

Susan Nelson

Since arriving at Indiana University in the fall of 1976, Susan Nelson has been a highly respected and active contributor both to her home department, the Department of History of Art, and to the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures (EALC), with which she was immediately affiliated by virtue of her specialization in early Chinese painting. Both departments have benefited from her energetic involvement in shaping their curricula and articulating their academic missions. Given Susan's wide circle of friends and acquaintances in other departments, however, and her close ties with academic colleagues at other universities, she might best be identified as a citizen of the wider academic community, valued for her formal contributions to scholarship—publications, book reviews, lectures—and for the witty and adventurous intelligence that she brings to every situation, be it faculty meeting or dinner party.

Susan's published research deals with topics as diverse and original as the representation of sound in painting, the culture of reclusion, drunkenness as a disguise of choice in difficult times, and the role of whistling in self-cultivation. These specific topics opened up broader vistas, as she expanded the meaning of a motif or narrative element and followed its interpretation across centuries of Chinese culture. Colleagues in Chinese art from across the United States have drawn attention to Susan's unique ability to move between the fields of painting and literature, making original and often unexpected connections. The result is an overall body of work that examines the ways in which Chinese painting has inflected literary tradition and even operated, at times, as a nonverbal form of literary criticism. Regardless of topic, each article or chapter of her published work has a characteristic elegance and subtlety manifested equally in her style of thought and her use of language. Based upon extensive textual research as well as close readings of pictorial evidence, broadly conceived and historiographic in nature, Susan's work has found its way onto the reading lists for undergraduate and graduate courses on Chinese art at universities across the nation, serving as a model of scholarship for aspiring specialists in her field.

Susan attacks every type of academic task with energy and zeal. As a result she is greatly in demand as a discussant at conferences and symposia and as a manuscript reviewer for scholarly journals. These academic responsibilities receive the same detailed consideration as her research. Susan's colleagues in East Asian studies recognize her as a particularly astute critic of other scholars' work, able to observe faults and shortcomings, but particularly respected for her ability to make constructive analyses of work in progress, aiding and encouraging others to extend and improve their initial presentations of new ideas. Susan brought the same rigor to teaching graduate and undergraduate students, demanding much of them but making equal demands upon herself, producing detailed bibliographies, impeccably organized course syllabi, and regular handouts that assisted her students in mastering the unfamiliar names and terminology of Chinese art. An IU colleague who team-taught with Susan wrote:

She provided me with a model of cogent and sensitive teaching, in both lecture and graduate seminar formats, at a time when I had little experience. Susan's lectures combined basic frameworks with original and intriguing interpretations, and as I was a part of the student audience during classes where Susan was primary lecturer, I was able to observe over the course of a term her ability to sustain student interest through careful pacing, variation of approach, and, simply, pizzazz. In graduate sections, Susan's approach stressed the process of learning and the openness of inquiry, and students participated actively, without trepidation.

Susan belongs to a generation of female academics who established a clear precedent for pursuing high-level careers, while simultaneously raising a family: in her case, two talented daughters. In addition to normal academic responsibilities, Susan actively involved herself in administration, serving as an associate dean of the College of Arts and Sciences under Dean Morton Lowengrub, as chair of East Asian Languages and Culture, and associate director of the School of Fine Arts, in addition to serving on countless departmental committees in EALC and History of Art.

Friends and colleagues will remember Susan's time at IU for other reasons as well: her skill as a raconteur; her lively dinner parties; her taste (when it came to food) for the savory, the salty, and the fiery, this last in the form of Tabasco sauce, which in her view could be added to any sandwich or salad she was about to consume. Her plans for the future will undoubtedly include long stretches of time in her home territory of Manhattan. Idleness is certainly no threat. The high level of esteem in which her Sinological colleagues hold her guarantees her continuing participation in scholarly life. Travel, reading fiction, listening to music, and keeping up with the latest film releases already beckon. It is impossible to imagine Susan in a sedentary mode; retirement in her case can mean only a reconfiguration of her existing list of activities.

Janet Kennedy