

2004

## A Berkeley Home for Textile Art and Scholarship, 1912–79

Ira Jacknis

*University of California, Berkeley*, [jacknis@uclink4.berkeley.edu](mailto:jacknis@uclink4.berkeley.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf>



Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#)

---

Jacknis, Ira, "A Berkeley Home for Textile Art and Scholarship, 1912–79" (2004). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 448.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/448>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Textile Society of America at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

## A Berkeley Home for Textile Art and Scholarship, 1912–79

Ira Jacknis

Phoebe Hearst Museum of Anthropology

University of California, Berkeley

[jacknis@uclink4.berkeley.edu](mailto:jacknis@uclink4.berkeley.edu)

For the first half of the twentieth century, the University of California at Berkeley was a national center for the study and creation of the textile/fiber arts. This essay outlines, for the first time, the history of the now vanished department that nourished this important activity.<sup>1</sup>

### The Rise and Fall of a Department: A Short History

During its almost seventy-year existence—from its beginnings in 1912, under Mary Lois Kissell, until its demise in 1979, with the retirement of its last professor, C. Edmund Rossbach—the program went under three different names: Household Art, Decorative Art, Design. The program began in 1912 as Household Art, joined with Household Science (which focused on human nutrition) to form a department of Home Economics. As originally conceived, the coursework was meant to occupy the relatively large female enrollment, and, in fact, until its demise, the department was substantially female in its faculty and students. Home economics had originally developed in nineteenth century America as a social reform movement. It sought to support women's roles as moral guardians of the family by applying rational and efficient methods to household management.<sup>2</sup> During the first decade of the twentieth century, home economics became a field of academic study. Home economics was, in fact, the primary field for most of the department's earliest faculty.

The department's first professor, Mary Lois Kissell (1874–ca. 1944), had an impeccable background for the job. An important but now obscure figure, Kissell had studied at Columbia with anthropologist Franz Boas and collected Southwestern Indian baskets for the American Museum of Natural History. She had a home economics

---

<sup>1</sup> The present essay is adapted from “The Lure of the Exotic: Ethnic Arts and the Design Department at UC Berkeley,” *The Chronicle of the University of California*, no. 6 (2004), 37–73. The history of the decorative art / design department is essentially unwritten, and unfortunately, the sources are scattered and uneven. Useful but brief is the entry for the Design Department by Karl Aschenbrenner in the *Centennial Record of the University of California*, edited by Verne A. Stadtman (Berkeley: University of California, 1967), 83. For the department's founding and early years, see Maresi Nerad, *The Academic Kitchen: A Social History of Gender Stratification at the University of California, Berkeley* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999). For its demise, see Hanna Haim Hindawi, “Interviews with Former Chairs Joseph Esherick, Claude Stoller (Architecture Department), Ed Rossbach, Margaret Dhaemers (Design Department)” (Berkeley: Master's thesis, Design, University of California, 1996). Records for the early period of Household and then Decorative Art (ca. 1920–65) seem to be largely absent, but one key source is Lucretia Nelson, “The Decorative Art Department: Holograph Memoir and Related Papers,” 1986, The Bancroft Library (BL). Records for the Design department, especially concerning its phase-out, are in University Archives (CU-35), BL, and the Environmental Design Archives, College of Environmental Design (CED), both University of California, Berkeley. Also important are the interviews in the Regional Oral History series on fiber arts devoted to Ed Rossbach, Katherine Westphal, Lillian Elliott, Kay Sekimachi, and Gyöngy Laky (forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> Nerad, *Academic Kitchen*, 4–11.

master's degree from Columbia (1913). After two years at Berkeley, she resigned when she saw that University President Benjamin Ide Wheeler had little interest in making the department a serious academic program.<sup>3</sup>

The department's effective beginning, then, came in 1914 under Mary F. Patterson (1872–1957), an artist, teacher, and social worker trained at the Rhode Island School of Design. The Berkeley program was established as a Department of Home Economics in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences in 1916, with subdivisions in household art and household sciences. In 1918, it split into two divisions that became separate departments the following year, still within Arts and Sciences.

