

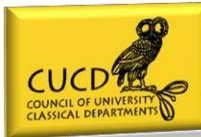
# Sir John Boardman (1927–2024)

by Diana Rodríguez Pérez



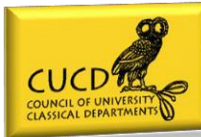
John Boardman standing in the archives of Blenheim Palace. Photo by Claudia Wagner.

If there has ever been an all-round Classical Archaeologist, John Boardman would undoubtedly be the one. A towering figure in the field of Greek art and archaeology, he has influenced a whole generation of scholars while making accessible the fascinating world of ancient art to the wider public. From West to East, from the art of the Aztecs to Chinese art, from small gems to big monuments, from excavation to museum work, his interests expanded hand in hand with his many travels and he left virtually no stone unturned. He was profoundly knowledgeable, quick, extremely sharp and witty, a no-nonsense scholar who worked with an awe-inspiring celerity and sense of duty.



John was born in Ilford, Essex, on 20 August 1927. A tranquil baby, he never had any rush to start walking, as he used to recall when seeing my adventurous toddler messing around the basement of the Ioannou Centre at Oxford during the sacrosanct 11 o'clock coffee kindly instituted by Thomas Mannack decades ago. He had a happy and comfortable childhood which somehow ended at the age of 11 with the early death of his father, aged 60, and the outbreak of the war. He studied at Chigwell School, at the time a Grammar school. From Chigwell he went to Magdalene College, Cambridge, and instead of pursuing a doctorate, he moved to Greece for two years after his undergraduate studies to spend time in the country (1948–1950), where he met his beloved wife-to-be, Sheila Stanford. He subsequently took up the position of Assistant Director of the British School at Athens (1952–1955), returning to Oxford in 1955 as Assistant Keeper at the Ashmolean Museum. He would be affiliated to Oxford for the rest of his life, first as a Reader in Classical Archaeology and Fellow of Merton College and later as Martin Robertson's successor in the University Chair of Classical Art and Archaeology at Lincoln College.

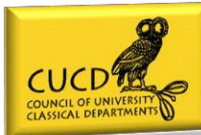
John's scholarship is immense. He had a long-lasting relationship with Thames and Hudson and produced numerous books for them, including his *Greek Art* from 1964, and the handbooks on Athenian black-figure and red-figure vases and Greek sculpture which are essential reading for undergraduates over the world; they have now been translated into 11 languages. His beautiful book *The Archaeology of Nostalgia* (2002) must also be highlighted here. Some of his articles—like the interpretation of the Parthenon frieze, those investigating Herakles as a “symbol” of Athens and its connections with the Peisistratids in the Archaic Period, or his controversy with Michael Vickers over chronology and the value of Athenian pottery—are excellent material for advanced undergraduate and postgraduate students: they teach them the power of conscientious argumentation and always prompt interesting discussion in class. Gems were one of John's life-long interests, and he did an impressive job of investigating many gem collections around the world that he published often in collaboration with Claudia Wagner, his assistant and Senior Researcher at Lady Margaret Hall. The “diffusion” of Classical art was another of his interests, which resulted in one of his most influential books, *The Greeks Overseas* (first published in



1964), a book that broadened the view of the Classical world to incorporate far distant lands. His approach was conservative, though, and in his reminiscences later in life, he acknowledged that he found some parts of it quite old-fashioned. As a scholar with strong interests in the Greek presence in the Iberian Peninsula, I would hope this includes his famous observation that “in the West, the Greeks had nothing to learn, much to teach”.

Though not the biggest fan of the dust and dirt of archaeological excavation, John still did his fair share of it: Smyrna, Emporio on Chios, Crete and Tocra. He was very aware of the importance of such work and valued his experience in the field, both for the range of expertise that it demanded and as a way to understand and interpret the evidence better. He worked on the publication of the material and the excavation reports almost on site, since he rightly thought that he had a moral duty to make the findings known to the scholarly community as soon as possible. It was also a time when one person “did it all” and publication of material was not “outsourced” to specialists who might not have been involved in the excavation process at all. He endeavoured to become an expert himself instead of relying on others. He also contributed to the wider research community in other roles, such as editor of the *Journal of Hellenic Studies* (1958-65), the *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* (LIMC), the *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum*, and through his decade-long involvement with the Oxford University Press (1979–1989), to name just a few.

John Boardman received many accolades throughout his career, including the knighthood in 1989, the Kenyon Medal in 1995 and the Onassis Prize for Humanities in 2009. He was highly appreciated by the scholarly community and was offered two Festschriften and several conferences, the last one in Lisbon in 2017, for his 90th birthday. More than 300 scholars from all over the world, including many of his own pupils, gathered at the Gulbenkian Foundation to celebrate his life and present him with their latest research. His stamina to sit stoically through three full days of parallel sessions and to attend the conference dinner quite late in the evening (at least according to British customs) was amazing to witness.



Sir John was a rather self-sufficient man; he usually attributed this to the fact that he was the “unexpected” child of older parents, who had less energy to entertain him 24/7. That self-sufficiency almost bordered dangerousness, I must say, as I could experience first-hand in what—still to date—is the most terrifying car trip I have ever taken: from the Ioannou Centre in Oxford to the Radford Cottage near Chipping Norton (his former house) with him at the wheel and Claudia in the backseat. We all breathed a sigh of relief when he gave up driving at the age of 90. He had a deep love for his family, his wife Sheila (who died in 2005) and their children, Julia and Mark. The mutual understanding that he shared with his daughter Julia was precious to witness, including her strict rationing of his much-appreciated ginger chocolate. I must confess that I was guilty of supplying a little tub of chocolate-covered ginger pieces on one occasion—dark, of course (one must be mindful of the sugar levels). Together with Julia’s partner Jeremy, and Claudia, his children made his last years more comfortable and largely worry-free.

In his 2020 memoirs (*A Classical Archaeologist’s Life: The Story so Far, An Autobiography*, p.125), he expressed his readiness to escape the world. I could very much feel that the last time I saw him in Woodstock, in the summer of 2023, when I spotted a gaze that I had seen before in my own world-weary nonagenarian grandmother. He finally passed away on the afternoon of the 23rd of May 2024. His was a truly remarkable and well spent life. Drink, eat, and be merry!