

Obituary: Dr A E A Werner

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Tony Werner, Keeper of the British Museum Research Laboratory, 1959-1975, and Chairman of the Pacific Regional Conservation center based at the Bernice P Bishop Museum in Honolulu, 1975 -1982, died in Hobart, Tasmania, on 21 January 2006 aged 94.

Alfred Emil Anthony Werner was born on 18 June 1911, the only son of Professor Emil Alphonse Werner, who was himself the third son of the portrait painter Louis Werner (d.1901), who had emigrated from Alsace to Dublin, via London, as a result of the Franco-Prussian War. The Werner family were loyal French citizens. In Ireland, Louis Werner had found plenty of commissions from the gentry, but spent too much time chatting to his subjects, rather than painting, so his wife started a photography business to provide mute subjects for the brush of her husband. Her second and third sons joined the business, and the youngest, Emil Werner, became so interested in the science of photography that he taught himself chemistry and was subsequently to become professor of chemistry at Trinity College. Tony Werner was educated at St Gerard's School, Bray, and at Trinity College, Dublin, where he went in 1929 and received a BA degree with first class honours in 1933, an MSc in 1934, and an MA in 1937. The German Government awarded him an Alexander von Humboldt scholarship in 1934 and he read for a DPhil at the University of Freiberg im Breisgau which he completed in 1937. He was immediately appointed to a lectureship at Trinity College, Dublin, becoming a reader in organic chemistry in 1945. He was awarded an Honorary ScD by his alma mater in 1971. Tony Werner applied for a post as a research chemist in the Scientific Department of the National Gallery, London, in 1948. He and Ian Rawlins, the Scientific Advisor to the Trustees, decided that they needed to expand the experimental capacity of the two-man scientific department and thus, in the absence of money to finance permanent posts, the National Gallery applied for two Nuffield Scholarships. These were filled by John Mills, subsequently to become the head of department, and Ian Graham who later pursued a career of archaeological exploration in Central America, becoming a world expert on the Maya. Under Rawlins' supervision, Graham, a physicist by training, studied the penetration of solvents into dried oil films, while Mills, a chemist, nominally supervised by Werner, applied the new technique of paper chromatography in the characterisation of dammar resin. Subsequently, with the late Joyce Plesters he developed microscopic methods for the scientific study of easel paintings and investigated new materials for their conservation. At this time, Plesters and Werner were involved in the unmasking of the Piltdown hoax by showing that the staining on the teeth was not natural. In 1954 Tony Werner took up an appointment at the Research Laboratory of the British Museum as a Principal Scientific Officer, filling a vacancy resulting from staff redeployment following a serious personality clash between the then Keeper and his deputy, who was transferred to another museum. He was the best possible person to fill this vacuum and, with his easy-going manner, the troubles of the past were quickly forgotten. It was thus a foregone conclusion that he would become Keeper on the retirement of Harold Plenderleith in 1959. He also filled the part-time chair of chemistry at the Royal Academy from 1962-75. As an organic chemist, Tony Werner was most interested in the application of modern

synthetic polymers to the conservation of antiquities and works of art. The war had seen the development of many synthetic adhesives for use in armament production, especially for the construction of aeroplanes, and in the post-war period Werner sought uses for these to mend and consolidate decaying museum objects. His successful work on synthetic varnishes for easel paintings and his development of a still widely used wax polish for use on wood, stone and metalwork have been tempered by the less successful promotion of soluble nylon for consolidating fragile surfaces; a treatment that has not endured due to the increasing insolubility of the nylon with the passage of time and the resulting difficulty in removing it thereafter. Two of his more important projects were the recognition (with the late David Baynes-Cope) that the Vinland map is a fake and his involvement in the opening of the coffin of Archbishop Walter de Gray (d.1255) in York Minster on 3 May 1968. This operation was carried out at night in great secrecy as the tomb was undergoing restoration to make it safe and, as a consequence, a coffin lid painted with a full-length portrait of de Gray had been discovered. This was the one and only time that Werner got his hands dirty on an excavation. It was he who removed the episcopal ring from the right hand and arranged for that and the other finds – chalice, paten and crozier - to be conserved at the British Museum. Tony Werner was much in demand as a lecturer and advisor, carrying out many overseas missions (usually on behalf of UNESCO or the British Council) to countries such as Pakistan (1961), Yugoslavia (1962), Syria (1966), Australia (1970), South Africa (1971), Egypt (1972), Romania (1973), and Bangladesh (1974). In the early 1970s, Tony Werner was a member of the team of curators who negotiated the loan of a magnificent exhibition of Chinese archaeology to the Royal Academy. These foreign assignments were manna to Werner who revelled in foreign travel, but his frequent absence from his duties at the British Museum did not go unnoticed! Outside the British Museum, Tony Werner was closely involved with the affairs of the International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, being elected a fellow in 1952, a member of Council from 1961 to 1962, Hon. Treasurer 1962-71, President 1971-74, and Vice-President 1974-96. He was awarded the Forbes Prize of the Institute in 1992 and Honorary Fellowship in 2001. He was also a member of the ICOM Conservation Committee working group on museum laboratories from 1957-67 and of the museum lighting group of the National Illumination Committee of Great Britain; he was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London in 1958 and a member of the Royal Irish Academy in 1963. Tony Werner was also very active in the Museums Association, becoming a Fellow in 1959 and President in 1967. The latter term of office coincided with the appointment of Sir John Wolfenden as Director of the British Museum (1969-73). The museum world was understandably disappointed that its top job should have gone to an 'outsider' and Werner was in the unenviable position of being president of an organisation that issued a press release condemning the appointment of his own boss! In 1974, Tony Werner was invited to advise on the conservation needs of the countries of the Pacific. He recommended that a regional conservation centre be established in Hawaii, wrote a job description for its director, applied for the position, and was appointed. He thus retired from the British Museum in 1975 and spent the next seven years in Honolulu. Tony Werner published many papers and articles on his chemical research at TCD and on his work at the National Gallery and the British Museum, culminating in writing a Royal Institute of Chemistry monograph entitled *The Scientific Examination of Paintings* (1952) and collaboration with H J Plenderleith on a revised second edition of the latter's *The Conservation of Antiquities and Works of Art* (Oxford, 1971). In 1997 the British Museum dedicated to him the proceedings of a conference, aptly titled *The Interface between Science and Conservation* (ed. Susan Bradley). Outside his chosen profession Tony Werner was a convivial and entertaining companion. He liked fine wines, good food, The Times crossword,

playing chess and bridge and, in retirement, croquet. His advice to me on my first official trip abroad in 1968 (only to Paris!) was never to trust the local water and therefore to buy a bottle of Whisky at Heathrow and drink a generous measure every night to disinfect the stomach and induce sleep. It was good advice. In 1939 he married the opera singer Marion Jane Davies by whom he had two daughters. His wife died in 1973. *Andrew Oddy*