

Memorial Minute: Pamela Askew

November 11, 1998

Pamela Askew's long association with Vassar began virtually with her birth in 1925, for she was the daughter of the Bronzino scholar, Arthur McComb, whose teaching career began in the Art Department here. That Pamela was actually born in Poughkeepsie always seemed one of the most surprising aspects of her quietly extraordinary life.

Her growing up took place in New York City within the most sophisticated of all cultural milieus: the celebrated salon presided over by her mother Constance and her stepfather, the international art dealer Kirk Askew. As an adult Pamela had a natural aura of social and intellectual poise ---that of one who had grown up, as she wryly commented, "at Elizabeth Bowen's knee." The air of graceful authority she would project to students was more than the self-possession of one who knows an academic subject well. It was the mark of an intensely worldly person whose knowledge of ideas, people and places was broad and deep, having been absorbed not merely through study, but through exposure to such family friends as Virgil Thompson, Alexander Calder, and a charismatic art historian named Agnes Rindge (later Agnes Rindge Claflin) who was head of the Vassar Art Department.

As a student at the Shipley School, Pamela encountered a young teacher who would soon become one of the luminaries of the Vassar English Department: Doris Russell. Deeply impressed to discover that this lady scholar was a smoker--and thus a sophisticated woman of the world worth listening to--Pamela listened. Not surprisingly she, too,

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went on to Vassar where she became an English major in the Class of 1946. But in later life she would amusingly recall her utter inability to get on with the formidable Helen Lockwood. One can only be grateful if this failure steered her, even indirectly, toward art history.

It was a profession she learned modestly from the ground up, as student and apprentice---beginning as a slide filer and Assistant Art Librarian in the Vassar Art Department in 1946. She returned to the department as an Instructor in 1950 and in 1951 completed her Master's degree in art history at the Institute of Fine Arts in New York. She then departed for the Courtauld Institute of Art in London where she completed her Ph.D. in 1954.

Immediately thereafter Pamela came back to the Art Department where she would teach until her early retirement in 1985. In 1956 she became the museum's first Curator of Collections, a position she held until 1959. She chaired the Art Department between 1971 and 1974, the period that saw the founding of the Friends of the Art Gallery, an organization that she worked hard to counsel, because she recognized that it could enhance our museum's resources, while helping Vassar's alumnae and alumni find new connections with the college.

Pamela taught an unusually diverse range of courses that covered the Venetian Renaissance, baroque art in Italy, Spain and France and eighteenth century painting in England, France and Italy. Her publications were wide-ranging too: among other subjects, a series of pioneering studies on Domenico Fetti, articles on Perino del Vaga and on Ferdinando Gonzaga as patron, a book on Caravaggio's Death of the

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Virgin, published in 1990, and a book-length history of the first hundred years of the Vassar Art Department and Gallery. The latter, nearly completed at the time of her death in 1997, is now being prepared for publication, as is her monograph on Fetti.

During her years at Vassar, Pamela took teaching as seriously as anything in life can be taken and she unstintingly gave the time and effort to see that it was done brilliantly---not just now and then, but every day. To her, the proper preparation of a lecture was literally a matter of life or death. Many an afternoon or evening one could hear her typewriter thundering away in an almost continuous cascade of sound as she rethought and reconstructed each lecture from the ground up, including materials she had been teaching for twenty years or more. An Art 105 lecture on Bernini or Velasquez or Poussin was always an event for students and colleagues alike, because each was such a subtly plotted performance: witty and beautifully written, reflecting the most recent state of research in her field, and always filled with her own profound and original perceptions.

Meticulous and intensely self-critical, Pamela could be wonderfully patient with students who perhaps were less so, but whose freshness and originality delighted her. Her office door was always open, leaving vivid memories of an imposing figure---all presence and pearls---locked in intense dialogue with various disheveled disciples. Or as one former student remembers: "Exacting and gentle, rigorous and kind....not only did she care about the product of my intellectual efforts, she cared about the process as

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well...who I had become along the way." What Pamela's students had long known was formally recognized by her profession in 1988 when the College Art Association of America granted her its Award for Distinguished Teaching of Art History.

Without consciously intending to, Pamela Askew represented to all who knew her a level of integrity and excellence that involved taking the utmost trouble to do well in every aspect of one's existence, because existence itself was worth the trouble. The values and refinements she found in the works of art she studied were no different from the ones she sought in her own life. She was utterly authentic---to invoke an art historical term---and we were privileged to have had her among us.

Respectfully submitted,

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