

OBITUARIES

IRENE EMERY, 1900–1981



Irene Emery, Curator emerita of Technical Studies at the Textile Museum, died suddenly on May 21, 1981, of a cerebral hemorrhage. She was 81 and had been in ill health for many years, but she had continued to serve as teacher, mentor, editor, colleague, and friend to many of those interested or involved in textile studies. Indeed, the revised edition of her pioneering work, *The Primary Structures of Fabrics: An Illustrated Classification*, had just been published. Death came when she suffered a stroke immediately after a Textile Museum lecture given in her honor by Junius Bird of the American Museum of Natural History.

Although she was not trained as an anthropologist, but as a dancer and artist, it was among anthropologists that she came to be most comfortable intellectually; and, despite her many years in

Washington, D.C., it was in the Southwest that her heart truly lay. Her career was one of many turnings and many successes. She was born in Grand Rapids, Michigan, on February 1, 1900. Her earliest professional interests were in dance, and, after attending Bradford Academy, she studied at the Central School of Hygiene and Physical Education (later Russell Sage College) and then became an instructor in dance at North Carolina Women's College (1921–23) and Denison University (1923–24). From 1924 to 1926, she attended the University of Wisconsin School of Dance and received a B.A. in philosophy in 1927. She moved to New York City in 1926 and became a member of Martha Graham's original concert group, while supporting herself teaching dance at Miss Chapin's School and giving private lessons. She also taught summer school at the University of Utah in 1927. Her dance career ended suddenly in 1930. Having broken her ankle during rehearsals for Massine's production of *Sacre du Printemps*, conducted by Stokowski, she persisted in dancing in the performance a few months later with one ankle taped under the boots of the dance costume. This so weakened her ankle that she was never able to dance again.

Dance had not been her only interest, however. She had studied sculpture with Archipenko in 1929 and 1930. With dancing over for her, she went on to the Art Institute of Chicago to further her studies under Emil Zetler. Here she executed carvings for the model house at the 1933–1934 World's Fair. In 1933, she moved to Santa Fe and began her lifelong romance with the Southwest. Between 1933 and 1937, she worked on a variety of Works Projects Administration (WPA) projects, including a bas-relief that can still be seen in the interior courtyard of the Palace of the Governors. Soon she began to encounter physical difficulties in carving and sought medical advice. It was some time before she found a sympathetic doctor, who eventually diagnosed myasthenia gravis. Unable to continue her sculpture, she turned to needlepoint and worked a number of canvases, usually depicting dancers. Before long, she was unable even to push the needle through canvas. Searching for a suitable outlet for her talents and meager strength, she

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began to teach herself to weave from books. Although she met with technical success, her training in logic left her frustrated by the lack of precision and uniformity in handweaving terminology and descriptions, a frustration that led ultimately to the *Primary Structures of Fabrics*.

As she became proficient as a weaver (some clients were disappointed in the linens she wove them, because they didn't look "handwoven"), new avenues opened to her. In 1944–1945, she engaged in experimental weaving at the Southwestern Range and Sheep Breeding Laboratory, working with Navajo weavers. In 1947, she became a Research Assistant at the Laboratory of Anthropology which provided her with space to continue her research on weaving terminology and structures. She also was made an Honorary Associate of the School of American Research and received a Wenner-Gren Foundation grant (1951) and a Guggenheim Fellowship (1953). Her other activities during this period were chiefly anthropological, studying archaeological, ethnographic, and Spanish Colonial textiles. During this time, she was a frequent contributor to *El Palacio*. The Guggenheim Fellowship permitted her to travel widely in the United States, examining museum textile collections. Her life in the Southwest and her association with American Indians and their culture left her with a preference for archaeological and ethnographic textiles over the more sophisticated products of Europe and Asia, but she was always fascinated by variations in technique, no matter how simple or complex.

One of the museums she visited was the Textile Museum. Her work came to the attention of René Batigne, then Director, who offered her a position as Research Curator in 1954. From that time on, she was to be a major force in the field of anthropological textile studies, an effective protagonist for descriptive terminology, and often a goad to those who favored more traditional handweaving terms.

A perfectionist, she spent nearly 12 years laboring at the Textile Museum on the creation of *Primary Structures*. She wove many of the samples used as illustrations, oversaw all photography, and typed the entire manuscript herself, although not a trained typist, in order to assure that the photographs and text would be perfectly aligned. The philosopher, scholar, weaver, and artist in her all contributed to the final product. The result was, of course, magnificent, and the book will always serve as the basis for all future discussions of textile terminology and structure.

Emery's illness never left her, and, in later life it was compounded by damaged eyesight and, shortly before her death, a broken knee cap. She never complained, except about her lack of stamina (which often seemed inconsequential to her younger colleagues, who sometimes had difficulty keeping up with her). Her greatest burden was her diminished vision, which prevented her from using a microscope and inhibited her reading, a sorry situation for a woman who loved the written word.

She retained her sense of logic, her clarity of thought to the last. She was the best editor I have ever known, with an infallible feeling for grammar, punctuation, and word choice, and unquestionably one of the best teachers. She was impatient only with stupidity and sloppiness in research and writing. To all those who knew her, she was an inspiration: an incredible role model for the not-yet-liberated young women of the 1950s and for the liberated ones of the 1970s alike. She never lost her dancer's figure and posture. To the end, she was a bright, witty, elegant creature, who was a joy to be with and a credit to the human race.

Note: A memorial fund in Irene Emery's name has been established at the Textile Museum, 2320 S Street N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008.

MARY ELIZABETH KING

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