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NEW

DIRECTIONS: Examining the Past,
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More than a Footnote or Bibliographic Entry: Mary Lois Kissell as an Innovator of Textile Study

Ira Jacknis and Erin L. Hasinoff

Mary Lois Kissell (1864–1944) was a pioneer in the comparative cultural study of textiles and basketry, an art educator, a museum anthropologist, and an intrepid fieldworker. When she died in 1944, no obituary was written about her, and since then, no study has focused on her contributions to textile scholarship. We have not come to know her, our “object of study,” through a single collection of personal papers; as far as we can tell, nothing of the kind was ever deposited in any repository. The correspondence that we have amassed by and about Kissell comes from various archives in North America and Europe.¹ These scattered letters attest to her extensive research and teaching, and to her miscellany of distinguished art-educator, anthropologist, and collector-scholar correspondents and mentors: Otis T. Mason, Arthur W. Dow, Clark Wissler, Charles C. Willoughby, Thomas A. Joyce, Henry Ling Roth, Baron Erland Nordenskiöld, Charles F. Newcombe, and James A. Teit, to name a few. In this paper we examine how Kissell appears to have simultaneously inhabited and been influenced by several communities of practice, while being marginal to each of them. Although her work left an imprint on the study of textiles, she and her pioneering publications are rarely anything more than a footnote or a bibliographic entry. We offer a rendering of Kissell’s life history that demonstrates how she lived within a series of separate disciplinary boundaries. In so doing, we highlight the social networks that interacted through her figure. This biographical sketch serves as an introduction to Kissell, and raises the question of the impact of her training and life-long innovations on textile study.

Two Lives in One

We have collaborated in taking turns seeking out and describing the biographical details of Mary Lois Kissell’s obscure life. By conducting archival research in the universities and museums that shaped her interests, we have come to see her identity defined by her curiosity in textiles, and her oscillating commitments to art education and anthropology. In our research, we have taken Kissell to be a kind of “boundary object.” Sociologists Susan Leigh Star and James Griesemer coined the concept to describe objects that inhabit and bridge several communities of practice (such as specimens, fieldnotes, or maps).² In finding and examining her letters, we have come to see her, like a boundary object, traveling across these disparate communities, sometimes bridging and other times being excluded by them. A portrait of Kissell is emerging that shows

¹ To date, these archives include the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology and University Archives, Harvard University; Division of Anthropology and Special Collections of the American Museum of Natural History; Ipswich Historical Society; Green-Wood Cemetery; Columbia University Archives; Brooklyn Museum; American Philosophical Society Library; National Anthropological Archives and National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution; Field Museum; University of Chicago Library; Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley; Southwest Museum; Canadian Museum of Civilization; Archives of British Columbia; Museum of World Cultures, Gothenburg; and the British Museum.

² Susan Leigh Star and James R. Griesemer, “Institutional Ecology, ‘Translations’ and Boundary Objects: Amateurs and Professionals in Berkeley’s Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, 1907–39,” *Social Studies of Science* 19 (1989), 408; Susan Leigh Star, “This Is Not a Boundary Object: Reflections on the Origin of a Concept,” *Science Technology Human Values*, 35 (2010), 601–17.

how she was a product of the different social worlds that interacted through her figure, even though she was marginal to each of them.

So, who was Mary Lois Kissell? Within Native American arts, she is cited for her 1916 monograph on the basketry of the Pima-Papago (Tohono O’odham and Akimel O’odham, as they self-identify today), and three articles, published between 1916 and 1929, on Salish and Chilkat textiles of the Northwest Coast. Within fiber arts, she is recalled as the founder of the Decorative Art (then household art) program at the University of California, Berkeley—a program that included Lila O’Neale and Ed Rossbach.³ Members of North American weavers’ guilds know Kissell’s name because of her book *Yarn and Cloth Making* (1918), which is a timeless reference to the basic principles and historical development of weaving.

Mary Lois Kissell had two lives. For most of her adult life, Kissell lived in two cities: Chicago and New York, but she traveled throughout North America and on extended trips to Western Europe, and the Soviet Union. Her first life (1864–1904) was defined by her childhood in Davenport, Iowa, followed by adolescence and early adulthood in Chicago. During her early years, nearly three hundred Dakota prisoners were held in a military prison in Davenport’s Camp McClellan. Initially during their detention, the prisoners were put on view on weekday afternoons. Later, they worked as agricultural laborers on surrounding farms and sold “trinkets” to townspeople.⁴ Mary Kissell’s lifelong interest in Native Americans may have been shaped by her family’s own early encounters with the Dakota inmates. She followed her parents into the profession of education: teaching elementary school, especially art, in Chicago public schools between 1884 and 1904. During her last years in the city she also taught at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and the University of Chicago.