In 1932, the department was transformed by the hiring of Lila M. O'Neale (1886–1948).<sup>4</sup> A former professor of home economics, she had come to Berkeley in August 1926 to do a master's on lace, but her exposure to the teaching of anthropologist Alfred L. Kroeber led her to submit a thesis the following year on ancient Peruvian textiles.<sup>5</sup> O'Neale's doctoral field research with basket weavers of California's Klamath River region in 1929 was embodied in an innovative anthropology dissertation in 1930.<sup>6</sup> O'Neale, who brought a cultural perspective to her analyses of textile form, was instrumental in getting Household Art renamed as a department of Decorative Art in 1939. Thus it moved from a rather personal and applied program to a more serious academic study of crafts.

Most of the early faculty focused on textiles, but one important exception was architect Winfield Scott Wellington (1897–1979).<sup>7</sup> Commonly known as Duke, Wellington had earned a graduate degree in architecture from UCB in 1923, before setting up a private practice in the Bay Area, where he concentrated on residences. Although he continued to design buildings after joining the department in 1937, he spent most of his time teaching interior design, furniture, as well as the ever-popular introductory course, "Survey of Expressions in Materials." Perhaps even more important was his directorship of the University Art Gallery (1946–62), during which he became known for his influential exhibits. These employed the department's own collections (begun in 1929, and richest in textiles) as well as the substantial holdings of the campus anthropology museum, founded in 1901 by Phoebe A. Hearst.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Nerad, *Academic Kitchen*, 54–61. After leaving Berkeley, it appears that Kissell was never able to obtain a permanent appointment, but continued her research into aboriginal textiles as an independent scholar, based in New York.

<sup>4</sup> Margaret W. Harrison, "Lila Morris O'Neale: 1886–1948," *American Anthropologist*, 50 (1948), 657–65; Margot Blum Schevill, "Lila Morris O'Neale," *Kroeber Anthropological Society Papers*, no. 65–66 (1986), 129–37.

<sup>5</sup> Lila M. O'Neale, "Design, Structural and Decorative, with Color Distribution Characteristic of Ancient Peruvian Fabrics" (Berkeley: Master's thesis, Household Art, University of California, 1927).

<sup>6</sup> Lila M. O'Neale, *Yurok-Karok Basket Weavers* (Berkeley: University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology, 32:1, 1932).

<sup>7</sup> Kenneth H. Cardwell, Lucretia Nelson, and Willard V. Rosenquist, "Winfield Scott Wellington," *University of California: In Memoriam* (Berkeley: University of California, 1980).

<sup>8</sup> Thomas K. Seligman and Kathleen Berrin, *The Bay Area Collects: Art from Africa, Oceania, and the Americas* (San Francisco: The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1982); Albert B. Elsasser, *Treasures of the Lowie Museum* (Berkeley: Lowie Museum of Anthropology, University of California, 1968).

After World War II, Decorative Art expanded in faculty and students. One of the leading new professors was C. Edmund Rossbach (1914–2002), hired to teach weaving in 1950. Chicago-born, Rossbach had earned his MFA at the Cranbrook Academy of Art (ceramics and textiles, 1947) before teaching at the University of Washington for three years.<sup>9</sup> During the post-war decades, the art world began to accept the use of traditional craft materials and forms for the creation of non-functional works, in effect, blurring the distinction between decorative and fine art. The Berkeley department contained three of the national leaders in this movement. In addition to Rossbach in what came to be called “fiber art,” Peter Voulkos (1924–2002) taught ceramics, in addition to sculpture in bronze; and Marvin Lipofsky (b. 1938) brought the glass sculpture movement to the West Coast. Another leader, in a more modern medium, was Willard Rosenquist (1908–94), who had been hired to teach metal and enamels but became a pioneer of video art.

The program obtained its final incarnation as the Design Department in 1965, the year after it was transferred from the College of Letters and Science to the College of Environmental Design (CED).<sup>10</sup> Just before its demise, the department was at its height in faculty and enrollment. The faculty had increased from about eleven regular positions in 1939 to twenty-two, with an enrollment of about 200 undergraduate majors.<sup>11</sup> During its entire time at the CED, the program was under constant administrative turmoil and redefinition, as the College attempted to find a place for it. In 1972, as the university reeled from Governor Reagan’s budget cuts, the decision was made to eliminate the program in two years. At that time, each tenured professor was asked to affiliate with another department. The textile program continued under Ed Rossbach, now in Architecture, until his retirement in 1979.

