

Robert D. MacDougall

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Robert Duncan (Scotty) MacDougall was an intriguing and enigmatic man. His concern with form and formality—which casual acquaintances misconstrued—was always balanced by his keen sensitivity to the life and energy that animates form. His unusual progress from a bachelor’s degree in architecture (Cornell, 1963) to a Ph.D. in anthropology (Cornell, 1971) was quite consonant with his view of the building as an extension of the individual within a culture. His main scholarly preoccupation was the Indian subcontinent, a choice that puzzled people when they first met him, given the obvious contrast between the dapper, precise Scotty and seething, turbulent India. Nor did he restrict his focus to the great works of Indian architecture. He went, as in his exhibition funded by the National Endowment for the Arts in 1980, “Beyond the Taj,” in a quest for India’s diversity as well as its unity. And his massive dissertation was on *domestic* architecture among the Kandyan Sinhalese, written while he and his wife Bonnie were both hard at work on degrees, trading off duties and responsibilities in a model partnership.

The spiritual structures that men built and inhabited, high religions, raw superstitions, and simple make-believe intrigued him as much as the buildings and artifacts that gave them symbolic form. He was not content to observe from a predictable, scholarly distance but wanted to participate in a ritual as well as to comment on it, to experience it from the inside. As was evident in his famous costumed appearances at the annual Beaux Arts Ball, he possessed an extraordinary ability to let his own energy so animate the form that he adopted that it was hard to believe he was not the being the costume suggested he was. Yet Scotty neither desired—nor imagined it was in his power—to discard his own identity and become assimilated into the world he observed and reproduced. He had what architects call a gifted eye. And perhaps his greatest artistic desire was to share the benefits of that talent with others: to help them participate in a world that he could see but perhaps they could not. He was not just a sympathetic and admiring scholar, determined to be the first Western participant in an age-old ritual. He wanted others to have the chance to see it as he did. So he photographed it.

His obsessive interest was in what the people of different nations took to be central to their lives rather than what a westerner might consider the major monuments of their culture. Although he observed and enjoyed the profundity of Indian and Greek thought and the masterpieces of those cultures’ art, as often as not he preferred to offer a less-elegant and fashionable perspective on a culture: its mysterious religious symbols, such as the *omphalos*

at Delphi, or its fear of the evil eye—an understandable preoccupation in one who himself possessed a gifted eye. Similarly he wanted to see a grand sailing vessel from the top of the mast or from the bowsprit, as a sailor sees it, not just from the deck or the shore. His own vision, extended by the camera, yearned to show us the insect's eye or the crow's-nest view of a building, a society, or an idea. His visual intelligence made him a fascinating teacher, a challenging colleague, and a very special parent. For he was dedicated to teaching his own children as well as his students, supporting them, encouraging them, and, above all, training their eyes.

His powers of observation were matched by his skill at reproducing an artistic image of what he saw—with the camera or the study tour, the graphic artist's tools, or the university. He loved observing nature and humankind. He also loved to organize nature into gardens and humans into colleges. And his talents were speedily put to good use by Cornell, which employed him as assistant dean in the College of Architecture, Art, and Planning; as director of the South Asia Program; as guest curator of the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art; and, finally, as dean of the Division of Summer Session, Extramural Study, and Related Programs. Under his leadership new programs developed and blossomed. There had always lurked the possibility, indeed the danger, that Scotty's creative talents would be harnessed to institutional rather than personal intellectual goals. His passion for Cornell matched his passion for art. Consequently Cornell's summer brochures became works of art.

Scotty's administrative skills were not tapped only by Cornell. He was intrigued by all the different ways humans in a community gather and express themselves socially. And he participated in many. He served on the boards of directors for the Statler Faculty Club, the Cayuga Heights Community Center, and the Hangar Theatre. Indeed, during the last few years of his life he became progressively more interested in gaining new perspectives on the theater, where human behavior is ritually imitated, mocked, and admired. And his collection of photographs of Greek theaters is a treasure in itself.

The demands of administration, however, sapped the time available for his personal scholarship. As death warned of its approach, he felt he had left far too much unwritten and undone. But his annoyance never lapsed into self-pity. During an early visit to a clinic, he found himself with other cancer patients in their sixties and seventies. Although a university professor in his mid forties usually feels old in comparison with those around him, Scotty felt suddenly and unjustly young. 'I was touched,' he said, "by how frightened some of them were as they faced death, and I noted their reactions. 'I'm not ready to die,' one older man complained bitterly." Neither was Scotty. But he didn't put it that way. His attention shifted almost automatically from himself to others. He maintained that same distance from himself that he had when participating in and photographing a Hindu ritual, seeing and

recording human genius with sympathy and awe, not with a haughty desire to impose his own image on it. In his heart he knew he had accomplished much. He was proud to have completed a pilgrimage to all the holy sites of India. And he met, as he traveled, many old men who were still trying to make all the stops.

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