survived by his wife, Michele, five children and five grandchildren.

Dean of Faculty Office (Information gathered from Ithaca Journal Obituary and Cornell Chronicle)