The reasons for the program’s end were multiple and complex, but essentially it was a victim of academic infighting, primarily against the more powerful Architecture and City Planning departments, but also within the department itself.<sup>12</sup> As the CED administration evaluated the program, the craft-based and historical approach of the department clashed with the industrial design orientation of the College. Thus the very strength of the department had hastened its end. The program might have fared better in Art Practice, where individual perceptions and skills were valued, but that was not to be. Ultimately, Rossbach blamed the university administration for not valuing creative work.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Charles Edmond Rossbach, “Artist, Mentor, Professor, Writer” (Berkeley: Regional Oral History Office, BL, 1987); Ann Pollard Rowe and Rebecca A. T. Stevens, eds., *Ed Rossbach: 40 Years of Exploration and Innovation in Fiber Art* (Washington, D.C.: Textile Museum, with Lark Books, Asheville, N.C., 1990).

<sup>10</sup> The College of Environmental Design had been established in 1959, uniting the existing College of Architecture with the Departments of Landscape Architecture and City and Regional Planning.

<sup>11</sup> On faculty size, Lucretia Nelson, “Decorative Art,” 3; on enrollment, Margaret Dhaemers, in Hindawi, “Interviews,” 28.

<sup>12</sup> The major views were articulated in two summary reports: “A Report . . . , Ad Hoc Committee on the Department of Design,” chaired by Art Museum director Peter Selz (and thus known as the “Selz Report”), 24 April 1967; and the “Proposal for Redirection of the Program of Studies in Design for the Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts Degrees, Dept. of Design, 16 February 1971, Design Dept. records, BL.

<sup>13</sup> Rossbach, in Hindawi, “Interviews,” 16; cf. “Artist, Mentor,” 39–43.

Although there was no longer an autonomous department after 1974, some of its content was taught in a free-floating “Program in Visual Design,” which around 1977–78 became “Visual Studies,” a study area of architecture.<sup>14</sup> The new program intended to emphasize “product design” (industrial design), which never really took off; and “communication design” (photography and other forms of graphic design), which did.<sup>15</sup>

### **Academic Generations**

It is possible to divide the history of the department into five periods: (1) the abortive founding, under Kissell, 1912–14; (2) the period as Household Art, under Patterson, 1914–39; (3) the period of Decorative Art, under O’Neale and then Wellington, 1939–ca. 1947; (4) the revival after World War II, with the hiring of Rossbach, Voulkos, and the expansion into other media, ca. 1947–64; and (5) the culmination and end, with the general redefinition of crafts as fine arts, 1964–74.

Linking these periods were successive academic generations, which as Rossbach maintains, were crucial in understanding the department’s history.<sup>16</sup> The principal faculty of what may be called the first generation—all hired by a department of household art—were Mary Patterson (retired in 1943), Hope Gladding (retired in 1957), and Lila O’Neale (died in 1948).

The following generation—hired by the Department of Decorative Art—lived to witness the transformation of its identity into Design and the shift to a new college. In various comments, Rossbach refers to the “old guard,” without ever exactly specifying who they were. He seems to mean the faculty who were already on campus when he came in 1950. Viewed another way, these would be individuals who were hired by a decorative art department which was part of the College of Letters and Science. During the last days of the program, in the 1960s and 1970s, these older faculty began to retire: Duke Wellington, Lea Miller, and Anna Gayton in 1965; Lucretia Nelson in 1969; and Mary Dumas, who died in 1971. This earlier group was generally committed to the program in Letters and Science, for instance, favoring written theses instead of creative work. Furthermore, because they opposed the move into the CED, many did not defend the program when it was challenged.<sup>17</sup>

Although many of the later professors had also been hired by Decorative Art, they represented a younger generation who generally focused on their own creative art work. It is clear that Rossbach was transitional between the old and new guards in many ways. For instance, while the earlier generation studied ethnic arts, the later generation actively incorporated it into its own art.