The 1890s were a transitional period for her, when she was first exposed to anthropology and Native American art from the teaching of educator-philosopher John Dewey at the College of Education, which was attached to his Laboratory School at the University of Chicago (1894–1904), through the great popularizer of anthropology Frederick Starr and his Walker Museum, and at the 1893 Chicago world’s fair and the Field Columbian Museum which grew out of it. Many years later in her correspondence, she reflected on these years as a time when she designed metalwork, commercial wallpaper, and taught pottery and basketry. She entered four of her own baskets into the Art Institute’s “First Annual Exhibition of Original Designs for Decorations and Examples of Art Crafts Having Distinct Artistic Merit” (1902–3): “ ‘The Star,’ plate basket; ‘Arrowhead,’ arrowhead shaped basket with arrow decoration in symbolic colors; Basket, natural color; Basket, Eel River chain stitch in browns.”⁵ Like other Midwestern craftsmen, her work

³ 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); Ira Jacknis, “The Lure of the Exotic: Ethnic Arts and the Design Department at UC Berkeley,” *The Chronicle of the University of California*, 6 (2004), 37–73, and “A Berkeley Home for Textile Art and Scholarship, 1912–79,” *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*, Paper 448 (2004), 183–92.

⁴ Sarah Eva Ellen Carlson, “They Tell Their Story: The Dakota Internment Camp,” *The Annals of Iowa*, 63 (2004), 251–78.

⁵ The Art Institute of Chicago, *From the Catalogue of the First Annual Exhibition of Original Designs for Decorations and Examples of Art Crafts Having Artistic Merit, December 16, 1902–January 11, 1903* (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1903), 40.

explored the decorative potential of Native American art. This was a time when interest in Native American cultures and designs served as inspiration for Chicago artists and architects of the Prairie School, more than in Eastern cities which turned to medieval or colonial American models.⁶ In her teaching, she took young women into the field to gather reeds to make baskets and to the Field Museum to study their Native American collections. This was a formative decade for her; she learned the discourse, skills, and culture of anthropology, decorative arts, and art education that interacted through the Arts and Crafts movement.

During her second life (1904–44), however, Kissell crossed the boundaries of these communities of practice. Her new life began in the fall of 1905, when she moved from Chicago to New York to enroll in an undergraduate degree in art at Teachers College, Columbia University. Her mentor was Arthur Wesley Dow, noted painter, print-maker, and art educator. Although he is famed for spreading the influence of Japanese woodblock prints in American art and for his writings on composition (and introduction of the Japanese design concept of *Notan*), through his friendship with Frank Hamilton Cushing, he became a Native American crafts enthusiast. In his 1915 essay “Designs from Primitive Motifs” he wrote that he found in their “design a source of fresh impulses for designing in line and color, for carving and modeling; and these will do their part toward expressing American life through a distinctively American art.”⁷ Most likely Kissell came to New York to study with Dow, after having heard his lectures in Chicago and participating in his summer art school in Ipswich, Massachusetts for several years, together with other female schoolteachers known as the “Chicago Colony.” Through Dow, Kissell would have been exposed to his use of Native material culture as artistic inspiration, aiding in the production of new arts and crafts.⁸ In years to come, Kissell never left the world of art education, following the path of her mentor.

It was during this first decade in New York that Kissell began to shift to a career in anthropology. In 1905, she began working at the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) as an assistant in the anthropology department. Curator Clark Wissler hired Kissell to help with researching a “textile hall devoted to basketry and weaving, illustrating Primitive methods,” which was never installed at the museum. In 1906 and 1907, she also studied basketry technology and classification with Smithsonian curator Otis T. Mason, who shared her interests in technical analysis. She published three regional studies on basketry—“An Aleutian Basket” (1907), “African Basketry Weaves” (1907), “A Kutenai Berry-Basket” (1909)—and a comparative analysis, “System of Basketry Technic” (1909), helping anthropologists with their classifications and advancing and refining the work of Mason, among others. During this time, she extended her regional studies to include Pacific Island baskets as well, and she traveled to study collections in Britain because of the lack of such material in North American museums. She met the kindred museum curator Henry Ling Roth at the Bankfield Museum in Halifax, Yorkshire, and helped him to analyze material for his exhaustive comparative work, *Studies in Primitive Looms* (1916–18). She spent time with anthropologist Thomas Athol Joyce at the

⁶ Judith A. Barter, *Window on the West: Chicago and the Art of the New Frontier, 1890–1940* (New York and Manchester: The Art Institute of Chicago, In Association with Hudson Hill Press), 53.

