

Elizabeth Titzel Riefstahl
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ELIZABETH TITZEL RIEFSTAHL by Diane Guzman

Elizabeth Riefstahl was born in Butler, Pennsylvania on March 8, 1889, to Doctor Walter Randolph Titzel and Molly Davis Titzel. Both of Elizabeth's parents were graduates of Thiel College in Pennsylvania. Elizabeth, and her two brothers, Walter R. and Vance grew up in Chicago where their father practiced general medicine for 55 years.

Elizabeth attended the Chicago Public Schools until 1904, and completed her elementary education at Saint Clara's Academy in 1905. She boarded at the Maryland College for Women, a finishing school, from 1905 to 1908 before enrolling at the University of Chicago, from which she received her Bachelor of Arts degree in Classics, Summa cum Laude in 1911. She became a member of Phi Beta Kappa in her junior year in 1910.

After graduation, Elizabeth began teaching English composition, which she called "English zero", on a temporary basis at the University of Chicago. After a single academic quarter, she abandoned teaching to follow her true calling, writing. Her first assignments were varied, writing for a diversity of publications such as *The Contractor*, a trade-paper, the *Chicago Evening Post*, *The Dial*, and little stories for the *Chicago Daily News*. She occasionally published verses in one newspaper or other and once managed to place an article in *The Delineator*. During World War I, she went to Washington D.C. to do publicity for the United States Children's Bureau.

Shortly after the end of World War I, probably in 1919, Elizabeth found the job that would set her on the track of her life's work. She joined the editorial staff of *Asia: the American Magazine on the Orient*, and in 1922 she went to the Near East for the first time on assignment for that periodical. At that time, she was a single woman, 33 years old, traveling unchaperoned

around Jordan and Palestine, areas dominated by societies hostile to the free movement of women. Elizabeth also faced the threat of physical attack from desert tribes which periodically raided permanent settlements. This assignment produced two articles published in *Asia*, "Beyond Jordan I and II" (January and February 1923) and "The Too Much Promised Land" (April 1923). She was not yet concerned with the antiquities of Palestine and Jordan but with their current events. Elizabeth keenly observed the growing social and political conflicts in this volatile region including the settlement of western Jewish immigrants in the area that would ultimately become Israel, and the Jordanian attempts to rebuild an infrastructure abandoned 1500 years before. Elizabeth interviewed Bedouins, bureaucrats, soldiers and Emirs to learn the realities of their lives. Her insights into the potential struggles of the pre-natal Jewish State are nothing short of prophetic.

When she returned to the United States she undertook various free-lance and ghostwriting assignments for a couple of years. It was certainly during this period that Elizabeth met her future husband, Dr. Rudolf A. Meyer Riefstahl. Nothing is known for certain about how they met. A Riefstahl family story relates that they met by chance in Vermont. It seems more likely that their writing about the Middle East would have caused their paths to cross.

Rudolf was born into an academic family in Munich in 1880 to Professor Wilhelm Meyer aus Speyer and Pauline Riefstahl. Wilhelm Meyer was professor of Classical and Medieval Latin Philology at the University of Göttingen. Rudolf eventually changed his name to Riefstahl to avoid confusion caused by the common surname "Meyer."

Rudolf earned the degree of Doctor of Philosophy from the University of Strassburg in 1903. He went to Paris and taught German at the Sorbonne until 1911. A significant event for his future career occurred in 1910 when he was appointed secretary-general of an exposition of Islamic art in Munich. From that time on, his scholarly focus remained on the arts of the Islamic world. Stranded in England in 1915, he eventually found his way to the United States where his

first job was the directorship of an exhibition of historic textiles for the National Silk Convention held in Paterson, New Jersey. During the next nine years, he held various positions across the United States until 1924, when he joined the newly founded faculty of the Institute of Fine Arts, the graduate school of art history of New York University. Elizabeth and Rudolf were married in Chicago on October 27, 1924. As early as May 1925, they got a joint passport and began their practice of always traveling together. Even the births of their two children did not keep Elizabeth at home. Their daughter Marian was born on April 26, 1926, in New York City. Their son, Rudolph, was born in 1929 a celebrity because he was the first American baby born in Turkey after its institution of a new law providing that children born in Turkey to foreigners shall be Turkish citizens.

Between 1924 and 1936, the Riefstahl family either visited or resided in Turkey, Egypt, Syria, Palestine, Jordan and Italy. Elizabeth and Rudolf worked as a scholarly team throughout their marriage. In the summer of 1925 they made their first expedition to Constantinople and Anatolia. They visited Egypt and made a second expedition to Anatolia in 1926 gathering material on Seljuq architecture. They lived in Constantinople between 1927 and 1929. In addition to research in Turkey, Syria, Palestine and Jordan, Rudolf lectured at Robert College and the American Women's College in Constantinople. The family settled in Rome when Rudolf was appointed fellow to the Research Institute of the College Art Association. They returned to New York in 1932 but traveled to Italy in the summer of 1934 to study the oriental influence in the decorative arts in southern Italy on a fellowship from the Guggenheim Foundation.

