

## **Ralph Fanning, Doctor of Humane Letters**

Professor of Art, The Ohio State University

Member, First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio

Founding Chairman, Art Committee, First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio

Ralph Fanning was born November 29, 1889, a member of one of the original families to settle on Long Island in the town of Riverhead, and he prepared for entrance into Cornell University at the Friends' Academy in Locust Valley, Long Island. While pursuing a bachelor's degree in architecture, he was elected to Phi Beta Kappa and graduated in 1912. He completed a Master of Science degree in History from the University of Illinois in 1917.

A pacifist Quaker vehemently opposed to killing, he volunteered for compassionate non-military service in France during World War I, serving as an ambulance driver. Following the war, Fanning returned to the United States and the University of Illinois to receive a Master of Architecture degree in 1920. At age 32, he was invited to join the faculty of the Art Department at The Ohio State University (OSU), and in 1924, he became full professor. The university conferred upon him the honorary Doctor of Humane Letters in 1959.

The words "gentle," "concerned," "humanitarian" are frequently used to describe the manner of this 6'4" tall articulate and refined man. He took special, deep interest in his students, and felt a calling to serve as a mentor to them.

As a scholar Fanning researched the life of Verocchio and published lively surveys of art history on the Italian Renaissance. He introduced the first graduate program in art history at OSU and served on its Graduate Council and Faculty Council as well as on the Board of Managers for the Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts (now the Columbus Museum of Art). His other scholarly interests and university affiliations took him to Egypt, the Middle East, north Africa, and Mexico during 16 summers as a guest lecturer. His addiction to learning led him several times to Columbia University as a research scholar. He was appointed visiting professor at the University of California and at the University of Georgia, and at the latter he was a consultant for the graduate program. In 1947-48 he was Acting Chair of the Department of Art at New York University. In 1953, he was Fulbright Professor at the University of Cairo.



Photo: Jeff McCutcheon

Heavily influenced by his passion for architecture, most of the subjects of Fanning's art are buildings—public buildings of importance at international, national and local levels and homes that captured his attention. Thousands of sketches and paintings were made of his beloved OSU, and many of those artworks are still found in offices and meeting rooms throughout the campus today. Over 100 of his works have been retained by the Ohio Historical Society (now Ohio History Connection).



Photo: Jeff McCutcheon

Fanning, who was a member of First Congregational Church in Columbus, found the stunning architecture of the 1931 edifice, designed by notable New York City architect John Russell Pope, to be particularly inspiring, and the church retains to this day several works featuring both interior and exterior details of the neo-Gothic building. The church has fittingly designated the principal meeting room of the Parish House as the “Ralph Fanning Room,” where many of the church’s collection of his paintings hang. Adjacent to this room is the church Parlor which displays Fanning paintings of all of the previous buildings of the church, as well.

Sadly, physical illness plagued Fanning for the last 20 years of his life, and he succumbed to Essential Tremor Disorder on March 15, 1971.

*This brief biography was adapted from information contained within the Archives of First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio.*

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Click [here](#) to view several of the Fanning paintings contained with the art collection of First Church.