Lila Morris O’Neale
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Lila Morris O’Neale came to the University of California, Berkeley in the summer of 1926 at the age of forty. For sixteen years she had been teaching household art in California, Wisconsin, and Oregon, alternating periods of instruction with graduate studies. An accomplished textile analyst and historian, O’Neale decided to expand her expertise and overcome the restrictions she faced as a home economist by working toward a master’s degree on lace in Household Art at Berkeley. She planned to complete the degree in the customary one year and probably move on to another teaching position. As chance would have it, Dr. Alfred L. Kroeber had just returned from fieldwork in Peru and required a textile analyst to work on the materials he had just excavated. O’Neale was recommended and as a result of this initial contact with archaeological Peruvian textiles, the direction of her life and scholarship turned to anthropological studies. Instead of lace, Kroeber suggested that she work on fifty-six Nazca specimens from the Max Uhle collection in the Museum of Anthropology for her thesis topic. In 1927, O’Neale received her master’s degree, entitled Design, Structural and Decorative, with Color Distribution Characteristic of Ancient Peruvian Fabrics.

By the spring of 1927, O’Neale had decided to pursue a Ph.D. in anthropology. As in the past, money had to be found to support her for the next three years. She applied to the School of Home Economics at the University of Minnesota for a $500 fellowship. Kroeber provided a letter of reference (ALK correspondence 4/5/27). Two other students had preceded O’Neale on analysis of Peruvian textiles with Kroeber, but she outshone them. Kroeber wrote that O’Neale was “outstandingly superior,” and that she possessed “an unusual background of general culture with a technical competence of high order . . . [and] she is in the best word both a lady and a scholar” (O’Neale correspondence 1/1927). It is likely that her brother Lester, who was an automobile mechanic, also contributed to her support. He was always proud of her accomplishments and spoke glowingly of her to his family (Briere p.c.).

By the fall of 1927, O’Neale and Kroeber were analyzing textiles from the collections of the Field Museum gathered during a second Kroeber excavation. Kroeber summed up the research:

We are going over each piece, analyzing its techniques and paying attention also to color scheme and pattern. Including seams, finishes and tassels, there are often three to six techniques employed in one fabric. . . . A feature of the art which is already outstanding is the combination of exceedingly simple apparatus for weaving with extreme refinement of process. [ALK correspondence 10/14/27]

In 1886, the year of O’Neale’s birth, cultural anthropology was in its infancy. Franz Boas, a directing influence on Kroeber, came to the United States in 1889 to become a docent in the Psychology Department at Clark University with a doctorate in physics and research experience in geography. An expedition to Baffinland had converted Boas to ethnolinguistics and ethnology. In 1896, he became curator at the American Museum of
Natural History and a lecturer at Columbia. Boas passed on to Kroeber and his other students his "peculiarly slanted romantic humanistic-scientific vision" (T. Kroeber 1970:50).

O'Neale was born far from this intellectual, academic climate of New York City and Columbia University in Buxton, North Dakota, a farm town located near her family's land claim on the Mississippi River. Her mother, Carrie Margery Higgins, came from Yankee settlers of New York State. George Lester O'Neale had emigrated from Ireland via Liverpool. He was fourteen years older than Carrie. In 1882 they were married in Minnesota. Lila and her younger brother Lester were born after Carrie had turned thirty, for Carrie had completed Normal School and was an English teacher when she met George.

The family moved to San Jose, California in 1898. A large Victorian house in the center of town became their home. Carrie rented rooms to female students at the nearby State Normal School to augment the family income. A Christian Scientist and member of the Women's Temperance League, Carrie exerted a strong influence on her daughter. Lila was from the "generation of women who model their lives on the pattern of their school teachers and their aggressive, directive mothers" (Mead 1963:322). Carrie died tragically in an automobile accident in 1936, and it fell to Lila to dispose of the house and all her mother's belongings. Each relative was asked to take something that was meaningful to them as a memento, and Lila chose to keep a silver thimble as a symbol of her mother (Estep p.c.).

