

Robert P. Multhauf (1919–2004)



Robert P. Multhauf was born in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, on June 8, 1919. He graduated with a B.S. in chemistry from Iowa State College (now Iowa State University) in 1941 and worked as a chemist for several years before joining the U.S. Navy in World War II. He stayed in Japan after his discharge in 1946, then enrolled at the University of California at Berkeley, receiving his M.S. in Far East studies in 1950 and a Ph.D. in 1953 for his thesis "The Relationship Between Technology and Natural Philosophy, ca.1250–1650, As Illustrated by the Technology of the Mineral Acids." After a year as a fellow at the Johns Hopkins Institute for the History of Medicine he was appointed by the Smithsonian Institution as associate curator for the Division of Engineering, United States National Museum (USNM). The following year he became curator of the division and in 1957 head curator of the department of engineering and industries. After USNM was reorganized and the Museum of History and Technology (MHT) was established in 1957, Multhauf became head curator for the Department of Science and Technology and served as acting curator of the Division of Physical Sciences within the department.

Multhauf became director of MHT in 1966. When MHT was renamed the National Museum of History and Technology (NMHT) in 1969, Multhauf was appointed the senior scientific scholar of the Department of Science and Technology (1970–1977), and for the Department of the History of Science (1978–1979). When NMHT was renamed the National Museum of American History in 1980, Multhauf joined the staff of the Office of Senior Historians. He retired from the Smithsonian Institution in 1987.

Multhauf participated in various national and international organizations, most notably the American Council of Learned Societies, History of Science Society (HSS), International Union of the History and Philosophy of Science, National Air and Space Administration Historical Committee, Society for the History of Technology, and American Federation of Information Processing Societies. He was the president of HSS (1979–1980) and editor of *Isis* from 1964–1978. Multhauf was a Visiting Professor at Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies in 1984.

Multhauf published numerous papers on the history of science including: "John Rupescissa and the Origin of Medical Chemistry," *Isis* 45 (1954): 359–367; "The Beginnings of Mineralogical Chemistry," *Isis* 49 (1958): 50–53; "A Museum Case History: The Department of Science and Technology of the U.S. National Museum of History and Technology," *Technology and Culture* 6 (1965): 47–58; and "Sal Amoniac: a Case History of Industrialization," *Technology and Culture* 6 (1965): 569–586, for which he received the Abbott Payson Usher Prize. His books include: *A Catalogue of Instruments and Models in the Possession of the American Philosophical Society* (1961); *The Origins of Chemistry* (1966, 1967, 1993); *Laurits Christian Eichner, Craftsman: 1894–1967* (1971); *History of Chemical Technology: An Annotated Bibliography* (1983); *A Brief History of Geomagnetism and a Catalog of the Collections of the National Museum of American History* (with Gregory Good, 1987); *Neptunes Gift: A History of Common Salt* (1993, 1996, 2003); and *The Invention and Development of the Radiosonde: With a Catalog of Upper-atmosphere Telemetering Probes in the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution* (with John L. DuBois and Charles A. Ziegler (2002).

In 1985, Robert P. Multhauf received the Dexter Award for his outstanding contributions to the history of chemistry, particularly for his books *Origins of Chemistry* and *Neptune's Gift: A History of Common Salt* as well as his important activities at the Smithsonian Institution. Two years later he received the Leonardo da Vinci Medal from the Society for the History of Technology.

Multhauf died May 8, 2004 of a heart attack at his home in Raphael, California at age 84. He believed strongly that knowledge of the history of science benefits scientists. He remarked that a firm understanding of the history of science "can open the scientist's mind and illuminate the process of discovery."

Sources

Bernard S. Finn, "Robert P. Multhauf, 1919–2004," *Technology and Culture* 46 (2005): 265–273.

Multhauf quote is from *Current Contents* 3 (1977–1978): 723–726.

For the papers of Robert P. Multhauf circa 1957–1987, see <http://www.si.edu/archives/archives/findingaids/FARU7467.htm>

Anon., "Robert Multhauf," *Bulletin for the History of Chemistry*, 4 (1989): 26.

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