

# Obituary

## Richard Brettell (1949–2020)

One of the world's leading scholars of French Impressionism, Richard Brettell had an inspiring impact on museums and academic art history in the United States and beyond, as an exhibition curator, fund raiser, museum director and Professor of Art and Aesthetics at the University of Texas at Dallas.

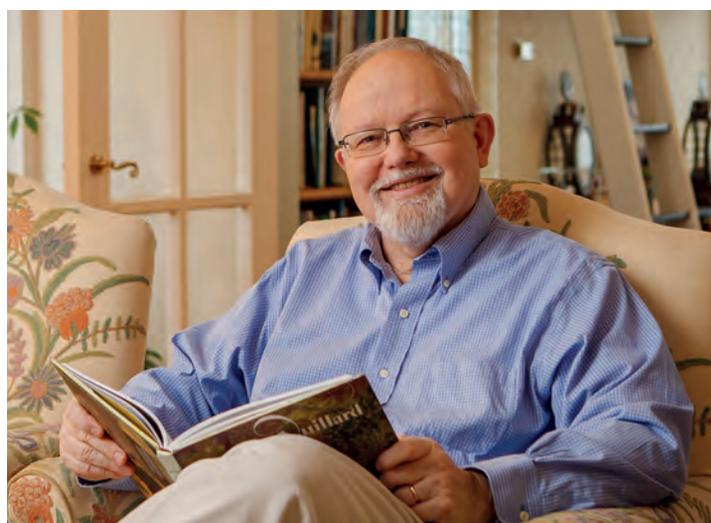
by JOACHIM PISSARRO

**WHEN I FIRST** met Richard (Rick) Brettell, who died on 24th July at the age of seventy-one, he was barely thirty years old, yet an already awe-inspiring reputation preceded him. Hired as the youngest-ever senior curator at the Art Institute of Chicago, he was soon to become one of the principal curators of a full-scale monographic retrospective of Camille Pissarro at the Hayward Gallery, London, in 1980, for which all his co-curators were about twice his age. He was in his mid-twenties when his doctoral dissertation *Pissarro and Pontoise* was defended in 1976,<sup>1</sup> and his catalogue of Pissarro's vast collection of works on paper at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, written with Christopher Lloyd, was published in 1980, immediately garnering him considerable attention.

An international symposium on Pissarro to coincide with the 1980 retrospective was hosted by the Courtauld Institute, of which I was then a graduate student. Although warned that I seemed to be more drawn to Carl Andre and Minimalism than to Impressionism, Brettell insisted on meeting me. At the end of our conversation he offered me a research position at the Art Institute of Chicago, although I had never held a job at a museum before. I would soon find out that spontaneous trust and generosity were inherent in his personality. Not long ago, Ian Wardropper, Director of the Frick Collection, New York, and I discovered that we both owe our first jobs to Rick.

Rick was an interstellar kind of scholar, travelling from one cultural constellation to another and back with superb ease and panache, always creating new knowledge and transforming and enriching lives on the way. All those close to Rick will remember him playing the piano like an angel – Alfred Brendel once invited him to play with him. The Zürich-based collector Hortense Anda-Bührle told me that she had initially felt reluctant to lend her famous painting by Paul Gauguin, *La Source*, to the retrospective Rick was curating, together with Charlie Stuckey, for Chicago, Washington and Paris in 1988. She was enjoying listening to him enthusing about the painting that was hung above her father's piano, when, uninvited, he sat at the piano and played one of his favourite Beethoven sonatas, moving Anda-Bührle to tears. She decided to lend the painting on the spot. The exhibition, *The Art of Paul Gauguin*, was a triumph and a major milestone in scholarship on the artist. Fifteen years later, Brettell was appointed by Guy Wildenstein to head the Gauguin Catalogue Raisonné project. He was putting the final touches to it at the time of his death.

Following the Gauguin retrospective, Rick's next project was to take on a whole museum. As its Director from 1988 to 1992, Rick transformed the Dallas Museum of Art by making us rethink America as a plural cultural construction at a time when programmes emphasising 'diversity' or 'plurality' were scarce. Brettell confided to me one day: 'north of us,



Richard Brettell, in 2012. (Photograph by Randy Anderson).

south of us, there are these multitude of cultures that have defined who we are, how we think, and yet, these go almost unnoticed in most museums in the US. I want to think of America as being on a crossroad of a multitude of paths rather than on a linear trajectory'. This was a groundbreaking approach in 1992, when much of museum culture in the United States was busy celebrating five hundred years of cultural and patronage kinship with Europe. The fact that Brettell was questioning the prevalent Eurocentric allegiance of museums in the United States, while having contributed so conspicuously to the unprecedented success of Impressionist exhibitions in those institutions and others worldwide the decade before, was an act of great intellectual courage.