No doubt Carrie had hoped that Lila would become an English teacher like herself—teaching was a common vocation in those days for women who preferred a profession to marriage. Lila majored in English at Stanford University, finishing a two-year course when she was twenty-one. A secondary diploma in Household Arts followed in 1909. One more year at Stanford resulted in an A.B. in English in 1910. However, instead of emulating her mother, Lila took a position as a manual training teacher in the Oakland Public Schools.

After three years of teaching arts and crafts to high school students, O'Neale became an instructor in household art at the State Normal School in San Jose, California. She worked there from 1913 to 1915, and her curriculum included the history and development of textiles, study of fibers, processes for manufacture, and dye analysis. O'Neale then transferred to Teachers' College at Columbia University and received a Bachelor of Science in Household Art there in 1916, followed by three years of teaching at the Stout Institute, Menomonie, Wisconsin. It is possible that during her year at Columbia, O'Neale came into contact with anthropology for the first time. She might have taken one of Boas' classes or learned of Alfred Kroeber and his research with native peoples of California.

A final period of teaching household art at Oregon Agricultural College, Corvallis followed from 1918-26. O'Neale rose to associate professor and published You and Your Clothes, a witty, how-to-make-the-best-of-yourself article in the Extension Bulletin of 1921. She taught many summer sessions at the University of California, on both the Los Angeles and Berkeley campuses, at the University of Southern California, and at the State Normal School in San Jose, California.

O'Neale's relationship with Kroeber began in 1926 and lasted until her untimely death at 62 from pneumonia. He came to value her as a friend and colleague, calling her "Pat," the name reserved for her friends and family. She addressed him as "Alfred" or more often as "Kroeber" in her letters. As Grace Buzaljko will show in a forthcoming article, "A.L. Kroeber as Mentor to Women," Kroeber got along well with his ten female graduate students who worked with him from the 1920s to the early 1940s at UC Berkeley. However, when O'Neale decided to enter the doctoral program in anthropology, Kroeber had not been encouraging (Nelson p.c.). Maybe he was put off by her age or lack of anthropological background. Or perhaps it was due to his attitude toward teaching as
expressed by his wife Theodora: "He had no ambition to be a 'great' teacher or to be a guru to disciples" (T. Kroeber 1970:209). It seems strange that Theodora didn't include O'Neale in her discussion of what Clyde Kluckhohn called Kroeber's "women Ph.D.'s":

Kroeber liked women but he was more discriminating about the women he liked than about the men. These women tended to be "characters," to be interesting and vital, to be intellectual and humane. . . . Kroeber did not like women who attempted to lionize him, or who made a cult of the Indian. He did not like women who "fussed." [T. Kroeber 1970:263-264]

O'Neale's work was highly regarded by Kroeber. He would later call on her to assist him in preparing the Andean Exhibition for the Golden Gate International Exposition of 1940. After her death he wrote, "what little I know of textiles I learned from her" (ALK correspondence 3/4/48).

After two years of course work, O'Neale was ready to do fieldwork for her dissertation. Kroeber gave her only the "skimpiest instructions" as was his habit with his graduate students (Mandelbaum p.c.). He did suggest that she work with material culture of the Hupa, Yurok, and Karok in northern California, an area he knew well and in which he had ongoing research projects. He also gave her a map of the area and advised her on where to stay (Mandelbaum p.c.). O'Neale set off for the Klamath River in the summer of 1929, accompanied by her life-long companion Martha Thomas, who was a professor of Household Art at San Jose State Normal School. In only six weeks she located and interviewed forty-seven female Yurok and Karok basket makers. Frequently travel was by canoe as she went from camp to camp, accompanied by interpreters who were also weavers.

