

Lucy Wright Mitchell, 1845-1888

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Lucy Wright Mitchell wrote the first book on classical sculpture published by an American and was one of the first women to study seriously classical archaeology. She represented the transition from amateur to professional in American classical archaeology.

She was born in Orumiyeh in northwestern Iran on March 20, 1845, the daughter of Austin Hazen Wright (1811-1865) and Catherine Myers Wright (1821-1888). Her father, Austin Wright, was a Dartmouth alumnus and medical missionary to the Nestorian Christians with an interest in archaeology. He was responsible for Dartmouth's acquisition of a set of reliefs from the palace of the Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal II. Lucy Mitchell spent her early years in Iran (then Persia). She came to know well the cultures of the Near East and learned the Syriac language sufficiently well to prepare the manuscript of a dictionary of that language that was unfortunately never published. These early experiences shaped her distinctive vision of antiquity that included the cultures of Egypt and the Near East as well as those of Greece and Rome.

In 1854 she was sent to the United States for education. She settled with relatives in Andover Massachusetts where she received that combination of formal and informal schooling characteristic for women in pre-Civil War America. The combination of her ability, the family's interest in her education, and her own intellectual ambition led her to enroll at Mt. Holyoke College, then one of the few American institutions of high education for women. However, her hopes for completing her college education ended when her father decided to return to his mission in Persia and she selected to accompany him. Her new stay in Persia was brief, for her father died suddenly in 1865, and she decided to abandon the missionary life.

In 1867 she married Samuel S. Mitchell of Morristown, New Jersey. Her husband, who seems to have been a rather restless and feckless fellow, combined an interest in oriental languages with the ambition to become a landscape painter. The couple decided to center their life in Europe and the Mediterranean. Life was inexpensive there, and they appreciated the artistic, cultural, and scholarly opportunities. After a brief stay in Lebanon, where Samuel studied language and Lucy began her exploration of archaeological sites, they settled in Germany, first in Leipzig and then in Berlin. The young couple cultivated members of the artistic and academic community wherever they lived. The European experience stimulated Lucy's interest in art history. She became an educated amateur and a resource, supplying family and friends in the United States with the latest art publications and reproductions.

She increasingly focused on ancient art and developed from an interested amateur to a serious scholar. A major stimulus for this growing commitment to classical archaeology was a series of lectures on ancient art by Professor Johannes Oberbeck that she attended in Leipzig during 1872-3. She began reading extensively on the subject and visiting the galleries and museums in Germany and elsewhere in Europe. By the mid 1870's the Mitchells were spending extended periods of time in Italy. She mastered the galleries of Rome and attended meetings of the British-American Archaeological Society. By 1876 she felt sufficiently confident in her archaeological knowledge to present lectures on ancient sculpture in the Roman galleries. Her audience was interested lay people, especially women. Such gallery talks were becoming an important (and in some respects the only) medium by which women interested in archaeology could expound their ideas to a serious audience. It was a path to be followed by both Jane Harrison and Eugenie Sellers Strong.

The lectures were well received. They especially attracted the attention of the American ambassador in Rome, George Perkins Marsh. He suggested that she expand them into a book on ancient sculpture. The project appealed to her, and she began serious preparation. That involved intensive library work, further museum trips and consultation with the best archaeological authorities, especially in Germany. The Germans appreciated her professionalism and seriousness of purpose and opened their libraries and collections to her. The acknowledgements in the preface to her book include the greatest names in later nineteenth century German classical archaeology.

She set about writing a history of ancient sculpture from the Egyptians to Constantine. Preliminary studies appeared in the Century Magazine, and she also wrote for The New York Times on archaeological discoveries. She completed the manuscript at Marion on the south shore of Massachusetts in September of 1883. It was published that year by Dodd, Mead, and Company in New York, and in London by Kegan, Paul and Company. The dedication was to the memory of George P. Marsh who had died in 1882.

Physically it was an ambitious book of over 700 pages of text, documentation, and bibliography. Technically it stood at a point of transition in the history of classical archaeological publication. The main volume included nearly three hundred illustrations and was accompanied by supplementary collection of plates. However, many of the illustrations were old-fashioned woodcuts that conveyed only a vague visual sense of the monument discussed. Mitchell still relied very heavily on detailed verbal descriptions and discussions of works of art considered.