Years of study produced the monographs *Turkish Architecture in Southwestern Anatolia* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931; *Catalogue of Persian and Indian Miniature Paintings forming the Private Collection of Darken Khan Kelekian* [exhibition] February 6 -- March 3, 1934, Detroit Institute of Arts, 1934. Their collaboration produced articles in *Art Studies*, *Art Bulletin*, *Dedalo*, *Roma* and other art publications. Elizabeth worked closely with

Rudolf, assisting him in the organization of the data he collected and the editing of his publications. Unquestionably, it would have been impossible for Rudolf to have produced as much as he did without Elizabeth's aid. This collaboration occurred during the years of their marriage between 1924 and 1936, when Rudolf met his untimely death when he succumbed to pneumonia on December 31, 1936.

The years of her marriage were productive for Elizabeth, contributing to her scholarly and professional development. The process of assisting her husband made her into an expert in her own right. At the time of her husband's death, Elizabeth was described as an authority on the history of art who had contributed immensely to his success.

At the dawn of 1937, Elizabeth found herself on the brink of the next phase of her life. Three years earlier on November 30, 1934, The Brooklyn Museum opened the Wilbour Library of Egyptology, named for Charles Edwin Wilbour, a pioneer American Egyptologist, who lived between 1833 and 1896. Because Wilbour's son and three daughters were childless, they decided to endow a library and department of Egyptology to preserve their father's collections of books, papyri and antiquities. Although the Wilbour Library was inaugurated in 1934, it was not ready to begin functioning until 1937 because it was being used as the reading room of the Museum's Art Reference Library during its renovation. This new Egyptological library needed a librarian, and Elizabeth was hired to do this job on July 12, 1937. She already had a relationship with the Museum that dated to the years of her marriage when she and her husband no doubt collected works of Near Eastern art. In 1924 and 1927, Rudolf donated two Islamic textiles to The Brooklyn Museum, and in March of 1937, Elizabeth sold three Islamic objects to the Museum. Between 1937 and 1974, Elizabeth either sold or donated several pieces to the Museum, including pages of Islamic manuscripts, Egyptian antiquities, 20th century prints, Islamic pottery, textiles, Japanese paintings and Russian icons. Her letters reveal that some of her sales were necessitated by financial needs like the education of her children.

Elizabeth's work in the Wilbour Library of Egyptology proved to be both a challenge and an opportunity. She began by creating a classification system, loosely based on the Library of Congress system, to organize the book collection. At the same time, she began augmenting the book and periodical collections. Between 1896, the year Wilbour died, and 1934, when the Wilbour Library of Egyptology opened, few, if any titles had been added to the collection. Not only did she almost comprehensively fill in the gaps, but also she found and acquired many older publications that Wilbour had not owned. The Library adopted the philosophy to acquire and fully catalog all scholarly literature devoted to the study of ancient Egypt.

Up to this point in her life and career, Elizabeth had worked in the areas of the Medieval and Modern Middle East. Now her work involved her in the study of pharaonic and early Christian Egypt. She clearly applied herself to this subject matter as she had to Islamic art when she collaborated with her husband. Her growing expertise was soon made manifest when her first Brooklyn Museum publication appeared in the *Brooklyn Museum Quarterly* in 1938 (see bibliography below). The editorial skills she developed in her earlier life soon came to the service of The Brooklyn Museum. She is first listed as the Associate Editor of the *Brooklyn Museum Quarterly* in the issue dated January 1939. She continued her work of acquiring and cataloging books for the Wilbour Library of Egyptology, and editing and writing for Brooklyn Museum publications until the outbreak of World War II. The entry of the United States into the war in 1941 caused radical changes in the Museum. All of the eligible men were inducted into the armed services, including the director of the Museum and John D. Cooney, the Curator of Ancient Art. As Wilbour Librarian, Elizabeth had always worked closely with Cooney. When he entered the United States Army early in 1942, a prolific correspondence between the two of them began. It is a remarkable collection of documentation of the workings of The Brooklyn Museum between 1942 and 1946 preserved in the Brooklyn Museum of Art Archives. While Cooney trained in the United States and then served in England, they exchanged letters two or three times a week, chiefly

discussing Department business in particular and Museum business in general.