O'Neale's fieldwork focus was rather unique for the time. She wanted to "investigate the weaver's subjective attitude, to determine individual reactions to craft aspects" (O'Neale 1932:5). This ethnoaesthetic approach focused on native aesthetics and criteria for excellence in basket making. The idea for this approach came from a book O'Neale had reviewed in 1930 for American Anthropologist, written by Franz Boas and others and entitled Coiled Basketry in British Columbia and Surrounding Regions. Boas stated in the book, "the problem I set myself was an investigation into the attitude of the individual artist toward his work. Much has been written on the origin and history of design without any attempt to study the artist himself. It seemed to me necessary to approach the problem from this angle" (Boas et al. 1928:131). O'Neale acknowledges "having freely adapted to a study of the tribes on the Klamath River whatever methods appeared to have been successful among the British Columbia tribes" in the introduction to her dissertation (1932:5).

O'Neale used a technique of showing to her informants photographs of Yurok and Karok baskets from the collections of the Museum of Anthropology and California Academy of Sciences. These baskets had been purchased by Kroeber and Pliny Goddard for their museums' collections and were generally considered to be traditional forms. The informants were very enthusiastic upon seeing the photos for they could recognize the work of well-known basket makers. The weavers defined native categories as well: treatment of design arrangements, design motifs, acceptable standards for materials and workmanship, sources for materials, care of baskets, proportion and contour, techniques, and male-female involvement in basket making were all discussed. O'Neale included information on each informant in the appendix. She further organized the material by arranging eight basket types within a table which distinguished baskets for native use from those made for sale.
The impact of O’Neale’s 1932 dissertation, *Yurok-Karok Basket Weavers*, is still felt today, and it is highly regarded by those who teach and conduct research on Native American arts (Beals p.c., Bernstein p.c., Mandelbaum p.c., Conn p.c., Cohodas 1985, Washburn 1985). Lowie Museum of Anthropology research anthropologist Lawrence Dawson (p.c.) commented on the influence of O’Neale’s work on his basket research:

O’Neale helped me to distinguish between the many made-for-sale pieces in the [Lowie Museum] collections and the traditional baskets. I was able to obtain a clear picture of white influence through different media.

O’Neale’s research also helped Dawson to learn about the “set of traditional baskets with all their culturally conditioned features” as well as the idea of sets as the proper base material for comparative study (ibid.).

Knowledge of craft techniques and the fact that she was a woman served O’Neale well in establishing good relationships with the Yurok-Karok weavers. She didn’t waste time asking them meaningless questions, for she understood basket making. She confirmed the findings of Boas and Kroeber in their work on Native American arts, demonstrating that excellence and formal diversity of a given art style hinged on perfection of technique. Kroeber himself acknowledged *Yurok-Karok Basket Weavers* as a report that was “one of the most important and liveliest ever to be made in the field” (ALK correspondence 3/4/48).

After receiving her Ph.D. at the age of forty-four, O’Neale joined the faculty of the UC Berkeley Household Art Department as lecturer and later became an associate professor. Her courses covered historic textiles, history of costume, textile design, and research in textile analysis. When Edward Gifford was on leave in 1931, O’Neale filled in for him in the anthropology department as lecturer, becoming the first woman to teach anthropology at Berkeley. She also took over Gifford’s duties as curator of the Museum of Anthropology while he was gone. In 1935 Kroeber, then curator, appointed O’Neale to the position of Associate Curator of Textiles. After that O’Neale assumed responsibility for the museum during summers when Kroeber was at “Kishamish,” his Napa Valley summer home.

The Household Art department was part of the Berkeley School of Agriculture when O’Neale began to teach in 1932. Faculty and students were predominantly female. With support from Kroeber and colleagues in the Household Art Department, architect Winfield Scott Wellington, and art historian Hope Gladding, O’Neale pushed for an expanded curriculum which included architecture, anthropology, art, and art history. Her efforts were successful and the name was changed to the Decorative Art Department and relocated in the College of Letters and Science in 1939. O’Neale became the first chairperson, and in 1940 she was the first woman to be appointed full professor in Decorative Art.

