

Smithsonian horizons



Assuming the responsibilities of Secretary of the Institution entails a commitment not only to its past but to a larger vision

Last month Dillon Ripley's extraordinary two decades and more of service and achievement as Secretary of the Smithsonian came to an end. The Institution's grand core-purposes remain what they always were, a breathtakingly unqualified commitment to the "increase and diffusion of knowledge." But the mix of topics under study and on exhibit has changed and broadened, in ways so well known to readers of SMITHSONIAN that they hardly need to be recapitulated.

Today the Institution's activities are closer than ever before to representing the full diversity of human knowledge, from the arts and humanities to technology and some of the most basic of the natural sciences. Its scale meanwhile has grown immensely, although in such an organic, measured way that an accurate before-and-after contrast would be difficult to reconstruct from memory.

I don't know where the phrase originated, but one hears repeatedly, among dwellers in the Washington area who can visit it most frequently, of a "museum for all seasons." This was a collective as well as gradual achievement, of course, built on thousands of individual ideas and efforts. But there is no denying that Dillon Ripley's was the guiding vision under which the modern arts of public communication were first brought into fruitful union with the classic scholarly concerns of the Smithsonian.

It is trite to say that his will be a hard act to follow, although it is no less than the simple truth. My own acquaintance with the Smithsonian, never previously

more than a passing one, does not yet penetrate very far beneath the surface. My taste in museums, for example, will have to proceed rapidly outward from a prior preference for the flawless, if perhaps a bit hermetic, little jewel of the Freer to embrace also the soaring spaces, greater heterogeneity and intentionally more open-ended appeal of its larger, more popular sibling galleries and museums. To be asked to step forward suddenly and deal with all of this range of responsibility requires a leap beyond any prior experience or ambition.

A recurrent theme in the letters I have received is that the Smithsonian is more than a national treasurehouse, that it has become one of our precious handful of unifying symbols. The writers sometimes suggested that this has led the way toward a broadening of the many meanings of Washington itself, into cultural realms well outside those formerly associated with our national seat of government. Well, it is only candid to admit that I may be still largely ignorant of most of the details. But I do share their—and I hope your—larger vision of the Smithsonian.

There is general agreement that this column should continue. Nevertheless, it is only fitting that Mr. Ripley's own title for it, *The view from the castle*, should somehow be replaced. After all, the numbered jerseys of great quarterbacks retire with them to permanent places in the Hall of Fame. We have different areas of sensitivity and expertise. No doubt we will be found on occasion to see the world differently. But it is an honor to follow him. Recognizing that conditions will always be changing, I will do everything I can to carry forward his work.