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Women of the Hearst Museum of Anthropology

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Women of the Hearst Museum of Anthropology

by Kate Fleming

October 3, 2020 marks the 150th anniversary of the UC Regents' unanimous approval of a resolution:

"That young ladies be admitted into the University on equal terms in all respects with young men." – Regent Samuel F. Butterworth

In 2020, Berkeley celebrated [150 Years of Women at Berkeley](#). The first women were admitted to the university in 1872, and since that time, hundreds of thousands of women have graduated from UC Berkeley, and thousands of staff, faculty, and friends of the campus have made immeasurable contributions to the UC Berkeley campus and beyond.

The Hearst Museum is honored to have been a site for research and teaching for innumerable women since its founding in 1901 by Phoebe A. Hearst, the first female regent of the University of California. In honor of this momentous year, we are delighted to share a selection of notable women who have worked with the Hearst Museum. The images below link to more information including: articles, online catalogs of collections donated to the Hearst Museum, and more. To read about other women affiliated with the Hearst Museum, visit [Women in the Department of Near Eastern Studies](#).

Lila Morris O'Neale

Adapted by Katie Fleming from texts written by Research Anthropologist Ira Jacknis.



Lila Morris O'Neale was an anthropologist and textile historian who pioneered the field of ethnoaesthetics through research that bridged the fields of design, history, and art. Trained as a teacher at the San Jose Normal School, O'Neale taught in Oakland before pursuing graduate degrees from Stanford, Columbia, and UC Berkeley. An interest in textiles, stemming from her teaching in the field then known as home economics, led her to pursue graduate research on lace in UC Berkeley's Household Art Department. In 1926, O'Neale met Alfred Kroeber, then director of the Museum of Anthropology (now the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology) who had just returned from

fieldwork in Peru and sought a textile analyst. Taking this position marked a shift in O’Neale’s academic life toward an anthropological approach to the study of textiles.

O’Neale went on to complete groundbreaking research culminating in a book entitled *Yurok Karok Basketweavers*. Her ethnographic approach, which sought to understand the individual aesthetic motivations and design preferences of basket weavers, represented a departure from previous anthropological work which focused primarily on the functionality of material culture. By 1941, O’Neale was a full professor at Berkeley in the Design Department and became the first woman to teach in the Department of Anthropology. O’Neale made frequent use of the collections of the Museum of Anthropology and collections held by the Design Department in her teaching and research. She valued not only a visual and cultural, but also a technical understanding of textiles, and sought to reproduce methods she encountered in her work. Her approaches in teaching and research brought together art and anthropology and had a profound influence on students of the Design Department, later renamed the Decorative Arts Department, such as fiber artist Ed Rossbach.

In addition to teaching, O’Neale served as Associate Curator of Textiles at the Museum of Anthropology and published works on Peruvian and Guatemalan textiles. Upon her death in 1968, O’Neale donated her personal collections to the Decorative Arts Department, which were later transferred to the Museum of Anthropology. You can [explore these collections in our online Collections Portal](#). O’Neale was instrumental in shifting the field of anthropology toward a more interdisciplinary approach that prioritized individuals over generalized culture. Her legacy continues in the weavers who continue informed by her research, and the artists and historians guided by her teaching and methods.



Zelia Nuttall

Originally published as “Focus on the Ethnographic Collections: The Mexican Collections of Zelia Nuttall” by Ira Jacknis

Archaeologist and ethnohistorian Zelia Nuttall (1857–1933) is today best-known for her work in finding and reproducing colonial-era Mexican books and maps. During her lifetime, she seems to have known everybody concerned with anthropology and Mexico’s past.



Zelia Nuttall grew up in San Francisco, the daughter of a pioneering banker. After a private education in Europe, in 1880 she married French explorer, archaeologist, and linguist Alphonse Louis Pinart. The marriage was not a happy one, and the couple soon separated and divorced. Increasingly, she found her passion in Mexico, the birthplace of her mother. After a lengthy trip there in 1885, she soon began her career with publications on Mexican antiquities.

It was Nuttall, more than anyone else, who was responsible for encouraging her friend Phoebe Hearst to found a museum of anthropology at Berkeley. The pair, who had first met around 1882, reunited at the Chicago World's Fair of 1893. In the years leading up to the founding of the museum in 1901, Nuttall guided Hearst in anthropology, putting her in touch with her own collaborator, Harvard's Frederic Putnam, who became the museum's first director.

In 1902, shortly after moving permanently to Mexico, Zelia Nuttall was commissioned to collect for the new museum, sponsored by patrons Ethel Crocker and Elisabeth Mills Reid. Between 1902 and 1905, she gathered a wide range of ethnographic objects, many expressing her interest in pre-contact customs. The expedition was especially notable for the important textiles she gathered. A woman's huipil tunic, for instance, is the oldest documented weaving from the village of Magdalena, and one of the earliest surviving textiles from the Maya of Chiapas.