Along with her administrative and teaching responsibilities, O’Neale continued her archaeological and ethnographic fieldwork. She was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship to go to Peru from 1931 to 1932 in order to study archaeological textiles from Paracas. She also found time to visit contemporary pottery makers in Ayacucho and Huancayo.

In 1930, O’Neale produced *Textile Periods in Ancient Peru, Part I*, the first of sixteen publications on her favorite topic, archaeological textiles from the New World. Kroeber collaborated by writing the introduction and providing dates and cultural attributes of the textiles. O’Neale expanded on the work of textile analyst M.D.C. Crawford of the American Museum of Natural History. Crawford’s research was based on the spinning, weaving, finishing, and superstructural techniques used in producing ancient Peruvian textiles. O’Neale documented hitherto unknown techniques such as “needle-knitting,” or the cross-knit loop stitch (1934), and “multicolored patchwork,” or plain weave with discontinuous warps and wefts (1933), and performed extensive technical analyses on twills and
gauze weaves. Her passion for working with ancient pieces of cloth was well expressed in a letter to Margaret Harrison, her editor at the Carnegie Institution:

My archaeological writings are done under a sort of compulsion I don't feel at all when I know the surface reactions, at least, of live informants. The dead mystify me and I am always conscious of the immense advantage they hold in any investigation dealing with methods and procedures. One cannot know sequences of movements or reasons for them. When you attempt surmises, you become more than ever serious. [in Harrison 1948:659]

For contemporary researchers of pre-Columbian Andean textiles, O'Neale’s technical analyses and descriptions are considered first rate (Mefford p.c.). She was the first to think about Peruvian textiles from the perspectives of chronology and provenience. "She always worked with the awareness of the age and provenience of the pieces she was analyzing and tried to summarize and generalize about style and techniques in the various cultural units of which she was aware" (A.P. Rowe p.c.). Unfortunately, O'Neale worked with a limited chronology divided into early, middle, and late time periods; it wasn't until the 1960s that John Howland Rowe and others produced an accurate chronology for Peru. In short, O'Neale did the best research possible with the information available in the 1940s.

O'Neale produced two more ethnoaesthetic studies, Papago Color Designations (1943) with Juan Dolores and Textiles of Highland Guatemala (1945). She began research on the latter in 1936 as part of a Carnegie Institution Mayan archaeology project. Her objectives in this research, conducted in Guatemala, were to document the existing complex textile traditions of the indigenous peoples and to search for pre-Columbian survivals in textile technology, materials, and iconography. With the aid of Carnegie project head A.V. Kidder, she later studied the Matilda Gray collection at the Middle American Research Institute at Tulane University. She also incorporated other Guatemalan textile collections into her data base, including the 1901 Gustavus Eisen collection in the Berkeley Museum of Anthropology and the private collection of Mrs. Mildred Palmer of Guatemala City. O'Neale referred to the finished Textiles of Highland Guatemala as THE BOOK or "door stopper" (Campen 1948). In one section O'Neale presented male, female, and children's costumes from 104 villages in the highlands. In other chapters, she adapted the categories that she devised for the Yurok-Karok materials in order to organize material such as weaving specializations, classes of textiles produced, how children absorb textile skills, and the notion of sets of costume elements based on construction. The book continues to serve as a valuable resource for textile researchers who work in this part of the world.