During the war years, Elizabeth took over the practical running of the Department of Ancient Art. She kept Cooney informed about everything that was happening and asked his opinions and even consent about most things. Most notably she always deferred to Cooney in matters of aesthetic judgment, especially as they pertained to potential acquisitions. He always made such decisions, even while he was away at the war. Many letters describe her visits to dealers and auctions. When a serious decision was to be made, however, she always sought Cooney's opinion and deferred to his judgment. The tone of her letters suggests that she did this willingly and even happily as she respected his scholarship and connoisseurship over her own.

The Museum evacuated many objects to a safer location right after the United States declared war. When the objects returned in early 1944, she supervised their reinstallation. When a new object entered the collection, she incorporated it into the galleries. She also wrote, edited and supervised the production of several books and articles (see bibliography below). Her book on toilet articles from ancient Egypt established her as the acknowledged expert of this area of ancient Egyptian life. She was in great demand as a lecturer both in the Museum and out. She jokes with Cooney in her letters about her "Beauty Secrets" talk. Her work as Wilbour Librarian was necessarily curtailed because most books published in Europe were virtually unobtainable during the war. Cooney's service in England proved very useful in getting at least the British publications. He was also successful in finding out-of-print books and buying duplicate copies from the libraries of British Egyptologist like Sir Alan Gardiner.

When Cooney returned to Brooklyn, the Museum acknowledged Elizabeth for her remarkable service by appointing her Assistant Curator of Ancient Art, in addition to her position of Wilbour Librarian. She managed to obtain almost all of the European publications unavailable during the war, making the Wilbour Library more complete than many continental European libraries in Egyptology.

Elizabeth's next ten years at The Brooklyn Museum consisted of her accustomed tasks of running the Wilbour Library, writing and editing, and accomplishing the major curatorial work of renovating the galleries. Soon after the war, the Museum and the City of New York, the landlord of The Brooklyn Museum made the commitment to renovate the third floor. A new Lecture Hall was planned; old, out of fashion plaster casts of Classical Greek sculptures would be retired; and the Egyptian collection would be given more space. In 1947, the Museum bought the Abbott collection of antiquities, which had been on loan from the New-York Historical Society since 1937. It is a large collection containing many magnificent pieces that needed to be incorporated into the collection. At the same time, Cooney was adding new objects of the highest quality on a yearly basis. Elizabeth was deeply involved in the planning and execution of this massive project. In 1948, she was given leave to visit European collections and in 1953 she visited Egypt while Cooney was serving as Director of the American Research Center in Egypt's Cairo office on a Fullbright scholarship. When she returned from Egypt in the spring of 1953, she single-handedly supervised the re-installation of the objects and wrote the great majority of the labels. The galleries opened in October 1953 to enthusiastic reviews and much appreciation for Elizabeth's work.

Elizabeth was diverted from her normal Museum activities, in December 1953, when she went to Hollywood to serve for two months as technical advisor on the movie *The Egyptian*. She defined a movie "technical advisor" as someone called in from outside the movie industry to advise on script, settings, costumes and properties to make the film as authentic as possible. The experience taught her much she did not know about Egyptian archaeology. She had never given a moment's thought to what an Egyptian market was like or how the army was organized. The producers posed thousands of questions including the order of an Egyptian royal procession and exactly what went on at a royal audience. She found most of the answers and was relieved to discover that there were some questions to which no one knew the answer. The production credits

point out her ability to create the overall illusion of Egyptian life where absolute archaeological accuracy would appear silly to the movie-going audience. Elizabeth expressed to the producers that her work with them had been one of the most interesting and rewarding experiences of her life.

Upon returning to the Museum in early 1954, Elizabeth resumed her usual activities and published several articles in a variety of scholarly journals. Late in 1955, she asked permission of the Museum's Governing Committee to retire as of September 30, 1956. The Committee reluctantly gave its permission but granted her the title Associate Curator Emeritus of the Wilbour Collection on December 7, 1955.

Her retirement from The Brooklyn Museum by no means brought an end to her Egyptological career. She essentially switched jobs with Bernard V. Bothmer who was appointed to replace her as Assistant Curator. Bothmer had been the Executive Secretary of the American Research Center in Egypt (ARCE). Elizabeth moved to South Essex, MA to live with her daughter Marian. Because ARCE was then headquartered in Boston, it was reasonably convenient for Elizabeth to take on this job. She was ideally suited for the work because it required organizational, personal and editorial skills. One of the jobs of the Executive Secretary was to put together the Newsletter (NARCE). She is called the Executive Secretary elect in NARCE 23 (January 1957) very shortly after her retirement. She devoted much time and energy to ARCE. It had been founded in 1950 to support the work of American scholars working in Egypt. Its Cairo office opened in February 1951. As ARCE secretary she was up on everything in the small world of American Egyptology in the fifties and early sixties. She knew everyone and was friends with many. During this period, she corresponded with Bothmer often and sought his advise on several aspects of running the organization from prying reports out of the Cairo office director to organizing the program of the annual meeting. It appeared that it was she who was actually running the Center. Bothmer referred to her as the most active ARCE officer. She held the

position of Executive Secretary until 1964 but continued as the editor of the Newsletter until 1969 when the Center moved from Cambridge to Princeton, NJ.

