

JOHN MARSHALL PHILLIPS

The untimely death of John Phillips at the age of forty-eight is one of the cruelest blows which American learning has suffered in recent years. He was born at Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, on January 2, 1905, a son of Marshall and Isabel Smith (Walter) Phillips, and of Quaker stock on both sides. His father and grandfather were managers of a large farm, and from them he brought to the study of the fine arts certain Quaker-farmer qualities which contributed to his greatness in his field. His plain background gave him a sharper passion for the beautiful, but with it a shrewd and detached appraisal which enabled him with rare success to distinguish the true from the false in art.

John attended the Kennett Square High School and went on to the University of Pennsylvania, where he majored in Latin and History and took his B.A. in 1927. After an unhappy beginning in the Law School of the University, he transferred to the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, where he took an M.A. in English in 1929. He had always been interested in American silver, so he accepted with alacrity the opportunity to catalogue the collection of the late Maurice Brix. This brought him to the attention of Francis P. Garvan who in September, 1930, took him to Yale to work in the collections of silver, furniture, glass, and art which he had given to the University. John remained in this connection for the rest of his life, rising over a period of twenty years by the proper steps from Assistant Curator of Silver to Director of the University Art Gallery and Professor of the History of Art. In 1932 he offered for the first time a course on American architecture, furniture, and art from 1607 to 1860. From a first class of six this course, locally known as "Pots and Pans," grew to be one of the most famous in the college, and indeed in the country, taken by

hundreds each year. John lived in Timothy Dwight College, loving the undergraduates and beloved by them, an ardent follower of the hockey team. Rarely has a man of such great scholarship been so close to his students.

The secret of John Phillips' growth in knowledge lay in the way in which he employed his summers. Beginning with a trip to Europe in 1933, he devoted every month which he could take from his teaching to the discovery of pieces of American art and the study of them and of their documentary background. Typically, he traced Tory portraits through the Public Records Office on his last trip to England. He never forgot a piece or a hall mark which he had seen, or a detail of their owners' genealogies. Perhaps no other institution man knew more than the dealers and collectors about their special fields. With that knowledge went a sound Quaker business sense which made him a terror in the auction galleries. Sometimes his nonchalant exposure of a forgery or a false attribution looked to the rest of us like the working of the Quaker Inner Light, but it was in fact the shrewd use of the vast collection of facts in his memory.

During the war years Phillips served with the Army Intelligence Corps and with the British-American Civil Affairs Center in England. Ignoring the falling bombs, he pressed his search for bits of old American art (he had little use for the new sort), or helped his hosts with their problems, as by serving on the panel of the members of the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths of the City of London which advises the Antique Plate Committee as to hall marks and reproductions. Indeed he was only the second American ever to have been admitted to the Freedom and Livery of the Company. As a member of the Looted Art Investigating Unit of the Office of Strategic Services he broke the secret of the Van Meegeren forgeries by pointing

out that a piece of silver in several of his "Vermeers" showed a nineteenth-century repair. He was probably better known in Europe than in America, although he never concealed the fact that he regarded their art as only the interesting background of the work of the American colonials. In this country, only Trinity College gave him an honorary degree, and that an M.A.

No doubt our failure to give John Phillips his due was because we thought that there was time enough. He first came to our attention with the publication of his *Early Connecticut Silver* in 1935. This was followed by *Masterpieces of New England Silver* (1938) and *American Silver* (1949). In the latter year he was elected to this Society. He attended meetings faithfully, and was to have read a paper for us in October. He died in New York City on May 7, 1953, from overexertion, after running for a train. He is survived by two brothers, Pennell and William Phillips.

C. K. S.

WILLIAM GREENE ROELKER

Bill Roelker was born at Providence on April 9, 1886, a son of William Greene and Eleanor (Jenckes) Roelker. He was educated at Groton School and at Harvard College, where he made Phi Beta Kappa and in 1909 took his B.A. magna cum laude. Taking advantage of the accelerated program then available, he spent the academic year 1908-1909 studying in the Law School, to which he returned after graduation. However, in the fall of 1910 he became a salesman in the advertising department of the Vogue Company, with which he remained for two years. Returning to Providence, he joined the *Journal*, of which he was advertising manager for four years. In 1918 he left to join the Washington office of the Red Cross, serving as associate

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