---

<sup>14</sup> Dhaemers, in Hindawi, “Interviews,” 31.

<sup>15</sup> A descendant of the department currently exists as the Design Theories and Methods program in Architecture. Within this broadly conceived field of visual studies are drawing, painting, sculpture, installations, photo-imaging, computer animation, and multimedia.

<sup>16</sup> On the “Old Guard,” see Rossbach, “Artist, Mentor,” 32–34; also in Hindawi, “Interviews,” 13–16, 21. While Rossbach generally does not name names, he does single-out Hope Gladding. Dhaemers identifies Mary Dumas and Lucretia Nelson as being in the Old Guard; Hindawi, “Interviews,” 29.

<sup>17</sup> Hindawi, “Interviews,” 3; Rossbach in “Interviews,” 21.

### **What's in a Name?**

In a university, the names of departments are vitally important, as they claim an intellectual territory and situate the program in an academic universe. The department's repeatedly changing names reflect its vulnerability. Never its own master, it must be seen always in relation to other, stronger departments. In fact, it seems that people were continually having problems with the name; despite the fact that it was changed about every two decades, its associations remained negative.

As in all semantic processes, the meaning of a given term is determined largely from what it is contrasted. As Nerad makes clear in her study of the Berkeley home economics department, definitions and nomenclature for this field were highly debated and contested, at Berkeley as well as in other schools. The "household" was a place for woman, apart from the "real world" of commerce and politics. On the secondary level, "art" contrasted with "science" (defined here as food, which related to agriculture, a subject of great concern in a land-grant college).

Moving to the next period, the department still concerned itself with art, and thus by implication was allied with the Art department. "Decorative" art, however, was contrasted with "fine" art, and thus downgraded. Commenting on the unintended associations of the term, professor Lucretia Nelson wrote: "The name Decorative Art later proved unfortunate, while thoroughly appropriate; to the Administration in its cultural ignorance it spelled only dilettante if not effeminate activities."<sup>18</sup> Art historian Herwin Schaefer, who was hired by the department in 1956, condemned "decorative art" as a nineteenth-century anachronism.

The final characterization, "Design," though somewhat vague, related the program to architecture, as it implies the creation of an aesthetic form that is then executed by craftspeople. By the end of the twentieth century, in fact, "decorative art" and "crafts"—the explicit subjects of the Berkeley department—were on the verge of totally disappearing as viable concepts, replaced in common usage by design. Schaefer was a leading advocate for changing the department's name to design, thus associating it with production for industry, and, he felt, linking the history of design with art history, then taught in Art.<sup>19</sup>

In the end, Rossbach thought that the program's name did not really matter, as it would probably have been phased out anyway due to the underlying attitudes in both the College and the university at large.<sup>20</sup>

### **Gender: A Woman's Department?**

Throughout its entire history, the program consisted mostly of female faculty and students, and a subject matter traditionally associated with women.<sup>21</sup> Unlike many other

---

<sup>18</sup> Nelson, "Decorative Art," 2.

<sup>19</sup> Herwin Schaefer, "A Suggested Program for the Department of Decorative Art: Memo to Academic Senate 1957," 1:15; see also his letter to Karl Aschenbrenner, 27 January 1965, Design department records, BL.

<sup>20</sup> Rossbach, in Hindawi, "Interviews," 24–25.

<sup>21</sup> Nerad, *Academic Kitchen*, for the Home Economics department. For treatments of women at UC Berkeley, see Geraldine Clifford, *Equally in View: The University of California, Its Women, and the*

universities, UC had a tradition of welcoming female students, if not professors. According to historian John Douglass, “The university had proven exceedingly liberal in the admission of women, who by 1900 represented 46 percent of the student population. In contrast, most colleges and universities in the East remained all male, and even such progressive universities as the University of Michigan and Stanford maintained quotas to keep female students at a magical 25 percent of the student body.”<sup>22</sup>

