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## **John M. Rosenfield (1924–2013)**

Yoshiaki Shimizu

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

## **John M. Rosenfield (1924–2013)**

*Yoshiaki Shimizu*

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John M. Rosenfield of Harvard University, who taught Japanese art history for more than 25 years, died on December 16, 2013. In his post-World War II career, Rosenfield rebuilt the discipline from the ground up. In

America, and at Harvard in particular, Japanese art had no leading scholar to revive a field that had lain dormant during the Pacific War (1941–45). Japanese art had become nearly invisible. Museums in America had not exhibited Japanese art in those bleak years of the war; scholars who knew Japanese or had any knowledge of Japan, be it in academia or art museums, had enlisted in US military intelligence. It took more than a decade after the peace treaty was signed in 1951 before John Rosenfield was appointed to teach Japanese art, in 1965.



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Photo courtesy of the Department of History of Art + Architectural History, Harvard University.

Born in Dallas, Texas, John M. Rosenfield was 18 years old when the Pacific War began and interrupted his studies at the University of Texas in Austin. He enlisted in the intelligence unit of the army, and after basic training and studying Thai at the language school at the University of California, Berkeley, where he received a Bachelor of Language Sciences with Phi Beta Kappa recognition, he was shipped out to India and Burma. Three and a half years of service gave Rosenfield the opportunity to

experience intimately a world far beyond Texas, an advantage, he would later admit, which allowed him to navigate with ease the arts and cultures of Asia that he was destined to study. The wide exposure to the outside world included stints in Bombay (Mumbai) on the west coast of India, and Assam in the northeast, Sri Lanka to the south, and north in Burma.

After the war, he attended Southern Methodist University where he received a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 1947. On a G.I. Bill of Rights loan, he then enrolled in the School of Art, University of Iowa, where he earned a Master of Fine Arts in 1949. In 1950, when the Korean War broke out, he was recalled to serve once again in an army intelligence unit, which enabled him to see Korea and Japan. It is a grim reality that nearly a decade of wartime experience helped prepare him to become an Asian art scholar—a far richer experience than what today's doctoral candidates normally gain during one or two years abroad for dissertation research.

Throughout his career, Rosenfield firmly believed that art historical practice required three components: direct engagement with works of art, ample opportunity to do research, and transmitting knowledge by teaching the subject to students. Those essentials for a scholarly discourse were in full suspension for more than a decade after 1941. Major art museums were not buying works of Japanese art. The Boston Museum of Fine Arts, America's great bastion of Japanese art and Harvard's close neighbor, removed its Japanese art from their gallery walls reportedly to shield them from public view. The art market fell dormant as the major Japanese art dealer, Yamanaka and Company, suffered the wartime seizure of its assets. Collectors, public and private, had to wait for better days to return to their acquisitive activities. Academic research on Japanese art dwindled to almost nothing at institutions of higher learning and at art museums, as curators and art scholars joined the military effort. Robert T. Paine, curator of Japanese art at the Boston Museum, served in the US Navy, while Harvard's Langdon Warner joined the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives unit of

the Army.

At the University of Iowa, Rosenfield had taken courses with the prominent art historian William Heckscher, a student and protégé of Erwin Panofsky who advised Rosenfield to go elsewhere to study Asian art history. After returning there from 1952 to 1954 as an instructor, Rosenfield finally took this advice and in 1954 began **[End Page 211]** graduate work at Harvard. The teaching of Asian art at Harvard had been resumed in 1950 by Langdon Warner's successor and Rosenfield's advisor, Benjamin Rowland...

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