



REMEMBERING JOHN CAMERON, 1931–2008

By Susan Wood

When John Cameron's article "The Campus Architecture of Oakland University" appeared in the fall 2007 issue of the *Oakland Journal*, none of us guessed that it would be his farewell. It is appropriate, however, that his final publication in an Oakland University periodical should deal with two of the greatest passions of his professional life: architecture, and Oakland University. John's 43 year career on this campus began when he was recruited by George Matthews, as part of his and Woody Varner's campaign to build an outstanding faculty that would establish the new university's commitment to academic excellence. As John observed at the memorial service for Matthews, without that commitment on the part of the university's administrators, he would not have come here and would not have stayed. Their dedication to creating an excellent scholarly institution also became his own. The presence of Meadow Brook Hall on this campus, with its rich architecture and history, attracted his scholarly interest. His monograph on the Hall's history and architecture is still the definitive work on the subject, and (she hinted broadly) long overdue for republication.

For those faculty members who share another of John's intellectual interests, the history of photography, let me direct your attention to his recent article in *The Photogram, Newsletter of the Michigan Photographic Historical Society*, entitled "Tom Halsted and the Halsted Gallery." Halsted and his gallery, as John

explains, were instrumental in educating the American public about the role of photography as a fine art, rather than an instrument of documentation. That trajectory parallels John's own intellectual journey as a collector and historian of photography. He first studied antique photographs of French Gothic cathedrals because they provided evidence of 19th century restorations and alterations to those buildings. Soon, however, he also gained an appreciation of early photographs as works of art in their own right, and began collecting daguerreotypes and full-plate tintypes. Eventually, he focused his interest and research on glass stereographs, amassing probably one of the finest collections of them in existence. He devoted the last decade of his career to research on the French photographic firm Ferrier and Soulier. His catalogue raisonnée of that firm is, I hope, still forthcoming, and will be an indispensable research tool for future photographic historians. Visitors to the Meadow Brook Art Gallery (now the Oakland University Art Gallery) may recall seeing an exquisite stereographic Daguerreotype of Osler's *Crystal Fountain in the Crystal Palace, Sydenham*, ca. 1855, in the exhibition *Dickensian London and the Photographic Imagination*. The photograph was a loan from the collection of William Becker, but the antique stereoscope that allowed visitors to see the photograph in its jaw-droppingly beautiful three-dimensional glory came from the collection of John Cameron and Janice Schimmelman.

These descriptions of John's scholarly achievements, however, hardly begin to scratch the surface of his importance to this university, and in particular to the Department of Art and Art History. The article in the last Oakland Journal perfectly encapsulated not only his formidable erudition, but his love of sharing that information with others, his breezy, informal style of speech and his often irreverent sense of humor. Teacher, field-experience coordinator, mentor, Departmental Patriarch, "Monsieur Parfait," founder and proprietor of the Husband and Boyfriend school (which promised to teach his colleagues' significant others how to be as perfect as he was), scourge of uncooperative desktop computers but warmhearted friend to

everyone else, John wore many hats around here, and wore them all with his unique fashion sense. It is literally impossible for any of us to imagine this department without him, since he was the longest-serving member of it, but we will never be without our fond memories of him.

When I first arrived at this campus as a candidate for a junior faculty position, it was John who met me at the airport, clapped me on the shoulder and said “It sure is good to see you, Honey.” I was at the time a non-tenure-track Assistant Professor at Harvard, where pompous, humorless condescension on the part of the senior faculty was such a fact of life that one barely noticed it. There were two codes of dress among Harvard faculty: three-piece suits, which indicated traditionalism, or denim overalls, which signalled Marxist sympathy with the working classes, although those denims had never been anywhere near a coal mine. John’s trademark rumpled shirts symbolized nothing except that he liked to wear comfortable clothing and was utterly unselfconscious about appearances. When he escorted me out to his rusty old sedan in the airport parking lot, he observed “This is my car. I know it doesn’t look like much, but I figure it won’t get stolen.” By then I knew for sure that I was among friends.