

Remembering Bates Lowry

by Jane C. Loeffler

BATES LOWRY, FOUNDING DIRECTOR OF THE NATIONAL BUILDING MUSEUM, died on March 12, 2004 in Brooklyn, NY, leaving a legacy of projects and publications that have significantly furthered public understanding of architecture, folk art, and photography. Many of us first encountered Dr. Lowry through his volume on Renaissance architecture, part of the Braziller series that was so popular among art history students in the late 1960s.

Just after that book was published, he joined the faculty at Brown University and became chair of the art department there in 1967. Prior to that, he had taught at the University of California, Riverside, New York University, and Cal Poly Pomona, where he chaired the art department. A graduate of the University of Chicago—B.A., A.M., and Ph.D.—he served in the Army during World War II and as assistant to Justice Robert Jackson at the war crimes tribunal in Paris after the war.

While Dr. Lowry was at Brown, floods ravaged Florence and, as chairman of the Committee to Rescue Italian Art, he raised funds for the clean-up of landmarks such as Brunelleschi's Pazzi Chapel. This work brought him national prominence. In 1968 he was named director of the Museum of Modern Art, succeeding René D'Harnoncourt. It was a turbulent time at MoMA and he became a victim of the labor unrest that paralyzed the museum at that time. He moved on to a teaching position at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, and then to Washington, where, doing research at the National Archives, he became fascinated there by the treasure trove of drawings of America's public buildings.

In the 1970s, together with his wife Isabel Barrett Lowry, Dr. Lowry created the Dunlap Society to produce top-quality visual documentation of major American architecture. It was easy enough to find slides of the Pazzi Chapel or Rheims

Cathedral, as he noted then, but next to impossible to find good shots of important buildings in the very middle of the U.S. capital—Thornton's Octagon House (1801), for example, or Meigs' Pension Building (1887), now the National Building Museum. It was on that project that I first worked with him. Those were the days long before *Great Buildings Online*, before databases, before the Internet—when microfiche images represented state-of-the-art storage and distribution technology. In focusing attention on architecture in the United States instead of Europe, he helped make it possible for scholars to study material that had been ignored for too long.

Dr. Lowry took charge as director of the new entity that came to be known as the National Building Museum in 1980, and putting his own expertise and that of his friends and board members to use, oversaw the transformation of the distinguished building. He expanded the staff rapidly to befit the needs of a growing educational and cultural institution. After retiring as director in 1987, Dr. Lowry returned to scholarship and published his final book, an extensive overview of the Getty Museum's collection of European and American daguerreotypes (1998).

When Dr. Lowry called me to ask if I would be interested in working with him as curator of an exhibition featuring U.S. embassies, I said yes, but not without protesting that I knew nothing about embassy architecture. Neither did he, he noted, but the material promised to be important, the State Department was all for it, and the exhibition would inaugurate the new museum devoted to America's building arts. It was an exciting moment and he brought a special sense of wonder and enthusiasm to the challenge. I am sure I speak for scores of others when I say that it was a pleasure working with him and a privilege knowing him. •



above / Bates Lowry.

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