



A B B E V I L L E P R E S S

Robert E. Abrams

In Memoriam

For immediate release

Robert E. Abrams, the eminent art book publisher, died on August 28 at his home in North Salem, New York. He was eighty years old.

Abrams—known to all in publishing as “Bob”—was the cofounder and president of Abbeville Press, the publishing house he established in 1977 with his late father, Harry N. Abrams. The elder Abrams had pioneered modern art book publishing at his eponymous firm, which he founded in 1949. With their new venture, Abbeville, Bob secured his family’s publishing legacy. He had a profound sense of the significance, and the responsibility, of the publisher’s vocation. “Publishing,” Bob wrote, “is about deciding what content, ‘speech,’ is sufficiently meaningful to try to bring it to the attention of others. It is about trying to diminish ignorance and share the grace of human consciousness.”

After his father’s death in 1979, Bob quickly made his own mark on art book publishing with a series of visionary projects that revealed a taste for the monumental. *The Vatican Frescoes of Michelangelo*, a two-volume limited edition issued in partnership with the Japanese publisher Kodansha in 1980, remains the best document of the Sistine Chapel prior to its restoration. Of particular pride to Bob was his private

audience with Pope John Paul II, to whom he presented the book. *The Vatican Frescoes* was followed by an equally spectacular undertaking: a full-size facsimile of the original Double Elephant Folio edition of John James Audubon's *Birds of America*, published with the National Audubon Society in 1985. Equally expansive in their editorial scope were *A World History of Photography* by Naomi Rosenblum (1985), then the most ambitious history of photography as an art form ever published, and *The Art of Florence* by Glenn Andres, John Hunisak, and Richard Turner (1989), a two-volume synthesis of the extraordinary flourishing of painting, sculpture, and architecture from Giotto to Bronzino in that one Italian city-state.

Propelled by projects such as these, Abbeville became by the 1990s one of the country's largest and most admired illustrated-book publishers. Even as the firm grew, Bob maintained a personal involvement with many, if not most, of its titles. His editorial insights and unerring eye were hallmarks of Abbeville's output. These are especially evident in the breadth of Abbeville's publishing on the Italian Renaissance, which had been a focus of Bob's undergraduate studies at Harvard, and in its monographs on contemporary artists—Bob, like his father, was a passionate and eclectic art collector, and both men took pleasure in publishing books on the living artists they admired.

Bob's belief in the importance of a personal engagement with works of art and understanding the artist's vision, along with his passion for visual literacy, spurred Abbeville's entry into children's publishing. The *How Artists See* series by Colleen Carroll introduced children to art by inviting them to compare how different artists had depicted similar themes.

Abbeville's children's list—developed with Bob's wife, Cynthia Vance-Abrams—has continued to grow with titles including Sara Ball's *Flip-o-saurus* (2010) and its sequels, whimsical interactive excursions into paleontology and zoology, and *World Soccer Legends* (2014 onward), inspired by the enthusiasm that Bob and Cynthia's son Nathaniel had for the sport.

Colleagues and friends alike can attest that stepping into Bob's office was stepping into a lively, sometimes hours-long conversation about more than art—politics, economics, current affairs, history, society, and culture were invariably part of the dialogue. Inevitably, Bob's publishing activities occasionally ventured outside the bounds of illustrated books to reflect his varied interests: a study of the national debt, a compendium of the lessons to be learned from the greatest coaches in various sports, and even a series of novels about prewar Jewish life in Europe and the U.S. found a place on the Abbeville list. One such prescient experiment, *The Expectant Father* by Armin A. Brott and Jennifer Ash Rudick (1995), perhaps the first pregnancy guide for men, has sold more than 1.5 million copies to date.

Despite the challenges faced by the industry, Bob's commitment to publishing illustrated books of the highest quality never wavered. Under the leadership of publisher David Fabricant, Abbeville continues to issue more than twenty new titles per year and, to the delight of scholars and book lovers, maintains a backlist of hundreds.

Robert E. Abrams was born in New York City on July 6, 1943. He attended the Ethical Culture Fieldston School and earned a bachelor's degree in art history from Harvard College in 1965 and an MBA from Harvard Business School in 1969. Prior to

cofounding Abbeville Press, Bob worked in investment banking, real estate, and film production.

Bob's passion for books and art was exceeded only by his passion for his beloved family: his wife Cynthia Vance-Abrams and their son Nathaniel; his children Joshua, Daniel, Jordana, and Benjamin and their spouses; and his nine adored grandchildren, Lucas, Spencer, Susanna, Lily, Penelope, Naomi, Ezra, Asher, and Jonah.

There will be a celebration of Bob's life on Friday, October 6, at 10:00 a.m. at Central Synagogue, 652 Lexington Avenue, New York City.