One of her most spectacular finds was a 16th century lienzo (a colonial period pictorial narrative) from Puebla. Not able to purchase it, she commissioned a full-size copy in 1902. The following year, the University of California published *The Book of the Life of the Ancient Mexicans*, a sumptuous facsimile of an ancient Mexican illustrated book that she had found in a Florentine library.



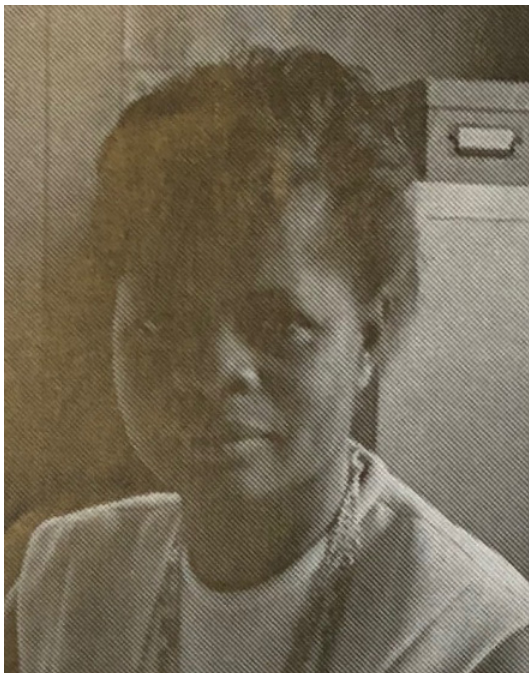
After the close of the expedition, Nuttall's ties to the museum faded, although she maintained her close personal relationship with its founder. These were renewed in 1915, at San Francisco's Panama Pacific International Exposition, where she displayed and lectured about her collection of 389 [Central Mexican spindle whorls](#). After the fair Phoebe Hearst purchased the collection, simultaneously supplementing the museum's holdings and helping out her friend, whose finances were always precarious.



One of the last but most important of the Nuttall acquisitions, which counts in its own way as part of the “Mexican collections,” was a rare, early “signed” basket made by Ventureño Chumash weaver Maria Marta Zaputimeu, which Nuttall found in 1918 in an antique shop in Mexico City. Nuttall intended to donate it as a birthday present for her friend, but Mrs. Hearst died before it could be given. Nuttall later donated it in her memory, testifying to the long and important friendship between Zelia Nuttall and Phoebe Hearst.

Irene Sawyer

Written by Claire Ittner, PhD Candidate in the History of Art Department at UC Berkeley, as part of research funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for Graduate Study in Curatorial Preparedness.



Irene Sawyer (b. 1929, d. 1988) was an artist, art historian, and educator, who played a key role in developing the field of African American art history. Like other Black women art historians and archivists of the 1970s and 1980s, Sawyer recognized the critical role that comprehensive archival databases of work by Black artists would have for future students and researchers of the field. She worked over the course of her career to create these archival databases, and to develop the exhibitions, texts, and educational resources that they made possible.

A Bay Area native, Sawyer earned her B.A. and M.A. in Art History from Mills College, focusing in these early studies on ancient Greek art. In the late 1960s—in part influenced by the ideas of the Black Power and Black Arts Movements—she shifted her focus to art created by Black American artists.

Sawyer taught high school in the Oakland Unified school district from 1958 until 1966, while maintaining her own artistic practice, focused on oil and collage. In 1969, she became an assistant professor at San Francisco State University.

In 1970, she was tapped to co-direct, alongside Dr. Margaret Wilkerson, the University of California, Berkeley's new Black Cultural Center, imagined as a campus and community hub for research, dialogue, and education in Black art and performance. Although the Center was short-lived, Sawyer remained affiliated with the University in a research capacity. From 1971-1976, she was the director and primary investigator for the Black Cultural Research Project. Supported by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration, the Black Cultural Research Project was dedicated to documenting and researching the work of Black artists and craftspeople in the United States, beginning in the 1700s and culminating in Sawyer's own moment. From 1971-1974, Sawyer traveled across the country, visiting archives, meeting with curators and art educators, and interviewing artists. Although she worked under a rotating group of on-campus sponsors—almost entirely White, male scholars, like Folklore pioneer Alan Dundes, Anthropology professor William Bascom, and History professor Lawrence Levine—Sawyer herself was the project's director and tireless advocate. By 1976, she had compiled a collection of slides that was at the time the most comprehensive visual archive of the work of Black American artists in existence at that time. The collection included some 4,300 unique slides, along with transcribed interviews with artists, artist biographies, and an annotated bibliography. It is still held in the archives of the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley.