⁷ Arthur W. Dow, “Designs from Primitive American Motifs,” *Teachers College Record*, 16 (1915), 34.

⁸ Elizabeth Hutchinson, *The Indian Craze: Primitivism, Modernism, and Transculturation in American Art, 1890–1915* (Durham: Duke University Press), 116.

British Museum, negotiating the exchange of duplicate African and Pacific baskets and textiles with the AMNH, and assisting him with a publication on Congo basketry.

Between October 1910 and February 1911, Kissell participated in the American Museum's Huntington Southwest Expedition by collecting and researching Pima-Papago basketry in Arizona. Newspapers noted that she was the first female scientist sent out by the AMNH, "adopt[ing] the garb of the Southwest, but carry[ing] no revolver."⁹ On numerous previous occasions she had pressured Clark Wissler and the museum for funds and the opportunity to do research, "when every man in our department was in the field," but until her trip to Arizona she was not given the opportunity to undertake ethnographic research of her own.¹⁰ This was a time when Wissler and his male scientist colleagues at the museum believed in the importance of fieldwork: "A curator in this Museum [is] a field-man; his thinking is in terms of the outside from which he draws his data and his collections."¹¹ Although Kissell became a lone female fieldworker among her male scientist colleagues, as an itinerant researcher she was never deemed to be an equal.

Her Pima-Papago monograph (1916) was one of the earliest studies of American Indian basketry based on fieldwork, uniquely combining collecting and photography with weaver interviews. Her style of field research would be repeated by other students of anthropology studying pottery, textiles, basketry, and weaving in the Southwest, such as Ruth Bunzel (1929) and Gladys Reichard (1934); and it laid the foundation for Helen Roberts's work on the basketry of the neighboring San Carlos Apache (1929).

Also in 1911, the year that she left the museum, Kissell earned a bachelors degree, at the age of 47. Two years later she was awarded a masters degree in education, with a thesis on *The Textile Museum, Its Value as an Educational Factor*. Outlining the historic development of textiles, it was the foundation of her later book *Yarn and Cloth Making* (1918). The organization of her thesis and book reflect the floor plan of Jane Addams's Hull House Labor Museum, which had an early influence on Kissell. There, various Chicago immigrant communities demonstrated the spinning and weaving techniques of their home countries, and an exhibition traced the development of cloth making from the least mechanical technologies through the use of treadle, jacquard, and power looms.¹²

⁹ *The Daily Picayune*, "Miss Mary Lois Kissell," 2 June 1912, 6.

¹⁰ Mary Lois Kissell to Clark Wissler, undated, File 655, Central Archives, American Museum of Natural History Research Library, Special Collections.

¹¹ Clark Wissler, *Survey of the American Museum of Natural History: Made at the Request of the Management Board*, 1942-43; 413. Unpublished typescript. Rare Book Collection, Research Library, American Museum of Natural History cited in Ira Jacknis, "In the Field / En Plein Air: The Art of Anthropological Display at the American Museum of Natural History, 1905-30," in *The Anthropology of Expeditions: Travels, Visualities, Afterlives*, eds. Joshua A. Bell and Erin L. Hasinoff (New York and Chicago: Bard Graduate Center and The University of Chicago Press).

¹² Eileen Boris, *Art and Labor: Ruskin, Morris, and the Craftsman Ideal in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), 132-33.

