

Minute for Leila Barber

Leila Cook Barber, who died on December 4, 1984, at the age of 81, was a member of the Vassar faculty for 37 years. She taught in the Art Department, which she joined in 1931, until her retirement in 1968.

Of that generation that in its youth placed more value on the personally creative than on conformity to professional orthodoxy, Leila Barber could and did say of herself: "I am a period piece. I've never published anything. I have no Ph.D. I don't know why they kept me." Generations of stu-

dents, however, and department members, colleagues and college administrators knew exactly why she was invaluable to the College, why it can be said that she has not left her peer. Simply because formalized professional ambition was alien to Leila Barber, this minute, to record her contribution to Vassar College must go beyond the framework of academic vita.

A phrase often used by Leila to characterize others was "mover and shaker."

Leila was not a shaker, but she was a mover and shaper. And it is the shape of things that she herself cared to fashion and foster, or encourage and support, that became incorporated into the mainstream of learning, enhancing its quality and affirming at the same time the values of larger social enterprise. What she gave shape to may, perhaps, be traced to her study of philosophy and psychology as an undergraduate at Bryn Mawr College, from which she received her B.A. in 1925, and to her study of art history, begun under the famed Giorgianna Goddard King. She earned her M.A. in art history in 1928 at Radcliffe, where she did further graduate work until 1931.

Related to these fields of study, and what might be said to lie at the heart of Leila Barber's accomplishments was a fundamentally domestic ideal. "Domestic" is not meant in the narrow sense here -- not at all implying a channeling of energies to private ends -- but signifying that personal space where what is within can be ordered and arranged, expanded and controlled, -- to visible effect. It was the platform from which an inner dynamic of energy radiated outward in many directions: a base from which a response to immediate surroundings was extended to a critical concern with a larger environment -- with working spaces, architecture and landscape. It was the launching point for a trajectory of thought that carried personal compassion into social action -- in her later years to serving meals on wheels, to recording for the blind. The domestic core was a touchstone not only for personal social life, but for social responsibility, including her vigilant concern for the quality of campus life. And it was the source of the tremendous reach of her truly liberal point of view which

in so forward looking and positive a way embraced every innovative idea that could potentially bring about greater understanding, more perceptive knowledge or pleasure, or improved social condition. The operative pattern of her gifts and dedication emerges clearly in her contributions to Vassar College.

Part of each summer she worked on student rooming with the College warden, Mrs. Drouilhet; by 1940 she was head resident of Josselyn House; and from 1955 on, house-fellow at Josselyn. During the Second World War she helped plan and inaugurate a college system of cooperative living in which household tasks formerly done by maids and white angels were rotated among the students in each dormitory. In addition to getting the work done, this, she thought, brought students of different backgrounds together, and induced a sense of communal responsibility and an active participation in the care for one's environment. She was also chairman of the wartime faculty committee called the Key Center of Information at Vassar, which, by appointment of the Office of Education, served as a distribution center for information about the war and postwar problems to six neighboring counties. She represented the Key Center on the Vassar Coordinating Council for War Activities, and served on the council's advisory panel of faculty members who helped students to choose individual programs of preparation for war service. She also chaired the Emergency Committee, which formulated the College defense program.

Her committee service for the College, however, encompassed the entire range of academic process, from visiting schools and talking with prospective students, to the Committee on Student Records, to the Curriculum Committee, to the Board of Residents which advised students in each house -- 140 in Joss -- to the advising of majors in Art History. She was chairman of the Art Department from 1965 to 1968; and following her retirement, she was briefly Acting Dean of Studies. Her advising, house-fellowing and teaching brought her into touch with an exceptionally wide range of students, with countless of whom she formed enduring friendships. She was masterful at bringing along the C student; she was a bulwark to those having a difficult time in college, and she was a fearless defender to parents of individual freedom as F. Scott Fitzgerald realized when Leila Barber took him to task for his views concerning the social life of his daughter.

In another vein, she was both awe-inspiring and formidable: formidable in the authority, strength of voice and definitive manner in which she expressed her views; awe-inspiring in her presence, which was stately, ex-

ceptional in grandeur and beauty and impeccable in every detail from coif to couture. Today she would be called a "role model;" indeed she inspired a student who saw her at a lecture last winter to write of her "perfectly seated figure," finding her "marvelous," and evoking more generations of students than she realized when she wrote, "Perhaps it was the child in me that caused the memory of Leila Barber to become forever crystallized within me."