While working on the Black Cultural Research Project, Sawyer began doctoral studies in Art History at the University of California, Los Angeles. She worked with professor E. Maurice Bloch, writing a dissertation titled "The Afro-American Artist-Illustrator: A Cultural and Historical Survey, 1770-1950."

Drawing on the breadth of knowledge granted by her work on the Black Cultural Research Project, Sawyer developed multiple art history courses, including a survey of African American art. She lectured at University of California, Berkeley, delivering probably its first course on African American art history, as well as at UC Davis, and later at Harvard. She was a W.E.B. Du Bois fellow at Harvard University from 1977-1979. She died in San Francisco in 1988.

Berta Bascom

Adapted by Katie Fleming from texts written by Research Anthropologist Ira Jacknis.



Berta Bascom (née Berta Montero-Sanchez y Lopez) was born in Havana, Cuba on June 19th, 1919. After receiving degrees and honors from Havana University and Syracuse University, she studied folklore and anthropology at Northwestern University under Africanist anthropologist William Bascom, and under the direction of department chair Melville Herskovits, a leader in the field of African and African American studies in American academia at the time. William (Bill) Bascom had received his PhD at Northwestern in 1939, where he subsequently taught anthropology and trained many of the graduate students in the

department. In 1948, the same year Berta Montero-Sanchez y Lopez earned her Masters from Northwestern, William Bascom received a grant to study the descendants of western African Yoruba people in Cuba. After she joined him on the trip as a folklorist and anthropologist with personal knowledge of Cuba, Berta and William were married.

Over the next decade the Bascoms continued to study Cuban and West African folklore, religion and art, focusing on Afro-Cuban cults and the Yoruba people of Nigeria. In 1957, they came to Berkeley, California where William Bascom served as Director of the Lowie Museum of Anthropology (now the Hearst Museum) and Professor of Anthropology. On their many travels, the Bascoms collected African art and objects of daily life, some of which they donated to the Museum together, and some of which Berta would later donate in memory of her husband who passed in 1981. [These collections can be viewed on the Hearst Museum's Collections Portal.](#) She also made numerous audio recordings of song, story, and language which have been digitized and are [available for listening online through the California Language Archive.](#) William and Berta Bascom were among the museum's most devoted patrons, second only to Phoebe Hearst. Almost every year from 1959 until 1999, the couple made a donation to the museum, eventually totaling 2029 objects,



mostly from Africa, but also from the Caribbean, South America, North America, Europe, and the Pacific; in addition to related photographs, films, and sound recordings.

Throughout her time at Berkeley and abroad, Berta Bascom was respected for her reputation as a folklorist, appreciated for her lively personality, and noted for her [cooking](#). Her publications include *Influencias Africanas en la Cultura Cubana* and *Seven Afro-Cuban Myths*. In addition, Berta Bascom taught Spanish in Cuba and the United States, including at Anna Head School (now Head-Royce School) in Berkeley. She was a member of the American Folklore Society, California Academy of Sciences, Sigma Delta Epsilon, Berkeley Yacht Club, and the U.C. Berkeley Faculty Club, and was an honorary emeritus member of the U.C. Anthropology Department.

Phoebe Apperson Hearst

Written by staff members of the Hearst Museum.



Phoebe A. Hearst spent her life advocating for the advancement of lifelong learning for all. Born on December 3, 1842 in Franklin County, Missouri, Mrs. Hearst began her professional life as a school teacher. Only later did she become a renowned philanthropist, driven by a passion for education, civic engagement and empowerment. As a feminist in the suffragette movement, Mrs. Hearst fought for the advancement of women. Her many contributions included a scholarship program that continues for female students at UC Berkeley today, the funding of libraries, helping to establish the National Congress of Mothers and co-founding the all-girls National Cathedral School in Washington, D.C. She would also become the first female regent of the University of California.

Phoebe Hearst had a passion for travel and discovery. Around 1890, she began supporting the nascent discipline of Anthropology, funding scholarly expeditions around the world. Her support resulted in a well-documented collection of 60,000 objects. Her vision then was for the Museum to become a “great educator” dedicated to “the dissemination of knowledge among the many, giving the people of California every educational advantage.” In 1901, she donated her collection to the University of California and founded what would later become the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology. The Museum still cares for Phoebe Hearst’s collections. Read more about them [here](#).

When Mrs. Hearst passed on in 1919, she left behind a storied, progressive legacy that the Hearst Museum is proud to carry on in her honor.

All images courtesy of the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology except those cited below.

*John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. (1931). Lila O'Neale [Photograph].
<https://www.gf.org/fellows/all-fellows/lila-morris-oneale/>.*

*UC Berkeley, Bancroft Library. (n.d.). Portrait of Zelia Nuttall holding a fan. [Photograph].
<http://www.oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/tf267nb2kg/?order=1>*