Moving to California in 1912, Kissell was chosen to found the Department of Household (later Decorative) Art at the University of California, Berkeley. She resigned, however, after two years because the administration did not support her or her ambitious plans for the program.¹³

Although Kissell had long been interested in the textiles of the Northwest Coast, at least since 1905, during a two-month field trip to British Columbia in late 1915, she undertook research on the subject that would remain her “life’s work.”¹⁴ She began in collaboration with collector-scholars Charles F. Newcombe and James A. Teit, but in the end, the project was hers. Kissell spent two months among the Coast Salish of British Columbia. Guided by Newcombe in lower Vancouver Island and Teit along the Fraser River valley, she visited Native villages, observing and interviewing weavers. Though she did have this brief but important field experience, her chief methodology, inspired by Newcombe’s work, was the study of museum collections, combined with a reading of early explorers’ accounts. Her discoveries were published as “A New Type of Spinning in North America,” in *American Anthropologist* in 1916. She documented a “unique manner of spinning” among the Salish. Kissell completed two additional related essays in *American Anthropologist* on Salish (1929) and Chilkat weaving (1928), and an essay entitled “Indian Weaving” (1931) which she wrote to accompany John Sloan and Oliver La Farge’s *The Exposition of Indian Tribal Art* (1932), the groundbreaking exhibition of Native North American art, which was treated as “art, *not* ethnology.”¹⁵ Together, her writings are excerpts of a larger ethnological writing project.

In 1920, the Smithsonian’s Bureau of American Ethnology (BAE) commissioned Kissell for a general, popular survey of American Indian textiles. By the time that she submitted the completed 227-page manuscript in 1928, it had become a study of “Indian Blankets of the North Pacific Coast.” Kissell focused on delineating and characterizing all the distinct types of weaving on the coast. Her study would have been more comprehensive, treating forms that have been more often considered separately: Raven’s Tail and Chilkat blankets of the north and the Salish blankets of the south, as well as the cedar-bark blankets woven throughout the region. An outline for one version of her text included Arctic mats and belts, and her introduction considered the place of Northwest Coast weaving in America. Due to Depression-era budget cuts, however, the Bureau deleted many of the illustrations. The manuscript was returned for her revision, but she never completed it. It is unclear if Kissell considered revising her BAE manuscript or if the Smithsonian would have published it even if she did, but she continued to research the subject for the remainder of her life. From the surviving correspondence, it is clear that this unpublished and missing manuscript would have become an essential work in the study of Native American art and textiles.

During her final years, Kissell seems to have supported herself through writing and guest lectures, which she had begun around 1909, primarily at the AMNH, Columbia University, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and by writing for the popular art press and Sunday

¹³ Ira Jacknis, “The Lure of the Exotic: Ethnic Arts and the Design Department at UC Berkeley,” *The Chronicle of the University of California*, 6 (2004), 37–73.

¹⁴ Mary Lois Kissell to Henry Fairfield Osborn, 6 February 1928, Division of Anthropology Archives, American Museum of Natural History.

¹⁵ Molly H. Mullin, “The Patronage of Difference: Making Indian Art ‘Art, Not Ethnology,’” *Cultural Anthropology*, 7 (1992), 395.

newspapers. She completed *Yarn and Cloth Making* (1918) and published articles in the *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, *International Studio*, and *House Beautiful* on topics ranging from “Ancient Greek Yarn-Making” (1918), “Textile Birds, Ancient and Medieval” (1919) and “Romanesque Baptismal Fonts from Sweden” (1929), to “Hispano-Moresque Silk Weaves” (1929). We find an interesting reversal from her early publications (1907–17), which she published primarily in anthropological journals. During the First World War she was active in occupational therapy, and sought to publish a handbook on the topic of basketry and weaving for the use of disabled soldiers and sailors. Later she wrote a pamphlet on basket making for the Boy Scouts, and we are curious to know if the basketry merit badge (first offered 1927) had its origins with her work.¹⁶ She resorted to her former life as an art educator when she was unable to establish herself in the academic discipline of anthropology.

From her correspondence, it is clear that she desired a career in the anthropological study of textiles. She corresponded with most of the world’s museum anthropologists concerned with the subject, and she maintained long (and complicated) professional relationships with the AMNH and the Smithsonian’s Bureau of American Ethnology. Her cross-cultural interests in the textile and basketry traditions—ranging from the Pima-Papago of the Southwest and the Salish and Tlingit of the Northwest Coast to ancient Peru, Africa, Ancient Egypt and Persia, Greece, Medieval Italy, Central Asia, Sweden, and historic Europe and America—meant that she was more interested in comparative historical analysis and museum-based study than her colleagues who were focusing on ethnography. Her intellectual outlook was rooted in the thought of earlier decades, inspired by evolutionists such as Otis T. Mason and Frank H. Cushing. Her conservative outlook explains why many curators she encountered may have been skeptical of her work.

