A Cornucopia for a Polymath

# A Cornucopia for a Polymath

## Studies in Archaeology, Architecture and Art History for John Burnett Mitchell

Edited by
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and Ian Riddler

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Cover: : John Mitchell shines a torch on Abbot Epiphanius at San Vincenzo al Volturno (Photo: Richard Hodges)

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# Preface

John Mitchell describes himself as a jobbing art historian. It is a modest explanation to his peers as to why, while still working on the art historical canon from Anglo-Saxon bibles and crosses to Rembrandt, he has ventured far and wide into a field that he likes to describe, with a chuckle, as knick-knacks. This cornucopia of interests, as this volume attests, is quite simply remarkable. He has mastered Roman mosaics, Late Antique architecture and amulets, Umayadd painting, the familiar and unfamiliar quotidian objects of the early Middle Ages from nails to trap-door hinges and, if occasion demanded, flints used in Lombard contexts as well as coins of all periods. It is not at all an exaggeration to describe him as a polymath. He is propelled by a visibly insatiable curiosity and passion. His excitement about the past is infectious. These are the hallmarks of someone who thrillingly pursues meaning in everything as far as it is possible. No matter what the object might be, his eye dwells longingly on its creation and its wider social significance. In sum, John Mitchell defies categorisation in the age of the corporate academy. For sure, great 19th-century intellects like Darwin or Mommsen would have found supreme pleasure in his scholarly companionship and above all, his eye for art in all its forms.

This book celebrates John's 80th year. It is hard to imagine, given he blessedly seems to physically alter so slowly. The festschrift brings together some of his army of undergraduate and graduate students, his fellow-travellers in the bi-ways of art history, his companions and colleagues on archaeological excavations and also a few admirers who have simply revelled in his friendship. The breadth of papers speaks volumes. We hope, too, that these chapters also speak to the profundity of John's intellectual journeys as well as some of his (many) wonderful idiosyncrasies. His is a life blessed by friendship and family, as will become clear in the following pages. It is a life that is hard to describe other than, in each of our instances, as an effervescent presence who generously gives of his time and thinking.

We would like to thank Archaeopress for its assistance (and in particular Mike Schurer, Robin Orlić and Ben Heaney) in preparing this volume. Special thanks, too, to Sarah Leppard for her assistance with the illustrations. Our thanks also go to the Mitchell family for their support throughout this project. Our one sadness is that Stephen Mitchell, John's cousin, passed away before he could write his essay which, had it been written, our celebrant would have surely appreciated.

We trust that we have brought to life John's many passions and his gentle if commanding intellect.

Jane Chick,
Richard Hodges
Ian Riddler
December 2024.