

Appreciation

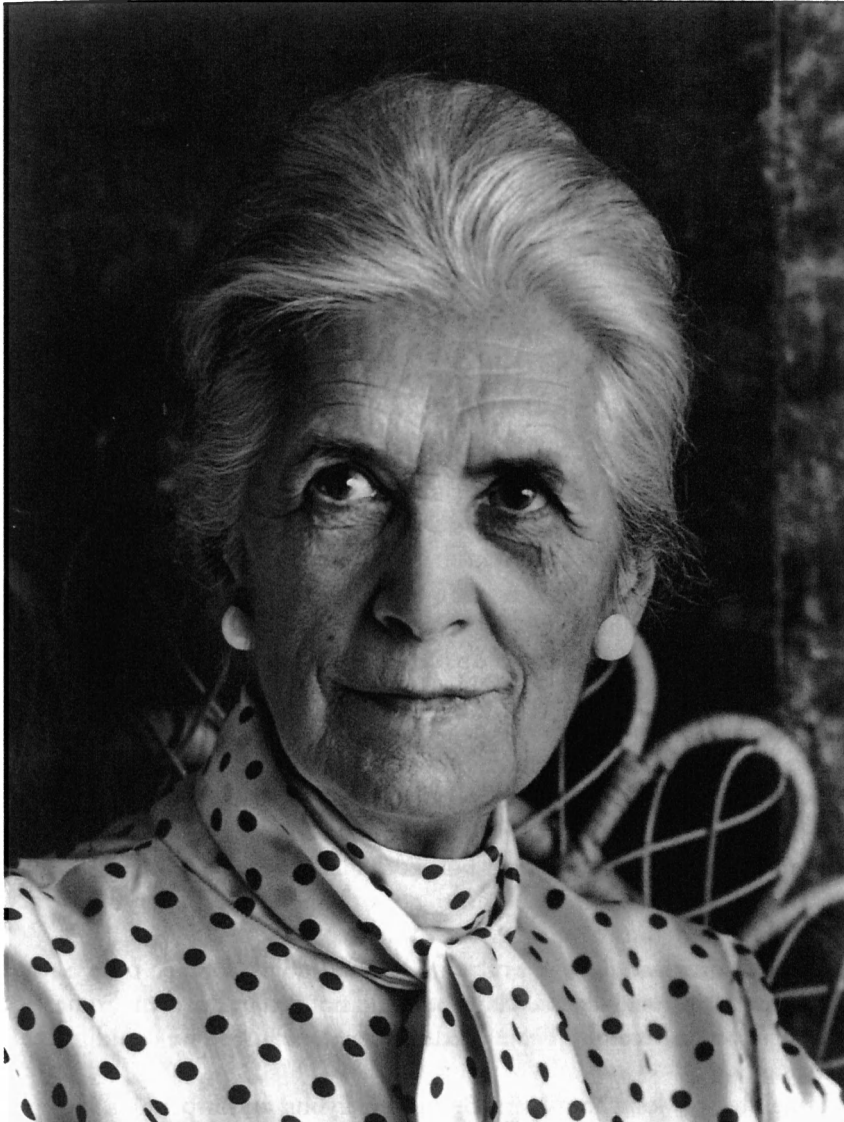
Adelyn Dohme Breeskin (1896–1986)

Charles C. Eldredge

At age eighty-eight, in a reluctant concession to her advancing years, Adelyn Breeskin—“Mrs. B,” as she was affectionately known to generations of students and colleagues—took up a walking stick to accompany her on her daily rounds at the National Museum of American Art. When glimpsed from a certain angle, Adelyn with her cane bore an uncanny resemblance to Degas’s portrait of Mary Cassatt in the galleries of the Louvre. The effect was striking, if unintended, for by that time Adelyn’s lifelong study of Cassatt’s work made the kinship natural, and her authoritative publications had helped ensure Cassatt’s place as one of our best-known and beloved artists.

Appropos her most familiar subject, Adelyn Breeskin once wrote: “The art . . . circumscribed her life and engrossed it, and to separate her life from her art would be impossible. Therefore, they must be considered together as the story of an American woman whose high ambitions overcame her limitations of precedent and sex and the era into which she was born, to drive her on to a place in the foremost ranks of creative art endeavor of her time.” As with the artist, so too with the author, whose remarkable career stretched over sixty-eight years, beginning at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1918, continuing through her eventful directorships of the Baltimore Museum of Art and the Washington Gallery of Modern Art, the presidency of the Association of Art Museum Directors, and twenty-two years’ service as the senior curatorial advisor at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American Art.

Adelyn’s keen eye and wide-ranging interests led her, and us, into many fruitful fields. Her tenacious belief in the art of the immediate present and of her own city, region, and country provided a stand against those who would exalt the distant or exotic over the native and near and offered support and motivation to many of our most creative artists. (I suspect it also helped keep her young for so long, or, as one colleague put it, “eternally in mid-career.”) Before it was fashionable, she recognized, for instance, the importance of a Milton Avery, Alfred Maurer, or Mark Tobey and featured their achievements in exhibitions that contributed greatly to their appreciation and reappraisal. As commissioner of the American Pavilion at the 1960 Venice Biennale, she introduced modern masters Franz Kline, Hans Hofmann, Philip Guston, and Theodore Roszak to an international audience. Her rediscovery of the paintings of expatriates Romaine Brooks and William H. Johnson greatly enriched the history of American art and the heritage of women and minorities.



During her long career she was often recognized for her contributions to the field. In December 1985, she received the Smithsonian Institution's highest award, the Gold Medal for Exceptional Service. On 15 July the following year, Adelyn's friends—over two hundred strong, from all over the United States—gathered at the Smithsonian to honor again this national treasure on her ninetieth birthday. Fond tributes from colleagues around the world were shared at that festival party. At the celebration's end, we bade her farewell on a European holiday for which she would soon depart. Sadly, Adelyn was never to return to the myriad projects she had in various stages of development, for on 24 July 1986, at beautiful Lake Garda, she suddenly took ill, and within a few hours she was peacefully gone from this world.

Perhaps the best summation of this remarkable colleague came from one of the authorities on the subject. "I wish to thank my mother," wrote Jean Breeskin Timbrell on Adelyn's last birthday,

for three very important lessons she taught her daughters. First, her career, which has been a source of inspiration to so many young people, convinced us that no field was closed to women and we were therefore free to choose our professions on the basis of our talents and interests. The second lesson is to

value work as an integral part of life; work one loves fills each day with meaning and joy. The third lesson was that, when the chips are down, it is only prudent to utilize every advantage at hand. In other words, at crucial budget hearings, know your facts—but wear your most becoming and stylish Lilly Daché hat.

Years ago, Adelyn Breeskin once appended a postscript to a letter addressed to another museum director, expressing her agreement with Oliver Wendell Holmes that "a man should share the action and passion of his time at the peril of being judged not to have lived." That she lived so long and so well is a source of comfort and pride to her family and friends and to her colleagues in this profession, to which she brought such distinction.

This essay was originally delivered as a eulogy to the Association of Art Museum Directors meeting at Houston, Texas, on 21 January 1987.