But the phrase "role model," which now verges on empty jargon, is one that Beila Barber would not have used except facetiously. Abstraction was not something that experience fitted into, but something drawn from it. For this reason, among others, she excelled in the art of teaching. Many teachers reach their students; but singular was Leila's style, projection of voice and logically sustained development of analysis and idea. What she said made an indelible impression, and not least because of her invention of striking, witty and vivid turns of phrase often drawn from the commonly shared worlds of food and fashion. Dazzlingly articulate, and lucidly clear, she was able, just in the telling, to raise every work of art that she projected on the screen to a higher power, or to consign it to a limbo of inferiority where the works of those who misunderstood the styles of others seemed rightly to belong. She made art history itself a profoundly aesthetic and human--as well as historical-- discipline.

When Leila Barber joined the Art Department, she became its third member, teaching twelve 105 conference sections and a course in ancient art. It was she who shaped the introductory survey course, writing and revising its extensive syllabus. Printed annually, it was a booklet eagerly sought after and cherished by graduate students at other institutions long after it ceased to be produced. There was, hardly a historical period in the survey course that she had not at some time taught herself. She taught American painting as well, and on the advanced level, medieval art and Italian Renaissance art from Giotto to Tintoretto and beyond, though Tuscan painting of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries was her special field. With growing specialization in the discipline, no one else in the department could do all that Leila Barber could do, or with the intelligence and knowledge that she did it. No one had before, and certainly no one has since. Covering the field, shaping the developing discipline through the curriculum at Vassar, she was absolutely integral to that excellence of teaching and training for which the Vassar Art Department was so widely renowned in mid-century. A member of the Renaissance Society of America and the College Art Association of America, she was well known in the art historical world, and it was well known by her.

Her shaping of programs extended, moreover, beyond the art department. In the Forties, she was a staunch advocate of the three-year plan, participating in it. This was an innovative arrangement of semesters and of curricular offerings that enabled students in the war years to graduate in three rather than four years. Part of the raison d'etre of the plan was its potential for encouraging students to go on to graduate work, to have already launched themselves on a course of advanced study within the canon in four years.

Study in the form of seeing, knowing first hand and re-viewing the works of art that she taught early established a regular pattern of summer travel. It was not altogether uneventful. In 1936, in Spain with J. B. Ross from the History Department, she was trapped in the bombing of Granada at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. The New York Times photographed them and headlined their 'Escape by Plane from Rebel Stronghold in Spain.' They were rescued in a H-seater piloted by the Comte de Sibour, for whom Leila characteristically, held the map that guided them to Tangier. In her teaching years she traveled mostly to the Continent including Russia, but especially to Italy; and in the years of her retirement she spent long intervals in Greece and made repeated trips to England. Although she traveled extensively with undiminished interest in all visible manifestations of life and civilization, she had a great spirit socially for those enterprises on the local scene, including the League of Women Voters, to whom she gave her enthusiastic support.

An alumna who had enjoyed Leila's 105 lectures some years earlier returned to work at Vassar. Still regarding Leila with the awe inspired by their earlier teacher-student relationship, it was some time before she could stop addressing her as 'Miss Barber.' However, in the years following Leila's retirement, they shared many happy times together. These ranged from the concerts and opera workshops in Skinner, and the Drama Department productions, to Honi Cole and his tap-dancing troupe in concert at the Bardavon. Leila's great capacity for enjoying a variety of experiences, and her witty comments on the proceedings, made these evenings and many another outing to museums in Williamstown and New Haven a delight.

A strong and loyal supporter of the arts in Poughkeepsie, Leila Barber could be seen at virtually every important cultural event. After her retirement she regularly attended concerts, plays and lectures at Vassar and at the Bardavon. She was a major supporter of the Bardavon and a patron of the Hudson Valley Philharmonic. A great film buff, she became the first member of the Bardavon Film Society. She also supported Vassar's Friends of the Art Ga

lery and Barrett House.

With her unfailing enthusiasm for budding talent, she never missed an audition for the Young Artists Competition, and she played a vital part in guiding a local student playwright, Bill C. Davis, in creating his successful Broadway production, "Mass Appeal." Her personal involvement with the arts was boundless. No wonder she was heard to say, "It makes me weary to think of all I shall have done weeks from now."

For all that she did do for the College and Art Department, art history and the community, we are deeply grateful.

Respectfully submitted,

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