As Nerad demonstrates, Berkeley’s attitudes toward women in the early part of the century brought gains as well as losses. On the one hand, by being denied equality with men in most departments, they were allowed to operate in “a separate sphere.”<sup>23</sup> Teaching in a largely woman’s department, O’Neale was able to become a full professor in 1940, while that did not happen in Anthropology until 1964. On the other hand, even O’Neale encountered resistance to her academic success. According to several of his students and colleagues, Alfred Kroeber was not very supportive of female students, despite his high opinion of many of them. According to George Foster, who entered the graduate program in 1935, “I don’t think Kroeber would ever have given a job in the department to a woman. He never did, in any event. . . . Kroeber was fair with them. He didn’t object to giving them doctorates, but he would never go out on a limb and nominate them for a job.” Although such an attitude was perhaps not surprising for a man born at the height of the Victorian period, it impeded the progress of qualified female scholars.<sup>24</sup>

In the decorative art department, Duke Wellington became the first male faculty member in 1937. Although he taught interior design, he was trained in the predominantly male profession of architecture. Gender balances in hiring shifted substantially after World War II, with the hiring of Rosenquist in 1946 and Rossbach in 1950. By the early 1960s, as the department expanded its orientation from a focus on fiber to include a broader range of media, men were hired to teach many of these courses: e.g., Peter Voulkos on clay (1959), Marvin Lipofsky on glass (1964), William Garnett on photography (1968), as well as Herwin Schaefer on design history (1956).

According to Lucretia Nelson, one of the guiding principles of the department was its “bisexual hiring and enrollment aims.” After the Second World War, a number of male students enrolled in Rossbach’s courses, with another increase in the 1960s, but there were never many.<sup>25</sup> For her courses in the late 1960s and 1970s, Margaret Dhaemers strove for a balanced gender ratio. She found, however, that the students tended to be

---

*Schools* (Berkeley: Institute of Governmental Studies, UCB, 1995) and Janet Rule, ed., “Ladies Blue and Gold” (*Chronicle of the University of California*, no. 2, 1998).

<sup>22</sup> John A. Douglass, *The California Idea and American Higher Education, 1850 to the 1960 Master Plan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 102.

<sup>23</sup> Nerad, “Academic Kitchen,” 2–3.

<sup>24</sup> George M. Foster, “An Anthropologist’s Life in the Twentieth Century: Theory and Practice at UC Berkeley, the Smithsonian, in Mexico, and with the World Health Organization” (Berkeley: Regional Oral History Office, BL, 2000, 49–50). Lucretia Nelson, a Decorative Art graduate and then professor, reported that “O’Neale did tell me at length about [Kroeber’s] resistance to her candidacy and job prospects afterward and her care [?] to prove she had the discipline he expected.” Nelson to Grace Buzaljko, 21 March 1986, “Decorative Art,” 3; cf. Schevill, “O’Neale,” 130–31.

<sup>25</sup> Rossbach, in Hindawi, “Interviews,” 14.

mostly female, and that because so many more women applied for her classes it was more competitive for them.<sup>26</sup>

With the exception of Rossbach, however, the textile program continued its female focus, and for that reason was marginalized. Architecture professor Joseph Esherick felt that the Design department's roots in the female-oriented home economics program was perceived as a problem into the 1960s, and was a factor in its demise.<sup>27</sup> Although one can only speculate, the fact that so many woman were attracted to the department gave it its strength—capturing a large group of talented professors and students denied other outlets for their expression—as well as proving its ultimate downfall.

### **A Matter of Degrees**

Another factor that could not have helped the department in the broader university setting was that almost none of the faculty had doctorates. As time went on, most of its professors did have post-baccalaureate degrees, but they were at the master's level, and were in some field of fine arts. Befitting President Wheeler's conception of the department, it seems that the program was somewhat preparatory, or at least not very academic, until O'Neale's arrival in 1932. She was the department's first faculty member with a doctorate. In fact, with the exception of Herwin Schaefer (Harvard, 1944), the department's only faculty with doctorates were the anthropologists: Lila O'Neale, and two women who continued to teach her courses after her death—Anna Gayton and Ruth Boyer (all from Berkeley, 1930, 1928, 1962, respectively).

