

# Obituary



John Bryan. *Courtesy of the Bryan Family*

## John H. Bryan Junior (1936–2018)

I am sad to report the death of John Bryan, a new member to the Society but one known to many of us for a good few years. He will be remembered particularly by RFS members who took part in the Chicago tour in October 2014. The visit to his home and collection at Crab Tree Farm and the warm welcome afforded members was reported in the *Newsletter* for Spring 2015, pp. 26–30.

John died just a few days short of his 82nd birthday and we offer our condolences to his wife Neville. In addition to his wife, John is survived by his four children, John H. Bryan III, Margaret Bryan French, Elizabeth Bryan Seebeck and Charles F. Bryan, thirteen grandchildren and one great-grandchild. *The Chicago Sun-Times* described John Bryan in its obituary as ‘courtly yet approachable’, noting that he was a leading patron of the Arts, a philanthropist and fundraiser. He was all of those things besides being a gracious and generous host to all who were fortunate enough to visit him at Crab Tree Farm.

My husband Victor and I worked closely with John on several projects at Crab Tree Farm. We collaborated particularly on The Little House and The Hermitage, two of the farm buildings which will have been seen by members on their visit. Early seventeenth-century English oak furniture was one of John’s great passions. He had formed his collection over many years and he also chose to furnish the main family home with it. Oak furniture was also displayed downstairs in what was

called The Little House, alongside his collection of early Tudor portraits. Upstairs at The Little House he showcased later seventeenth-century furniture of exceptional quality but also of small scale to suit the proportions of the room. The furniture collection at Crab Tree Farm also encompassed American and British Arts and Craft through to modern makers such as John Makepeace. As we are a furniture society I shall not speak of his other collecting passions which included paintings, pottery, metalwork and needlework. I am sure that other societies such as Antique Metalware Society will write about these fine collections.

John Bryan was first a businessman and was CEO of The Sara Lee Corporation from 1975–2000. He was a man of many abilities and fierce intelligence which he used to great effect throughout his life and career. A Southern gentleman who was a committed civil rights advocate, he raised millions of dollars for philanthropic projects which included the Modern Wing of The Art Institute Chicago. He was the driving force behind the creation of The Millenium Park in Chicago with its famous Anish Kapoor sculpture. John was a past Chairman of The National Trust for Historic Preservation. He had a great interest and knowledge of architecture ancient and modern and helped raise key funding for the preservation of The Farnsworth House in Plano Illinois. More recently John had embarked on sponsoring and producing several books on furniture, pottery and metalwork which particularly showcased his collections at Crab Tree Farm.

Victor and I first met John through his sponsorship of two students for the course of furniture making at the John Makepeace School for Craftsmen in Wood. Crab Tree Farm continued this tradition of sponsoring furniture makers and sculpture with placements for artist in residence. John was a man who was equally at home in the farm workshops as he was in the boardroom. I remember being at the farm once and I commented on the wonderful display of small pots of fresh flowers in each of the rooms where a tour of visitors was expected later that day. They had been created by John, the colours in the flowers matching details of paintings displayed in each room.

To be in his company was always a privilege. His knowledge of furniture and all the areas of his collecting was truly encyclopaedic; he was a true Renaissance man.

*Jan Chinnery*