

*REMARKS AT THE RETIREMENT LUNCH FOR WANDA CORN
STANFORD UNIVERSITY, 14 NOVEMBER 2009*

Wanda Corn is a “Great American Thing.” It has been my good fortune to have known Wanda for many years. We were introduced by a mutual friend in 1963, the year we both started our graduate work in New York. We did not see much of each other for a while, as I was at Columbia and she was at NYU.

It was when we both moved to California that we began to spend quality time together. I was Chief Curator of the FAMSF and teaching a graduate program in Museum Studies. Wanda wanted to do museum internships. (I love teaching these graduate programs & am still teaching a similar training program at Cal State.) It will not surprise you to know that Wanda was the most brilliant intern I ever worked with. As part of her M.A. studies she did the Tonalism show at the Legion. As part of her Ph.D studies she did the Andrew Wyeth Show at the de Young. She did amazing work, proving to be a radiant presence that illuminated every corner into which she shined her light. Those particular chapters of American art history were transformed by what she did. And the character of art history itself was transformed by what she did. One could not get a Ph.D with an American topic at NYU before Wanda Corn. After Wanda Corn, one could.

But the most important show she ever curated was the Rockefeller Collection of American at the de Young in 1976. Wanda did not know this at the time, but we had been secretly negotiating with Mr Rockefeller for many years in hopes of acquiring his collection for San Francisco. This show would be the first public showing of his remarkable collection. How this show was handled would be a key factor in his decision. I was nearing the end of my tour of duty at that museum, so the work load on this very special project was divided. I was managing editor of the catalogue & Wanda was managing curator of the exhibition. Once again her work was brilliant. Mr Rockefeller was very impressed. And the rest is history. The most important private collection of its kind came to San Francisco.

For several years, Mr Rockefeller had been quietly watching how we were building our American collection. He was quite impressed when we acquired Church’s “Rainy Season in the Tropics” and liked our smaller acquisitions as well. One of his favorites & mine was (and is) the little trompe l’oeil slate painted by John Haberle about a hundred years ago. I had some difficulty getting this painting through the Acquisitions Committee. They favored European Old Masters and were not sure why I

wanted to spend so much money on American paintings, especially one as odd as this one. One old timer, who was French and really wanted only French art, was especially unhappy with my recommendation. He said at the meeting: “Mr Graham this is art with a capital F.” Happily he was outvoted. When all the trompe l’oeil paintings in the combined collections of de Young and the Legion were joined with those in the Rockefeller Collection it made for a remarkable gallery, one that many say is unmatched anywhere in the United States. When the art critic of the San Francisco Chronicle reviewed the opening of the new de Young building a few years ago, he said the trompe l’oeil gallery was the strongest gallery in the American wing.

Like many of you, I have spent much of my life composing little biographies of artists, in the form of wall labels or catalogue entries. I also like to compose 3-D portraits of my favorite artists & hang them in my den so we can have long conversations. I made one today as a gift for Wanda. It is called “Time and Eternity, a Portrait of John Habele.” Inside the frame is a replica of a Habele that Haberle himself titled “Time and Eternity.” One of the reasons I chose this piece to give Wanda was the fact that she opened her Great American Thing with an essay on spirituality. Here was another radical thing. We hear a lot about the sacred in Tribal Art, Asian Art, Asian Art, but very rarely in American Art. She opened her book with this radical perspective. That perspective reminds us of what the sacred means in most World Art: the ultimate oneness of spirit & matter, the actual unity of heaven & earth, or in the words of William Blake, “Eternity is in love with the productions of time.” I suspect Haberle knew that line from Blake’s poem. In honor of the spirit Wanda has given to American art and to thousands of students of American art, I wrote this poem and pasted it on the back of this little trompe l’oeil of a tromple l’oeil:

TIME & ETERNITY: A Portrait of John Haberle

Haberle had a feeling
for the finite and infinity,
and how eternity plays the string
of each of us and everything.
Clock-time most folks think is real
and life a game of chance.
But there are other points-of view,
other ways to dance.
Those who sacrifice themselves
on the Cross of Consciousness
have new ears
with which to hear
The Music of the Spheres.