In 1943, O'Neale collaborated with Juan Dolores, a Papago Indian and museum preparator at the Berkeley Museum of Anthropology, on Papago Color Designations. Dolores was a close friend of Kroeber, who had brought him to the museum and often invited him to spend his summer vacations with the Kroeber family at Kishamish. Kroeber had encouraged Dolores to publish his research on the Papago language. Two other papers by Dolores, Papago Verb Stems (1913) and Papago Nominal Stems (1923), preceded the color study. Utilizing Milton Bradley's Color in the Classroom (1895) as a visual tool, O'Neale elicited Papago names for familiar colors from Dolores. She found that color terms relate to the context of the object described. "Papago color designations indicate a limited need for color terminology in their everyday life" (O'Neale and Dolores 1943:397). O'Neale's unique ability to draw out Dolores and to organize the data produced an inside or emic view of aspects of the Papago language. Although not known to Berlin and Kay when they were researching Basic Color Terms (1970) in the 1960s, O'Neale and Dolores also perceived color as a "response."
O’Neale’s other projects included collaborations with graduate students on research projects which developed into master’s theses and publications. Two examples are *The Central Asian Silks Excavated by Sir Aurel Stein* (1945) written with Dorothy Durrell and *Textile Periods in Ancient Peru: Part III, The Gauze Weaves* with Bonnie Jean Clark (1948). O’Neale also reviewed books on a wide variety of subjects and wrote the entries “Basketry” and “Weaving” for the *Handbook of South American Indians* (1949; see Harrison 1948 for O’Neale’s full bibliography).

During the war O’Neale drew on her practical training to devise an occupational therapy course at Berkeley for disabled veterans which utilized simple weaving materials (Scholer p.c.). At that time she also wanted to expand the visual presence of the anthropology and decorative art collections, persuading Edward Gifford, chief curator of the Museum, to place an exhibition case in the University Library for a “Specimen of the Week” exhibit. Every week from June 15, 1941 to July 10, 1942 a different object was exhibited, each with an easily understood descriptive label written by O’Neale.

O’Neale was a member of Sigma Xi, the scientific honor society, and served as Councillor of the American Anthropological Association from 1932 to her death. She was a delegate of the University of California to the International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences at London in 1934, and there delivered a paper on textile technology.

An advocate of women’s independence, O’Neale was self-confident in a man’s world, never compromised in her pursuit of excellence, and accepted her due with grace (Briere p.c.). When a colleague from the Art Department tried to commission her to weave some fabric, she was surprised and somewhat offended at the suggestion (Loran p.c.).

O’Neale was an indefatigable researcher and had a characteristic sense of humor. For her trip to Guatemala she used a spring sabbatical and went as a volunteer with only her traveling expenses covered by the project. She traveled on a French liner and wrote to Robert Lowie about the quality of French hospitality on the ship: “The French really do know how . . . and all women are of interest. Curious!” (Lowie correspondence 2/23/36). Strenuous fieldwork was no stranger to O’Neale, after six weeks camping on the Klamath River, but Guatemala posed a challenge. She was unable to follow her habit of working at night, since only ten-watt bulbs or candles were available (Lowie correspondence 4/8/36), and wrote to Kroeber, “I have never been so far away in mind and body from the more civilized world” (ALK correspondence 4/15/36). However, less than two months later she wrote again to Kroeber, stating “I am truly glad for my constitution. I lost one hour under the strain of climbing, altitude, and sun, but only an hour this whole trip, that’s a good record in view of the beds, food, roads, and smells” (ALK correspondence 6/6/36).

Tall and slender, O’Neale was a role model in appearance and deportment. Some remember her white smock or blue suit, others the large hats and white gloves she would don when meeting with the administration. E.A. Hoebel, a post-doctoral fellow in 1940-41 at Berkeley, first met her at the interdisciplinary seminars planned by Kroeber and psychologist Jean MacFarlane. Hoebel remembers O’Neale as a charming woman, at ease at both professional and social occasions.

Her Monterey Colonial house on Euclid Street above Cedar in the Berkeley hills was the scene for parties of various kinds. Colleagues remember lovely dinner parties, always with Lila’s companion Martha Thomas present (Mandelbaum p.c.). Students recall “pie parties” where many different pies from a local bakery were served (Atthowe p.c.). A front and back garden with a patio gave O’Neale the opportunity to cultivate roses which she said gave her “more than any other flowers” (in Harrison 1948:663).
On Saturday, January 31, 1948, O'Neale gave her last final examination. Theodore McCown, a close friend and colleague, saw her that afternoon. Within twenty-four hours she was in Permanente Hospital with pneumonia. The toll of pneumonia was severe without the availability of penicillin at that time, and she died on Monday, February 2nd, with Martha Thomas at her side. McCown's father, dean of the Pacific School of Religion, conducted a simple service, and her ashes were placed in the Chapel of the Chimes columbarium in Oakland with those of her parents. Her sudden death was a tremendous shock to Kroeber, who was at Harvard that year, and to all who knew her (ALK correspondence 2/3/48).