As far as degrees awarded were concerned, the department granted a master's, as well as a bachelor's, from its inception (the first M.A. was given in 1916). In this, the department was comparatively advanced, making Berkeley "the first university department to offer a master's degree in weaving." Unlike an M.F.A degree from an art school, however, this was never a purely practical or professional degree.<sup>28</sup> Although students were encouraged to learn craft skills, such as weaving, one had to submit a written theses based on some kind of research. When the department joined the College of Environmental Design, its bachelor of arts degree was still offered through the College of Letters and Science, but this was shifted over to CED, beginning in 1972 and made final with the phase-out of the department in 1974.<sup>29</sup> Significantly, unlike its sister department of Nutritional Sciences, the department never granted the doctorate, which serves as an indication of its valuation of scholarship. Like departmental names, degrees were primary forms of identity definition in a university, and both worked to the disadvantage of the program.

### **Arts: Theoretical and Applied, Fine and Decorative**

Although all universities are caught in a tension between the theoretical and the applied, state land-grant universities were founded with a firm root in practical fields such as agriculture, mining, and engineering. Over the years, the Berkeley campus added schools

---

<sup>26</sup> Dhaemers, in Hindawi, "Interviews," 30.

<sup>27</sup> Esherick, in Hindawi, "Interviews," 5.

<sup>28</sup> For Berkeley's priority in weaving, see Rowe and Stevens, *Rosbach*, 122.

<sup>29</sup> Aschenbrenner, "Design"; H. Leland Vaughan, "College of Environmental Design," in Stadtman, *Centennial Record*, 74. "Report on Undergraduate Program in Environmental Design," 6 January 1978, CED.



for architecture, law, business, journalism, and optometry, among others. Nevertheless, there was an abiding discomfort with creative fields such as painting and sculpture, decorative art, fiction and poetry, theater, and music.

In its combination of theory and practice, the decorative art department was firmly within a Berkeley tradition. For most of its history, its sister department of Art combined practice and history in the same department.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps befitting its status as a land-grant college, the earliest art training at Berkeley had been of drawing as an aid to engineering, and later architecture. Around the turn of the last century, a more aesthetic approach began to take shape. Eugen Neuhaus, who had begun teaching drawing at Berkeley in 1908, became the first chair of the Department of Art when it was founded in 1923. In fact, “This department within the College of Letters and Science was the first studio-practice department in a national university,” with a “teaching philosophy [that] encompassed esthetics, practice, and history of art in a well-rounded, humanistic, program.”<sup>31</sup> Surprisingly, at a research university, art history came relatively late. Classics professor Oliver Miles Washburn was the first to teach it. At Berkeley since 1907, he received an appointment as Associate Professor of the History of Art in 1925. Many of the early art professors, such as Erle Loran (appointed in 1936), had historical interests, but the first full-time art history professor was medievalist Walter Horn (hired in 1938). The first doctorate was awarded in 1948, but it was not until 1971 that an independent Art History Department was established.

Appropriately, Decorative Art combined art practice with historical scholarship. In speaking of the “requirement of matching practice and theory courses,” Lucretia Nelson regarded the guiding aims of the Decorative Art as: “a liberal arts rather than professional focus.” In most cases, historical courses were paired with lab sections in which students examined museum specimens in order to learn their techniques.<sup>32</sup> According to one memorial, “O’Neale would describe no textile technique until she could reproduce it with her own hands,” and many of the faculty followed her example.<sup>33</sup>

Over time, however, the stress in the department shifted from the historical to the creative. O’Neale and Gayton definitely stressed the historical.<sup>34</sup> With the move into Environmental Design and after Rossbach and his colleagues came to the fore in the 1960s, practice and creative work became much more important. Rossbach, however, was distinctive in that he genuinely loved both, and many of his students followed this approach.

Nevertheless, there was a certain disdain for creative, as opposed to critical or historical work. As Nelson remarked, “History of Art, Music, Literature were customary,

---

<sup>30</sup> James McCray, “Art,” in Stadtman, *Centennial Record*, 79.

<sup>31</sup> Walter W. Horn, Karl A. Kasten, Erle Loran, and James A. McCray; “John C. Haley,” *University of California: In Memoriam* (1991).

