

Cleo Rickman Fitch 1910-1995 by Norma Goldman

The career of Cleo Rickman Fitch is a model of how the good archaeological life should be lived. The roles of artist, botanist, draftsman, and humanist-historian were all combined in one elegant lady. She was a gentle Southerner from a Tennessee family, and she proudly kept her drawl all her adult life in New York, both in the country and in the city. In the country she lived at Rockland with her husband, the architectural historian James Marston Fitch, and later they lived in Greenwich Village, where she spent the last 20 years before her death on January 15, 1995.

Her parents, and indeed the whole family, were part of the tradition of schooling that considered the classics paramount in education, with Latin and Greek languages, history, and literature a part of normal table conversation. Her own interests in art and architecture, art history, the natural world of plants and animals, all prepared her for the exciting career of her eventual work in Rome and at Cosa, the excavation of the American Academy in Rome, under the direction of Frank E. Brown.

Cleo Rickman Fitch was born June 16, 1910 at Carlsbad, Texas, where her surgeon father had been assigned as a sort of missionary doctor while employed by the Southern Pacific Railroad. He had brought his wife along, and there three children were born, an older sister, Cleo, and a younger brother. When the doctor diagnosed himself as having diabetes (at that time incurable), he abruptly moved himself and his family back to his native home of Chapel Hill, Tennessee, where the young children had to adjust to their new home. Cleo's father died soon after the move, and her mother immediately

began to teach school to support the family. Because she did not have proper teaching credentials, she was required to take summer courses to fulfill the requirements for teacher certification.

Peabody College (which eventually became part of Vanderbilt University) in Nashville, Tennessee, had an excellent art department, and it was there that Cleo attended college, studying art and art history. She continued those two studies at Watkins Institute of Art in Nashville, but it was only twenty years later, in 1953-1954, years after her studies at the art school, that she had an opportunity to study sculpture in Florence, Italy. That year abroad ended her formal art training, but she applied the principles that she had learned to all other pursuits in the field of art and design.

Cleo met her husband-to-be, James Marston Fitch, when the young architect came to Nashville in 1929 to practice his trade with an architectural firm primarily concerned with residential construction. The two met socially and found much in common in their interests in art and architecture, but it was not until 1936, seven years later, when James had found a secure position as editor of Architectural Record, that the two decided to marry. In 1945 James accepted a position at Columbia University as professor in the School of Architecture, and as faculty wife Cleo became aware of the fine staff of teachers in the fields of art and art history. She attended the seminars of many of the illustrious scholars, including such luminaries as Otto Brendel and of Rudolph Wittkower. Although urged to complete her graduate study, she preferred the life of quiet enjoyment of education and study for its own sake. She was excited about all things in the natural world and in the world of man's creation. She responded to all kinds of art with an enthusiasm that was genuine and uninhibited. She enjoyed working in her garden, planning the perennial beds and the seasonal flower displays.

During the war years, 1943-45, Cleo worked for the United States Army as an industrial draftsman, interpreting in drawings the mechanisms for the new fields of war equipment being produced in the factories. There was a fantastic expansion of industrial work that brought thousands of unskilled workers into the factories who needed training or retraining to produce for the war industry. Through her drawings Cleo taught how parts could be assembled and how they worked, in something as basic, for instance, as the assembly of cogs and gears. Her work demanded the sophisticated understanding of how things worked, so that she could translate the mechanism to the drafting table. She never considered the work routine, since she was fascinated with the way things worked, with mechanics, as well as with natural phenomena.

After the war and her job with the Army ended, she retired into the life of the countrywoman, working in her garden in Rockland. Her expertise in planning her own garden made her the consultant for the neighbors who came to her for help and advice about gardening and about plants. Eventually she helped her architect husband design and execute gardens for his clients. She assisted in at least fifteen garden designs for the homes that Fitch designed for his clients, thus adding botany to her other skills as an artist. In all her fields, she was self-taught, since she learned by trial and error what would work and what would not.

After James Marston Fitch had completed his years as architectural editor for House Beautiful, they both took a year off to enjoy life in Italy in that seminal year of 1953-1954. Cleo studied art and sculpture in Florence while James toured the architectural wonders of the city. Their friends, both in Italy and in New York were the architects, artists, and art historians that they both knew as colleagues, students, and associates. These included James and Judy Casson, Bluma and Max Trel, Blanche and

Milton Brown, Larissa Bonfante and Leo Radita.

Cleo was a close friend to the archaeologist Therese Goell (q.v. *Breaking Ground*), who excavated in Turkey, and she was always fascinated with the stories told about the excavations, especially since the pyramid-like tomb at the site at which Goell worked was always in danger of collapsing, having been so designed by the occupant or his/her builder that it would fall in on whoever disturbed it. These tales inspired in her an ambition to become part of an archaeological excavation team, not in the field, but using her talents as an artist and as a draftsman to aid in the interpretation of the finds.