Kissell, however, never gave up her ambitious research plans, seeking continuously, but unsuccessfully, for the grants that would support them. After two research trips to the Soviet Union in 1935 and 1936, she began to trace the Asian roots of Northwest Coast weaving and she persisted with an interest in ancient Andean textiles, receiving encouragement from Thomas Athol Joyce, Harvard Peabody Museum director Charles C. Willoughby, and Swedish anthropologist and archaeologist Baron Erland Nordenskiöld. She chose to devote her life to textile scholarship and education. In fact, she was the first trained weaver to study Native American baskets and textiles, followed in 1929 by Lila O’Neale. (With the exception of the general ethnographer Matilda Coxe Stevenson, we identify Kissell as the first woman to seriously study Native American textiles.) She never tired of pointing out to her anthropological colleagues the mistakes they had made by not knowing how to weave: “in its contribution to ethnology by being left to the general ethnologist, who quite often makes mistakes about technics and does not know their importance in relation to pattern... However, the time is not far distant when the need will be recognized for trained textile research.”¹⁷

¹⁶ See Jesse Walter Fewkes to Mary Lois Kissell, 19 July 1920, Bureau of American Ethnology Records, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution and “Basketry,” US Scouting Service Project, updated on April 16, 2014, accessed July 8, 2014, <http://usscouts.org/mb/history.asp>.

¹⁷ Mary Lois Kissell, “The Early Geometric Patterned Chilkat,” *American Anthropologist* 30 (1928), 116–20.

A Pioneer and Her Legacy

As our itinerant spadework shows, Kissell lived within and outside a series of separate, yet parallel professional boundaries. By studying her as a “boundary object” we see how she was able to move between networks of exchange and collaboration, gaining necessary skills, and credentials. She established life-long contacts with other pioneer figures in moments where her work intersected with their interests in textiles, art education, or anthropology. It is through the dispersed archives of correspondence that it is possible to see various communities of practice—art education, anthropology, and fiber arts—that interacted through her figure. Kissell was a trailblazer because of these encounters and her border crossings.

But, her inability to establish herself as a textile specialist among anthropologists demonstrates the way in which certain boundaries could not be trespassed. A durable cooperation between communities could not take hold, at least not through her personage. One of her critical problems was a scholarly confusion of where to place the study of ethnic textiles. Western scholars around 1900 were not sure if weavers or anthropologists should study these fabrics. Moreover, despite her successes, as a woman studying the arts of women, Kissell received the skepticism of male curators.

Many of those who came after her either repeated work that Kissell had already done or carried out the work that she had planned out but had been prevented from doing. The most direct example is Lila O’Neale. Coming to Berkeley about a decade after Kissell, she joined a reformulated program in household arts. Like Kissell, she had been a school teacher with a degree in home economics. But, O’Neale was much more effective in founding the cultural study of baskets and textiles, in part because Alfred Kroeber, anthropologist and University of California Museum of Anthropology director, mentored her into a career as a professional anthropologist.

Only decades later did scholars pick up the serious study of Northwest Coast weaving. In the 1960s Bill Holm—another non-anthropologist, high school art teacher, with a masters in art education—turned to the textiles and other arts of the region.¹⁸ During the 1970s, he was followed by two protégées: weaver Paula Gustafson, who studied Salish weaving and Cheryl Samuel, who studied Chilkat and Raven’s Tail weaving.¹⁹ Career paths and scholarly approaches that Kissell had struggled with in the early part of the century were now widely accepted.

Kissell’s lack of a permanent museum home, coupled with her eclectic ambitious research projects and contributions to public education, means that there is no expected or singular repository for the material evidences of her historical memory. We think that the scattered, but conscientious, research that we have done has been worth the effort because Kissell was clearly

¹⁸ Bill Holm, *Northwest Coast Indian Art: An Analysis of Form* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965) and “A Wooling Mantle Neatly Wrought: The Early Historic Record of Northwest Coast Pattern-Twined Textiles—1774–1850,” *American Indian Art Magazine*, 8 (1982), 34–47. See also Erna Gunther, *Art in the Life of Northwest Coast Indians* (Portland: The Portland Art Museum, 1966) and *Indian Life on the Northwest Coast of America, as Seen by the Eighteenth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1972).

¹⁹ Paula Gustafson, *Salish Weaving* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965); Cheryl Samuel, *The Raven’s Tail* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1987) and *The Chilkat Dancing Blanket* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990).

an innovator in comparative textile study and art education, even though relegated to the status of a footnote or a bibliographic entry.

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