

Alan Tompkins '29: A Passion for Painting

By Daniella Zalcman '09



Alan Tompkins '29

To **Alan Tompkins '29**, a painter and the former director of the Hartford (Conn.) Art School, those faraway College years still seem meaningful. Perhaps it's because it was at Columbia that his lifelong career started. "As an idealistic student, I fell so hopelessly in love with art that my friends would muse — with some accuracy — that I would rather paint than eat," Tompkins jokes.

Tompkins, whose 100th birthday was October 29, enrolled at Columbia as a pre-engineering student at the behest of his father, a civil engineer who was the deputy commissioner of docks for the City of New York. But during his first year, Tompkins remembers, "I drew a portrait of Herbert E. Hawkes, then-dean of the College. Dean Hawkes intuited that my interests and talents lay outside the discipline of engineering, and when I tripped up on calculus, he recommended a change of majors to my father."

Tompkins quickly became a joint history and art history major, and soon after discovered a singular passion for painting. After graduation, he earned a B.F.A. from Yale's art school in 1933. His talent then led him to government commissions, painting murals for post offices in Indiana and North Carolina. In the '40s, he was a designer at GE, where his designs for kitchen appliances were patented. He also taught at Columbia and Cooper Union, and in the early '50s was named assistant art director of the Hartford Art School. He became its director in 1957.



Tompkins' painting *Faculty Club Dining Room* (1949) was inspired by intellectuals in conversation at Columbia's Faculty Club.

PHOTO: JOHN BONDY

Tompkins, according to a recent *Washington Post* interview, isn't eager to define himself by his stints at academic institutions. "When you have lectured and taught at other places, there's a tendency for people to say you're a teacher," he remarked. "I am a painter, a professional painter." Nonetheless, his contributions to the Hartford Art School clearly were significant. As its director, he oversaw the school's merger with Hillyer College and the Hartt College of Music to become the University of Hartford. And later, at the new institution — whose seal he designed — he was named vice chancellor for the visual arts.

This summer, at the University of Hartford, a selection of his paintings was exhibited — a showing that coincided with the Hartford Art School's 130th anniversary, the University of Hartford's 50th, and (almost) Tompkins' 100th birthday. "An Exhibition of Paintings by Alan Tompkins" featured works from recent years as well as works dating from the 1940s and '50s. (*Alan Tompkins — painter*, a biography with selected artwork by Linda Powers Tomasso, also was released earlier this year.) Tompkins' wife and his two children are deceased, but his 38-year-old grandson, Charles Tompkins, a financial planner from Seattle, flew in to help his grandfather set up the retrospective exhibit. To Charles Tompkins, it seemed clear that his grandfather's engagement with art had "extended his life by many years." The message of Tompkins' long career, he told the *Washington Post*, was this simple one: "If you're passionate about something, keep doing it."