Thus, when Frank Brown, then Director of the American Academy in Rome, complained to James Marston Fitch, that he could not find an intelligent, hard-working, trained person to assist in the excavations at Cosa, Fitch told Brown that he could recommend someone ideal for the task, but only on the condition that Cleo never discover who had recommended her for the job. Brown, who knew Cleo socially, but not professionally, was delighted to have such an experienced draftsman join his group of excavators at Cosa, and for Cleo it was the realization of a dream, a fulfillment of her ambitions.

Brown immediately put her to work on cataloging the finds from the dig and especially the terracotta lamps. Eventually her assignments included the building plans for the new museum, which Brown had commissioned to be built at Cosa. She chose the lamp objects for the special permanent exhibition in the cases, and she helped design the contents of the cases in other fields. Her work also included the replanting of the garden behind the reconstructed House of the Skeleton (SUNY House), with the pathways laid out as in the original home and plants chosen from the ones, carefully researched, that would have been used in antiquity. She always admired the work of Wilhelmina F.

Jashemski, who pioneered that study. It seemed that all of the skills that she had learned in drafting, in art, in landscape architecture, in design, were coming together in her work at Cosa.

One of the most important ingredients at Cosa and at the American Academy in Rome, where her subsequent work on the lamps continued, was her cheerful, pleasant, non-competitive good humor that made her a delightful companion to the workers, the scholars, the volunteers, the administrators. The kitchen crew at the Academy knew about her inability to ingest tomatoes and always prepared special meals for her when the pasta was red-sauced. The chef called her "Nona."

Her friendship with and respect for Frank Brown and his wife Jackie lasted all of the 21 years that she was associated with the Cosa project, and probably some of the happiest years of her life were those spent at the drafting table in the old Cosa Room of the American Academy in Rome, where she went back every summer to work on the lamps of Cosa, which she had been assigned to catalogue and draw. But the first morning of arrival each summer, to overcome jet-lag and to reacquaint herself with the Academy, she spent touring the Academy Main Building garden to see how the fruit trees were faring, how the bamboo was spreading, how the vegetable plot was being laid out in deep furrows, what flowers were in bloom from the cutting beds. Then in the afternoon she would take out her pens and other drawing materials and return to her work on the lamps.

The lamps were in fragments for the most part, some crushed beyond recognition by the reuse of parts of the site for subsequent rebuilding. But the fragments that could be identified were immensely important, since some are from datable loci, the most exciting ones from a hardware storeroom, a sealed layer in a storeroom in the Forum. Thus from the ordinary materials of daily life, a whole period of lamp production can be

reconstructed and dating accurately assigned. Because lamps in museum collections are so difficult to date, because of the many paths that they have travelled before being acquired by the museum, this Italian site is important for its dating of materials and for how that dating can be applied to other lamps and lamp collections. In 1979 she invited Norma Goldman to join in the work; that cooperative effort has resulted in the publication of Cosa: the Lamps, which appeared in 1994 as Volume 37 of the Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome. The publication was celebrated at the New York offices of the Academy, not only for the lamp book, but also for the publication of the Republican Houses by Vincent Bruno and Russell Scott and the posthumous publication of the work on the Forum by Frank Brown, edited after his death by Emeline Hill and Lawrence Richardson, jr.

Because the c. 1200 Cosa catalogued lamps for the most are fragmentary, they could only be restored from comparanda, and that is where the real expertise of Cleo Fitch's previous work came to bear on the archaeological work. The lamps have been drawn with such artistic perfection by Cleo Rickman Fitch, both top view, side view and cross-section, that the lamp book is a work of art as well as a scholarly catalogue. From the over-view of all of the lamps from the c. 700 years of the history of the site, it is possible to see the entire history of the Roman lamp industry capsuled in this amazing chart. A previous version of this chart, prepared by Cleo Fitch, had appeared in her article published in Scientific American, June, 1982, with a summary of the study of the Cosa lamps.

Her friends include many of her husband's former students, among them John Stubbs, presently Program Director for the World Monument Fund and Adele Chatfield Taylor, President of the American Academy in Rome. Among her closest associates

were the members of the Classics Study group at New York University: Larissa Bonfante, Lionel Casson, Bluma Trell, Blanche Brown, Cyrus Gordon, Penny Small, a group that met regularly to discuss new projects and developments in classical study. Friends of the Fitches also include painters, playwrights, sculptors, photographers, and of course, architects and architectural historians. A Symposium entitled "LUX EX COSA" in her honor was held at the American Academy in Rome New York offices on May 20, 1995 with her former friends and colleagues at Cosa or the Academy giving papers: Larissa Bonfante, Blanche Brown, Vincent Bruno, Lionel Casson, David Grose, Anne Laidlaw, Norma Goldman, Anna Marguerite McCann, Helen North, Lawrence Richardson, jr, Russell Scott, and Elizabeth Will.

Cleo Rickman Fitch was an autodidact, a self-taught person in all things, learning first from the art lessons how to draw and how to communicate in the materials of the artist, but she then put all of these lessons to practical use in her later application of them to the world of archaeological investigation.