

With sadness, the family of Derk Visser, Ph.D. of Trappe, Pennsylvania, share news of his death on December 16, 2018. He was 88.

Dr. Visser retired from Ursinus College in 1999 where he began teaching in 1968 after receiving a Masters degree in history from the University of Pennsylvania (1960) and a Doctorate of Philosophy, also in history, from Bryn Mawr College (1966). Prior to joining the Ursinus faculty, Dr. Visser was an instructor in Latin, French, and History at the Haverford (PA) School. Dr. Visser also held positions as Assistant Professor at Muhlenberg College and Instructor at Temple University where he taught evening and summer school courses for many years.

Born in the Netherlands, Dr. Visser grew up in a village on the outskirts of Amsterdam and was the youngest of four children. The post-depression 1930s and the German occupation of 1940-1945, as well as a Calvinist education juxtaposed with time spent exploring the Dutch landscape alone and in fondly remembered family excursions, stirred a life-long interest in the relationship between the human context and the natural world. As a young adult Dr. Visser joined the Dutch Merchant Marines which led him to the coasts of Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East as well as ports across Europe and earned him the moniker of “professor” for his penchant for documenting his experiences with a camera and on a typewriter. Dr. Visser drew on these experiences throughout his academic career, both to enliven his seminar lectures and to refine the scope of his research. His wanderings resulted in a personal catalog of climate change and habitat loss. He also assembled an extensive bird list culminating in a life list of over 1000 species.

Dr. Visser emigrated to the United States in 1957, though his scholarship required an annual return to Europe. In addition to serving as Chair of the Department of History (1988-1997) while at Ursinus, Dr. Visser was Faculty Secretary (1985-1990), College Marshall (1990-1995), and served on a number of committees including the Library, Professional Development, Promotion and Tenure, Women’s Studies, Nominations, Art Advisory, and the Athletic Hall of Fame committees. Perhaps his largest contributions to the College were the establishment of its first interdisciplinary studies course, “Community and Civilization,” funded through a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the development of an Art History program.

A prolific scholar, Dr. Visser produced work in English, German, French, and his native Dutch. His scholarship spanned the Middle ages, the Renaissance and Reformation, Art History, and Utopian Studies. His research appeared as book chapters, teachers’ manuals, abstracts, reviews, and in peer reviewed journals and published conference proceedings. Dr. Visser organized conference panels, often serving as panel chair. He was invited to read papers internationally. His books include *Jean Giono* with Dr. Colette Hall and *Zacharias Ursinus, the Reluctant Reformer, 1534-1583* (also translated into Dutch). Dr. Visser organized and chaired the “Colloquium Commemorating the Life of Ursinus” at the College to commemorate the 400th anniversary of Ursinus’ death. In addition to Dr. Visser’s academic contributions, he was a staunch supporter of the Women’s field hockey team and would often be found on the sidelines of the football games. Dr. Visser shared his love of nature through a photography club and regularly organized outings for its members.

Dr. Visser's artistic side also brought him into the garden where he attempted to recreate scenery from his travels in Europe with formal topiary planted as chess pieces or strategically planted flowering trees and shrubs to lend a sense of space in a small suburban lot. His gardens mirrored the evolution of his thought regarding the not-always-positive impact of human activity in that his earliest foray into growing roses tended toward the highly hybridized varieties while in his later gardens, he favored the more nuanced antique varieties. His later gardens were abundant with wildflowers and native species, though his sentimental nature induced him to pick a few seed pods from the fields of southern France or coastal Maine to take root in Pennsylvania. His gardens were always home to the birds and he paid special attention to incorporating areas for nesting and species that supplied berries or seeds.

Dr. Visser spent many summers on the Maine coast where he hiked along the shore, in meadows, and through bogs, charting the changing landscape and perfecting his observations of the habits of shore birds and flitting songbirds. It was here, on the shorelines, that he ensured his sense of wonder would pass to his children and grandchildren. Dr. Visser was also a longtime supporter of the Cape May, New Jersey Audubon Society and of the Hawk Mountain Sanctuary. He held his friends in high regard, was generous of spirit and selective in his praise, making it all the more meaningful on the receiving end.

Dr. Visser is survived by his partner of more than 30 years, Dr. Colette Trout; his two children, Robert and Marijke; three grandchildren, one sister-in-law, and many nieces and nephews. A small gathering of family and friends will be held in the spring to raise a glass and celebrate his life.

Memorial donations may be made to the Perkiomen Watershed Conservancy at 1 Skippack Pike, Schwenksville, PA 19473 or made online at [www.perkiomenwatershed.org](http://www.perkiomenwatershed.org) via the Derk Visser Memorial Fund Donation Link. Contributions can also be made to the S. Ross Doughty '68 Endowed Scholarship at Ursinus College. Please note the scholarship name when sending to Ursinus College, Attn.: Advancement Office, 601 E. Main Street, Collegeville, Pa. 19426.