



## Robert L. Herbert

April 21, 1929 - December 17, 2020

Robert Louis Robert died of a stroke at Cooley Dickinson Hospital in Northampton, MA on December 17, 2020 at the age of 91.

Bob was the next-to-last surviving child of eight, born to his railway-worker father and a mother the children called “the general,” with good reason. For primary school, Bob was taught by a single teacher in a two-room schoolhouse in Mystic, CT. Along with his parents and siblings, his teacher instilled him with a life-long love of learning. He graduated from Wesleyan University, then received a Fulbright Fellowship to study in Paris, before pursuing graduate studies in Art History at Yale University. He then taught at Yale for 34 years, becoming one of the leading pioneers of the “social history of art”— looking at art in the historical and social context in which it was created. He was a much-loved mentor and father-figure to generations of graduate students at Yale.

His specialty was French painting from the late 18th century through the early 20th, and he is known especially for his path-breaking books on Barbizon, Impressionism, and Post-Impressionism. He also curated exhibitions at the Metropolitan and Guggenheim Museums in New York, the Art Institute in Chicago, and the Grand Palais and Musée D’Orsay in Paris. He was decorated by the French government in recognition of his contributions to French culture.

In 1990, much to the consternation of his colleagues, he left Yale for Mount Holyoke where his wife, Eugenia (“Fi”), was teaching African history. He loved Mount Holyoke, with its focus on teaching undergraduate students and the collegiality of its faculty. He also loved the Pioneer Valley and made many friends outside of academia. His particular delight was biking on his favorite routes around South Hadley and providing guided tours to friends who joined him on these excursions. As one companion remarked, he could tell you the history of every potato field in Granby. He turned his scholarly interests to the Valley, as well. He wrote a study of the art of Orra White Hitchcock, a rare 19th Century woman artist, and organized an exhibition of her art at Amherst College in collaboration with Daria D’Arienzo. His study of Orra White Hitchcock led him to her husband, Edward Hitchcock, president of Amherst College and a geologist whose books Orra obligingly illustrated, at the expense of pursuing her own art. Edward Hitchcock in turn introduced him to the Valley’s early role in recovering dinosaur fossils and led to collaborations with other fossil enthusiasts in the area. From dinosaurs, Bob turned to the history of Mount Holyoke College itself. He loved immersing himself in the College archives and working with its wonderful staff. He wrote and mounted exhibitions about the changing landscape of the College, the three fires that devastated it and its phoenix-like recovery from the ashes of those fires.

In addition to biking, Bob was a weaver of great skill. He also loved chopping logs for the wood stove. His greatest love, however, was for his family: Fi, his wife of 67 years; his children, Tim, Rosie, and Cathy; their mates, Mara, John, and Chris; and his grandchildren, Alex, Claire, Bethany, Jesse, Sophie, and Matthew. Bob’s family is very grateful to the nurses and doctors at Cooley Dickinson for their compassionate care at a time of great stress.

Contributions may be made in Bob's name to  
Womanshelter/Compañeros and Doctors without Borders.

New England Funeral & Cremation Center, LLC, 25 Mill Street, Springfield,  
MA has been entrusted with the arrangements. For expressions of sympathy  
please visit [www.nefcc.net](http://www.nefcc.net)

# Tribute Wall

JF

“ Dear Fi: I am so sorry to learn of Robert’s passing. I wish for you and your family God’s blessings. Cousin John

John R. Fisk - February 14, 2023 at 10:03 AM

TW

“ I’m so saddened by Bob’s death. He was such an inquisitive spirit. I will miss him.

Thomas Wartenberg - February 14, 2023 at 10:03 AM

AM

“ My condolences to the family and friends on your loss.

Anne Moore - February 14, 2023 at 10:03 AM

SL

“ Sending my heartfelt condolences to Fi and all of the Herbert family. Bob was such a mentor to me, to my students, and to many he never had the chance to meet. His wisdom and generosity were legendary. I’m so sorry you, and we all, have lost him.

Sura Levine - February 14, 2023 at 10:03 AM