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Paul Kristeller, 94, Scholar Of the Renaissance, Is Dead

By ERIC PACE

Paul Oskar Kristeller, a leading authority on Renaissance philosophy, died on Monday at his home in Manhattan. He was 94.

Professor Kristeller began teaching at Columbia University in 1939, became Woodbridge Professor of philosophy there in 1968 and retired in 1973.

Columbia's president, George Rupp, praised Professor Kristeller's mastery of ancient texts and "his tenacity in tracing the influences of those texts in medieval and Renaissance thought."

Professor James Hankins of Harvard, a specialist in Renaissance history who worked for Professor Kristeller as a research assistant in the 1970's and 80's, said, "Many people would say he was the greatest Renaissance scholar of the century." In the field of Renaissance studies, he added, Professor Kristeller was "the last of the great German Jewish refugees who came to the United States in the 1930's" and "really made their marks on American culture and academic life."

Professor Kristeller was active in the revival of Renaissance studies in the United States after World War II, Professor Hankins said. In the 1950's and 60's, he added, Professor Kristeller "traveled up and down the country giving hundreds and hundreds of lectures and popularizing Renaissance studies."

He was a founding member of the Renaissance Society of America and its president from 1957 to 1959.

The word Renaissance, French for "rebirth," has become the name used for the evolution of Western civilization during the changeover from the Middle Ages to the modern era, first in Italy and then elsewhere in Europe, from about 1350 to 1600.

All told, Professor Kristeller wrote more than 800 books and articles, Professor Hankins said. His chief scholarly project was a seven-volume catalogue, "Iter Italicum," meaning "Italian Journey" in Latin. His aim in writing it, he said, was to make the sources of Renaissance culture, especially manuscript sources, available for study by scholars. The work has been called a field guide to Italian Renaissance documents and manuscripts held in libraries in various countries.

Professor Kristeller's work on the catalogue began in the 1930's, and the volumes came out between 1963 and 1996. The typescript for the volumes grew to be 35,000 pages long, Professor Hankins said, in large volumes of small type in double columns.

In manner and appearance, Professor Kristeller "appeared to people to be very stiff, like a Prussian, when they first met him," Mr. Hankins said. But after further acquaintance, he added, they found that Professor Kristeller was actually "a very warm and generous person."

Anthony Grafton, the Dodge Professor of history at Princeton University, who is also a Renaissance specialist, said that Professor Kristeller represented, in his scholarship and in the values and the methods that he taught, "the great tradition of the German universities" and that he "carried that on and taught it in Italy and America."

A native of Berlin, he went on to do doctoral and postdoctoral studies at the universities of Heidelberg, Berlin and Freiberg until 1933, when the Nazis came to power.

During his student days, he received one doctorate in philosophy in 1928 from the University of Heidelberg and another in 1937 from the University of Pisa in Italy. He also taught in Italy before moving to the United States in 1939. His parents, Heinrich Kristeller and the former Alice Magnus, both became victims of the Holocaust.

Professor Kristeller's wife, Dr. Edith Kristeller, a physician whom he married in 1940, died after five decades of marriage.

Professor Kristeller's writings also included "Renaissance Thought" and other textbooks that were widely used for years in college and university classrooms.

He was a particular expert on Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), an Italian philosopher who was a notable reviver of Platonism during the Renaissance.

But Professor Hankins said that Professor Kristeller was best known for his efforts on behalf of Renaissance humanism, as distinct from later forms.