

At a Meeting of the Faculty of Vassar  
College

held

October fourteenth, nineteen hundred eighty-one the following Memorial  
was unanimously adopted:

Agnes Rindge Claflin was born with the century, on May 19, 1900, in Grand Rapids, Michigan. She graduated magna cum laude from Radcliffe College in 1921 and came to Vassar as an instructor in 1923. She returned to Radcliffe in 1926, receiving the M.A. in 1927 and the Ph.D. in 1928. Rejoining the Vassar faculty, she became Professor in 1931. Agnes Claflin was Chairman of the Department of Art from 1944 until her retirement in 1965 and for 18 years, from 1943 to 1962, she was Director of the Vassar College Art Gallery. For the last four years before her retirement, she held the Mary Conover Mellon Chair in Art History.

Apart from her active involvement in the life and administration of the College, she maintained numerous and varied connections with outside institutions. During World War II she served as Executive Secretary and Consultant in the Art Division of the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (1941-42), and continued as Consultant in the program of Cultural Relations with Latin America. In 1941, she was appointed to the Advisory Committee of the Museum of Modern Art, and served as Assistant Executive Vice President of the Museum in 1943-44. She was elected to the American Association of Museums in 1943. Beginning in 1939, she became a member of the Commission on Arts of the American Association of Colleges. A member of the College Art Association, she was its Chairman from 1945 until 1948, and on its Board of Directors from 1947 to 1951. From 1940 until 1943, she was a member of the Editorial Board of Art in America and from 1944 to 1945 President of the American Federation of Arts. She served on the Editorial Board of Magazine of Art, 1943-1951. In 1962 she was awarded an honorary degree from Wheaton College, and in 1963 the Graduate Society Medal from Radcliffe. Author of a variety of catalogue essays and articles, she also wrote two books: Sculpture and The Elder Pieter Bruegel. She died in Kingston, New York, on June 12, 1977.

This account of Agnes Claflin's career during her 42-year association with Vassar College, impressive as it is, conveys little of her unique contribution to this institution. For Agnes Claflin was an extraordinary teacher, administrator

and person. She represented the College, the art **department** and the profession with distinction and style. Style was her element -- an elegance of dress, speech **and manner** that spoke of personal choice and inner refinement: Calder jewelry, her tilted or feathery headgear, her elliptical and **memorable** turns of phrase all made **a** deep and lasting impression on those who had the good fortune to swim into **her** orbit. Knowing her, one gradually came to understand that grace and **works** figured about equally in the plan of intellectual salvation.

Just as Agnes offered herself as a living example of brilliant personal style, she had an unerring eye for it in **works of art**. She numbered **many** contemporary artists among her friends -- Alexander Calder, Eugene Berman and Pavel Tschelitchew, for example. She also bought the **works** of an even larger range of contemporary innovators, including **women**, for her own **collection** and for that of the Vassar College Art Gallery. She gave generously of her own collection to the gallery and believed strongly in bringing artists and their **works** to the College in order that students might directly confront the thoughts, ideas and issues that went into the "making" of the art of their time.

Both her sense of style **and** her extraordinary **reach** were communicated in Agnes's way of teaching; there was never anything so pedestrian as a "method." In **fact**, her great virtue as a teacher lay precisely in her refusal to **impose** any kind of system on the richness, density and intractability of the artistic material at hand. Intelligence was **perhaps** her only method, if one **can** call it that, a shining lucidity that often **worked** by indirection, **much** to the confusion of the less quick-witted of her students, the delight of the brighter ones. Her comments, inscribed in dashing hieroglyphics at a terrific tilt at the end of a quiz or term paper might be devastating: even worse might be an inscription only two paragraphs down from the top: "Could go **no** further: complete nonsense: Incomprehensible!" --or something of the sort. Nevertheless, one always had a **second chance**. Agnes was unswerving in her support of intelligence, of increasing mastery of fact and of the ability to articulate ideas and feelings on the part of her students. Although tolerant of a wide range of approaches, including some definitely not her **own**, she would never tolerate dullness, laziness or intellectual **poncif**. Gradually, almost without being **aware** of it, with **risk** and effort gladly **given**, the **good** student would develop a style of her own. It is **no wonder** that so **many** of Agnes's students went on to distinguished **careers** in

the art world: teaching, museum work, criticism, art publishing, collecting the roster is an impressive one.

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During the course of her chairmanship, Agnes created a department of excellence and international reputation. Among her early acquisitions were Henry-Russell Hitchcock, the noted architectural historian; Alfred Barr, founder of the Museum of Modern Art; John McAndrew, architectural historian and director of Save Venice; Richard Krautheimer, Adolf Katzenellenbogen and Wolfgang Lotz, German scholars of enormous energy, humaneness and accomplishment who later went on to other positions but always remembered their years at Vassar under Agnes's chairmanship with great vividness and affection.

Central to Agnes's inimitable discernment was her un-erring ability to sort out the shoddy from the valuable in contemporary art and contemporary criticism. She could do so because of her firm grasp of traditional painting and sculpture. Knowing and responding to artists such as Bruegel, Poussin or Goya, she could turn with equanimity to the relatively

unexplored aesthetic territory represented by Picasso, Mondrian or Jackson Pollock. Never did **she** impose her taste on anyone, student, friend or colleague; it **was** through the obvious depth and passion of her own commitment to the innovations of our century, her openness yet **critical** alertness **to** value or the lack of it that one was inspired to form one's own judgments of the new, the relatively **un-**familiar, or even the shocking **in** modern art. Although Agnes always saw both **the** art **of** the past and the present as part of an ongoing tradition of excellence, she nevertheless understood that the core of the new art was precisely what was innovative and risky. Essential to her distinctive style of **mind** was a beautiful acceptance of risk: risk **on** the part **of** the innovative maker **of** art as **well** as that of the student confronting new forms of aesthetic expression. Agnes **never** believed any art, old or **new**, was easy, but she **knew** that the great work, the **major** artist, was always worth the **effort**.

**In** her later years, Agnes faced affliction with extraordinary gallantry, maintaining her interest in art, in people, in ideas

until the **end** of her life. **For** many of **us**, a visit to the Claflin's house in **New** Paltz was a memorable event: there were pets, conversation and needle-point available to soothe the spirit, **works** by Rouault, Tchelitchew and Lachaise to beguile the eye, and **a sym-** pathetic yet critical eye to go **over a** troublesome manu- script. **For those of us who** knew her, **who** came under her influence, who cared deeply about her, Agnes Claflin **remains a** part of our present day lives and **work**. The **Vassar** Art Gallery offers material mementoes **of her on-** going presence in works like the personally inspired, witty **and** logical Agnes's Ring by Alexander Calder **or** George Platt Lynes memorable profile photograph en chapeau

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de paille, modern style. Her students and colleagues are a living testimonial to **her** continuing influence. In every sense Agnes Claflin was, and continues to **be**, a vital presence among us.

Respectfully submitted,

Linda Nochlin Pommer

Pamela Askew

Leila Cook Barber

Earl Groves

Susan Donahue Kuretsky