The Brooklyn Museum had not entirely let her go despite her retirement. She continued to edit the *Brooklyn Museum Bulletin* until June 1957. She received a yearly stipend from the Museum to supplement her modest pension. In return, she edited the publishing projects of the Department from her home in South Essex. Most notable among these projects was the catalog for the exhibition *Egyptian Sculpture of the Late Period* that opened in the Brooklyn Museum in 1960. This impressive volume of 197 pages and 134 photographic plates was the first of its kind in terms of scope and completeness in the field of ancient Egyptian art.

The other great project of this period was the writing of *Thebes in the Time of Amunhotep III*. The University of Oklahoma Press was publishing a series called *The Centers of Civilization* and the editor had asked William C. Hayes of the Metropolitan Museum of Art to recommend an author for ancient Egypt. Thus Elizabeth was approached by the press in February 1959 and she accepted the challenge although she had never written a book. During the course of her research and writing she often sought advice especially from Cooney and Bothmer. She came down to Brooklyn several times to do research and presumably to discuss her ideas as she had done via letters. When the book appeared in 1964, it received an excellent review in *AJA* 69 (1965) p. 70-1 from the Egyptologist Edward Terrace.

She was clearly encouraged by the success of the book because she went to Egypt in early 1965 on an ARCE fellowship to research Memphis with the plan to write another book in the series. I have found no evidence that she ever began writing this book.

In September 1967 she moved from South Essex to Cambridge, MA. Her continued contact with The Brooklyn Museum is evidenced by the fact that in 1969 she came back to Brooklyn at the bidding of Bothmer who by then had become the Curator of Ancient Art. She was now 80 years old. Bothmer took care of her like she was his grandmother. Her living

accommodations were seen to by the Museum, and some one or other of the staff of the Department was always looking after her. Her job was to edit every publication produced by the Department or its staff. She worked on the major exhibition catalog *Akhenaten and Nefertiti* (1973) authored by Cyril Aldred. She sat and read manuscripts all day in her own corner of the Wilbour Library. As can be seen from her bibliography, she even found time to publish a few articles of her own.

During these last years at The Brooklyn Museum she was indefatigable in her determination to continue leading a productive life. She endured hip operations and eye cataract surgery in order to continue working. In the summer of 1974, her 86th year, Elizabeth and the then Wilbour Librarian, Eleanor Wedge, traveled to England for three weeks to visit collections, colleagues and friends. They even did a little sightseeing. In the fall of the same year, she traveled to Toronto to see an exhibition of Chinese art with her friend and colleague Nora Scott, formerly of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Elizabeth submitted her second letter of resignation to Mr. Bothmer on September 22, 1975. She complained of being too old, half-blind and frankly not greatly interested in what she was doing. She had been offered a place in the home of her son in Ferndale, MI, outside Detroit, and desired to spend her remaining days in the bosom of her family. She left The Brooklyn Museum after a splendid party attended by the whole staff of the Museum and by as many of her old friends who could manage it.

She was tired of editing but not of writing. She continued to work on the second edition of *Patterned Textiles* and on the biography of Henry Abbott, whose collection of Egyptian antiquities purchased by The Brooklyn Museum from the New-York Historical Society in 1947. Unfortunately, she never finished either project.

She continued to correspond with many people, both personally and professionally. Her Abbott research accounts for a significant amount. Scholars wrote to her, sometimes via The

Brooklyn Museum, to ask her questions referring to her publications and related areas of research. On such occasions, she missed the resources of The Brooklyn Museum and once in 1977 she commented to Mr. Bothmer that she wished she had never left Brooklyn!

Mr. Bothmer did coax her back to the Museum for brief visits in the late 1970's to finish the editing of the catalog for the exhibition *Africa in Antiquity* (1979). During the 1980's, Elizabeth led a quiet life in Michigan with occasional excursions to the Detroit Institute of Arts for example.

Elizabeth died at the age of 97 on September 15, 1986. Although she never excavated herself, her organizing and building the Wilbour Library of Egyptology created a resource that continues to support the research needs not only in the New York City area and the United States, but throughout the world. Upon her death, a memorial fund was established at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in her name to support the work and growth of the Wilbour Library of Egyptology.

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Elizabeth Riefstahl

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