O'Neale's influence has continued to present times. Lea Van P. Miller, "a true believer with amazing respect and admiration for Dr. O'Neale" (Rossbach p.c.), passed on some of O'Neale's publications to Ed Rossbach who came to Berkeley to teach in Decorative Art shortly after her death. Rossbach wrote to me: "Certainly my work in weaving and basketry was influenced by the anthropological approach which, I think, I acquired indirectly from O'Neale." John Howland Rowe stated that O'Neale was "a presence that I felt for many years [at Berkeley], because of her relations with people who became my friends and because of my inevitable involvement with her legacy of unfinished research on Peruvian subjects" (Rowe p.c.). Rowe was responsible for publishing her notes on modern pottery making in highland Peru in the 1976 edition of Nawpa Pacha. In the 1960s, Ruth Boyer was teaching courses in textile history and costume history initiated by O'Neale, and said of her, "Dr. O'Neale was a scholar and innovator. . . . [I] do my best to uphold the traditions of Lila M. O'Neale, a great lady indeed!" (Boyer p.c.).

O'Neale's students pursued such various careers as fiber artist, librarian, interior decorator, teacher, and textile analyst, and some combined marriage and having families with their careers. They also remember her vividly. She participated in seventeen Master of Arts committees for the Decorative Art Department. One of her students, Jean Atthowe, said of her, "I had not before known any woman of her scholarly background and brilliance, and her professionalism and dedication to quality inspired me to do the best that was in me" (Atthowe p.c.). Another student, Margaret Estep, considered her "the most innovative, inspired instructor in my academic life" (Estep p.c.). In a 1948 letter to Margaret Harrison, O'Neale's editor at the Carnegie Institution, former student Bonnie Jean Clark Campen, stated "Dr. O'Neale never grew tired outwardly. She gave the impression of ceaseless and endless energy," adding "She often worked late into the night and amused me with stories of what the shipyard workers cooked for their breakfast at 4:30 a.m. She had tremendous curiosity, never on the idle side. Her imagination kept pace with it."

An obituary prepared by her colleagues Alfred Kroeber, Lea Van P. Miller, Barbara Armstrong, and Hope M. Gladding aptly sums up the O'Neale presence, personality, and accomplishments:

Searchingly exact in the content of all her work, O'Neale was felicitous and apt in expression, concise and pungent. Through all her writing, there moved a quality of incisiveness which enabled her to present bodies of intricate detail with a drastic directness. In personal relations she showed the same traits. She was concentrated in the intensity of her work, definite and pointed in matters of business, skilled in administering affairs and in handling people, witty, gay, and charming in relaxation, lightning-like in riposte, commanding respect in all human relations.

It is extraordinary that the voluminous, precise, and penetrating investigations which constitute O'Neale's monument of scholarship were all performed in the last two decades of her life. Their impact would have been yet greater had she been spared longer or had her talents found their channel earlier. [Kroeber et al. 1948:66]
Note

1 All of the references to "p.c." concern correspondence and personal communication between Margaret Schevill and the person listed. I wish to thank those people that aided my research between 1983 and 1985: Jean Atthowe, Ralph L. Beals, Bruce Bernstein, Ruth Boyer, Adelle O’Neale Briere, Bonnie Jean Clark Campen, Richard Conn, Lawrence L. Dawson, Margaret Estep, E.A. Hoebel, Earle Loran, David Mandelbaum, Jill Mefford, Ed Rossbach, Ann Pollard Rowe, and John Howland Rowe, and Margaret Evans Scholer. I wish to especially thank Lucretia Nelson.

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