This opening up of new horizons was carried through without the slightest acrimonious tone; it was a treat to enter Rick's 1993 installation, the 'Museum of the Americas', in Dallas, which opened the public's eyes to troves of visual and cultural artefacts seldom given the light of day. Space was needed for such an ambitious *redressement*, and he worked tirelessly to raise funds for a new wing of the museum. Shrewdly, this fresh emphasis on the artistic practices of the Americas coincided with an exhibition of Camille Pissarro's series of cityscapes, which we co-curated. Rick's logic did not stem from a reductive 'either/or': both axes of reflection (north/south, and east/west) complement, inform and nurture each other. There was no better 'European' artist to choose to introduce this double axis than Pissarro, who was born and raised in the Caribbean – the first modern artist of the new world, as Rick was fond of saying. Although short, Brettell's

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directorship saw Dallas become one of the ten most important museums in the United States and his legacy still shapes the museum today.

In 1989 Rick oversaw a small exhibition, *Impressionism – Selections from Five American Museums*, for the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. It was drawn from five Midwestern museums: Pittsburgh, Minneapolis, Kansas City, St Louis and Toledo. In the catalogue's introduction, Rick pointed out that 'when you put together the collections of those five museums (which most people in this country have not even been to, forget about Europeans), you have a collection that is larger than the collection of the Metropolitan Museum or the Musée d'Orsay or any other museum'. This was the germ for the creation of a major inter-continental alliance of museums.

Annoyed by the fact that all the attention goes to big, metropolitan institutions in Paris, New York, London and elsewhere, with Elizabeth Rohatyn and Françoise Cachin he created FRAME (French/American Museum Exchange), which brought about long-term friendships and exchanges among a dozen museums in the United States, Canada and France. FRAME mounted some major travelling exhibitions and will be remembered as one of the most creative acts of cultural diplomacy. On a more local level, Rick founded the Dallas Architecture Forum, worked with the Crow family to establish the Crow Collection of Asian Art, at the University of Texas at Dallas (UTD), and helped another Dallas family to create McKinney Avenue Contemporary (MAC), which offers support to emerging artists. He also worked with John Bryan, CEO of Sara Lee, to make a gift of the corporation's art to public collections.

In 1998 Rick joined the faculty of the University of Texas at Dallas, where he held the Margaret McDermott Distinguished Chair of Art

and Aesthetics. Rick reinvented himself constantly and never stopped learning and sharing his knowledge.<sup>2</sup> Every summer for about twenty years, he and his wife, Carol, would pack books, computers, clothes and their dogs, and drive for two or three days from sweltering Texas to the cool mountain hills of Massachusetts in Williamstown, where Rick was a sort of life fellow at the Clark. There he had access to an outstanding library, out of which many remarkable curatorial projects emerged, including *Impression: Painting Quickly in France 1860–1890* (2000–01) and *Pissarro's People* (2011),<sup>3</sup> for which, as he told me, 'I've decided to recreate Pissarro's library and read everything he ever read, especially the anarchist political theory'. Despite his work on Gauguin, Rick never abandoned Pissarro and in 2017 (at only twelve months' notice) we co-curated an exhibition at the Musée du Luxembourg, Paris, focusing on the artist's last two decades, *Pissarro in Eragny: Nature Regained*.<sup>4</sup>

Rick was adept at negotiating tricky political situations among academics and professionals and he was a brilliant and effective fundraiser. In the course of his career he raised close to \$100 million for various projects, including his legacy at the UTD, the Edith O'Donnell Institute of Art History and the UTD Athenaeum that, when built, will house major art collections and an important library. Rick died while he was involved in creating the Institute for the Study of American Art in China (ISAAC) at Nanjing University. He was also involved in several projects in Mexico and had launched a significant institutional project, the Museum of Texan Art (MOTA). A few months before his death he was informed that he had been elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in recognition of a monumental institutional and scholarly legacy.

1 The thesis was published as R. Brettell: *Pissarro and Pontoise: A Painter in a Landscape*, New Haven and London 1990.

2 Brettell contributed numerous book and exhibition reviews to this Magazine over the past twenty-five years, most recently a review of *The Art of Pastel* at the Petit Palais, Paris, THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE 160 (2018), pp.246–49.

3 R.R. Brettell: exh. cat. *Impression: Painting Quickly in France 1860–1890*, London (National Gallery), Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum) and Williamstown MA (Clark Art Institute) 2000–01; and *idem*: exh. cat. *Pissarro's People*, San Francisco (Legion of Honor) and Williamstown MA (Clark Art Institute) 2011–12.

4 The exhibition was reviewed by Patrick Bade in this Magazine, 159 (2017), pp.498–500.