<sup>32</sup> Rowe and Stevens, *Rossbach*, 48.

<sup>33</sup> Alfred L. Kroeber, Lea Van P. Miller, Barbara Armstrong, Hope M. Gladding, “Lila O’Neale,” *University of California: In Memoriam* (1948).

<sup>34</sup> According to Design professor Margaret Dhaemers, the Art department would also not accept a creative thesis; in Hindawi, “Interviews,” 35–36. Anna Gayton was firmly opposed to students’ submitting creative work for a master’s thesis, cf. Rossbach, in Hindawi, “Interviews,” 16.

even honored inclusions but not the creative genius itself. Neither William Morris nor Picasso could have been hired by the University of Calif, let alone Ivy League institutions.”<sup>35</sup> Although she was speaking more from her experience during the 1940s and 1950s, this was essentially true during later years, as well.

Even within the sphere of art, some arts were more prestigious and respected than others. As changes in the unit’s name suggest, the cultural and esthetic status of the department’s subject matter remained contested and problematic. “Decorative arts” or “crafts” have always been seen as lesser endeavors than painting and sculpture, if not architecture, another applied art. The architecture program has always had a certain high-art prestige, and not surprisingly, has been a largely male occupation.

The practicality of the department’s subject matter changed substantially over the decades. While Household Art may have seemed very practical to some, Decorative Art was treated as a subject of academic study. During the “Design” phase, however, the development of genres such as “fiber art” and other arts using traditional craft media erased if not blurred the distinction between fine and decorative art.

### **Textiles and Other Artistic Media**

Of the various artistic media, the Berkeley program emphasized textiles, at least up until it expanded and moved into the College of Environmental Design. All the early professors in the department—Mary Kissell, Mary Patterson, Hope Gladding, and Lila O’Neale—were textile specialists; it was not until the hiring of Duke Wellington that the department expanded to furniture and interior design. The department’s anthropologists (O’Neale, Gayton, and Boyer) especially seemed to have focused on textiles. Even more unusually, of all forms of weaving, it was the container form of basketry that was a particular departmental specialization—from Kissell and O’Neale, who both studied them in the field, to Rossbach, who pioneered basketry as a self-conscious artform. One reason for this focus was the importance of baskets in Native California, amply represented in the large collection at the anthropology museum.

As we have seen, when the department expanded after World War II, other media began to be taught: ceramics, glass, metal, calligraphy, photography, video. And increasingly, there was cross-fertilization between the media. For Rossbach, in particular, ceramics was an artistic model. He took clay pots as an inspiration for his fiber containers (i.e., baskets); he helped recruit famed potter Peter Voukos, whose work he admired; and he and his wife Katherine Westphal later studied ceramics.<sup>36</sup> Ceramics were also the field in which the ethnic arts were a key influence, an enduring concern of the department. Asian precedence in the medium was long acknowledged, but during the 1950s Japanese influences were felt in American ceramics, as well as in Abstract Expressionist painting. Realizing this, the department purchased an important collection of Japanese and Korean folk pottery in 1957.

Despite Berkeley’s strength in fiber art, the medium always carried a stigma on campus. In response to the feelings common among his university colleagues, Rossbach tried to avoid saying that he taught weaving: “Even the Art Department did not think that

---

<sup>35</sup> Nelson, “Decorative Art,” 2.

<sup>36</sup> Rossbach, “Artist, Mentor,” 51–52, and Rowe and Stevens, *Rossbach*, 124.

weaving should be part of their department because it was not academic.”<sup>37</sup> Whatever its local fate may have been, during its six decades the Decorative Art / Design Department became a national leader in the creation and study of textiles.

**Coda: A Legacy for “A Heady Time”**

This, then, was the changing institutional environment that nurtured the exciting work of Berkeley fiber artists in the late 1960s and early 1970s: professors Ed Rossbach, Lillian Elliott, Joanne Segal Brandford, and Katherine Westphal—as well as students such as Patricia Hickman and Lia Cook—described by my co-panelists. Without this context, the path-breaking fiber art for which Berkeley has now become known would not have existed.

---

<sup>37</sup> Rossbach, in Hindawi, “Interviews,” 14.