Intellectually it was also a very ambitious work. Mitchell had known the world of the Near East before she had studied Greece and Rome and she provided a detailed, sensitive, and on the whole sympathetic account of the art of Egypt, Assyria, and other cultures of the eastern Mediterranean. She certainly appreciated the distinctive contribution of Greece to the development of ancient art, but she seriously discussed the role that interaction with old Mediterranean civilizations had played in its artistic genesis. In that she contrasted with the emerging generation of Angle-American archaeologists who would exaggerate the isolated genius of Greek civilization.

Mitchell took pains to combine detailed discussions of ancient written sources on Greek and Roman artistic production with the most recent archaeological discoveries. In this she reflected the influence of such mentors as Heinrich von Brunn and Ernest Curtius. The result is a sensitive narrative of artists creating art in a complex social, political, and cultural scene rather than a technical discussion of a limited range of monuments. She took pains to include the latest German, French, and British archaeological discoveries and includes an impressive array of examples from both public and private collections. More than a century of new archaeological discoveries and new interpretations have made many parts of her discussion outdated, but for a work produced in the early days of scientific archaeology, it still must be regarded as an impressive achievement.

The book was received with the seriousness that it deserved. Edward Robinson, probably the leading classical archaeological authority in America at the time, lauded what her work was doing for classical archaeology in America. Reviews appeared in Germany, Britain, and the United States. Adolf Furtwangler praised her full scholarly presentations and her use of the latest archaeological discoveries. Jane Harrison wrote a long and thoughtful review for The Academy. She disagreed with certain interpretations, especially with Mitchell's positive evaluations on Pergamene art. However, she judged it the best book yet published on Greek art, and emphasized, ironically, to her English audience the fact that this pioneering work in classical archaeology had been produced by an American woman.

The only negative review appeared in The Nation written by William J. Stillman, an artist and journalist also very knowledgeable about Greek art. Mitchell dismissed him as one of the 'old school' who had "not kept up with the latest research." Behind some of his criticisms lay their disagreements over the archaeological worth of the Cesnola collection, recently acquired by The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Mitchell's view on the virtues and limits of that collection appears today to be a balanced and fair one. The dispute with Stillman had its own ironies, since they both represented the last of the archaeological amateurs in a scholarly world that would be dominated by German educated professionals like her own brother John Wright.

Lucy Mitchell was in the prime of life when her book was published, and she looked forward to other research projects. As she wrote to her brother, "I do not feel like looking back. Life is too strong, too impulsive." Her new professional standing was acknowledged in 1884, when she became the second woman elected to the Imperial German Archaeological Institute. She had begun research on a book on Greek vase painting, a topic of increasing interest to classical archaeologists. She consulted closely with Adolf Furtwangler on the subject. She even studied photography, hoping to use that research tool on a planned trip to Greece. Lucy Mitchell was also interested in promoting the teaching of archaeology in America, working through her brother, whose career was advancing rapidly. She felt that the future of Classics in American colleges and universities lay in the combined teaching of the monuments and the literary texts.

The future looked promising. However, in the winter of 1886 her health suddenly collapsed. A rest period in Switzerland proved futile, and she died in Lausanne on March 10, 1888. The New York Times published a full, laudatory obituary. It emphasized the importance of her recent book on ancient sculpture “which has already found a place among the most important and valued books of reference on ancient art.” However, it was Lucy Mitchell’s fate to be forgotten in the rapidly changing world of American classical archaeology. She was a woman, and she was an amateur at a time in which males with college and university educations and often with German degrees were shaping the newly emerging discipline. Her own brother, John Wright, represented that new pattern, and his career went from Dartmouth through Johns Hopkins to Harvard, even though he never published anything as ambitious and complex as his sister. She sensed the problem of her gender in the emerging world of American archaeological professionalism, exclaiming painfully to her brother about one of his scholarly gatherings, “Would that I were a man. Then I’d attend the meeting and be of still more service.” Subsequent American general publications in classical archaeology reflect her undeserved marginalization. Her volume received a passing mention in the Harold Fowler and James Wheeler’s A Handbook of Greek Archaeology. In Rufus Richardson’s A History of Greek Sculpture, a volume ironically dedicated to her brother, it is not even cited. While these two volumes benefited from a generation of new archaeologists, they lost the complex cultural view of ancient art that made Lucy Mitchell’s work so distinctive.