

Women Medievalists and the Academy

Edited by Jane Chance



WOMEN
MEDIEVALISTS



and the Academy

EDITED BY JANE CHANCE

THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN PRESS

This book was published with the support of
the Office of the Dean of Humanities at Rice University

The University of Wisconsin Press
1930 Monroe Street
Madison, Wisconsin 53711

www.wisc.edu/wisconsinpress/

3 Henrietta Street
London WC2E 8LU, England

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5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Women medievalists and the academy / edited by Jane Chance.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-299-20750-1 (hardcover : alk. paper)

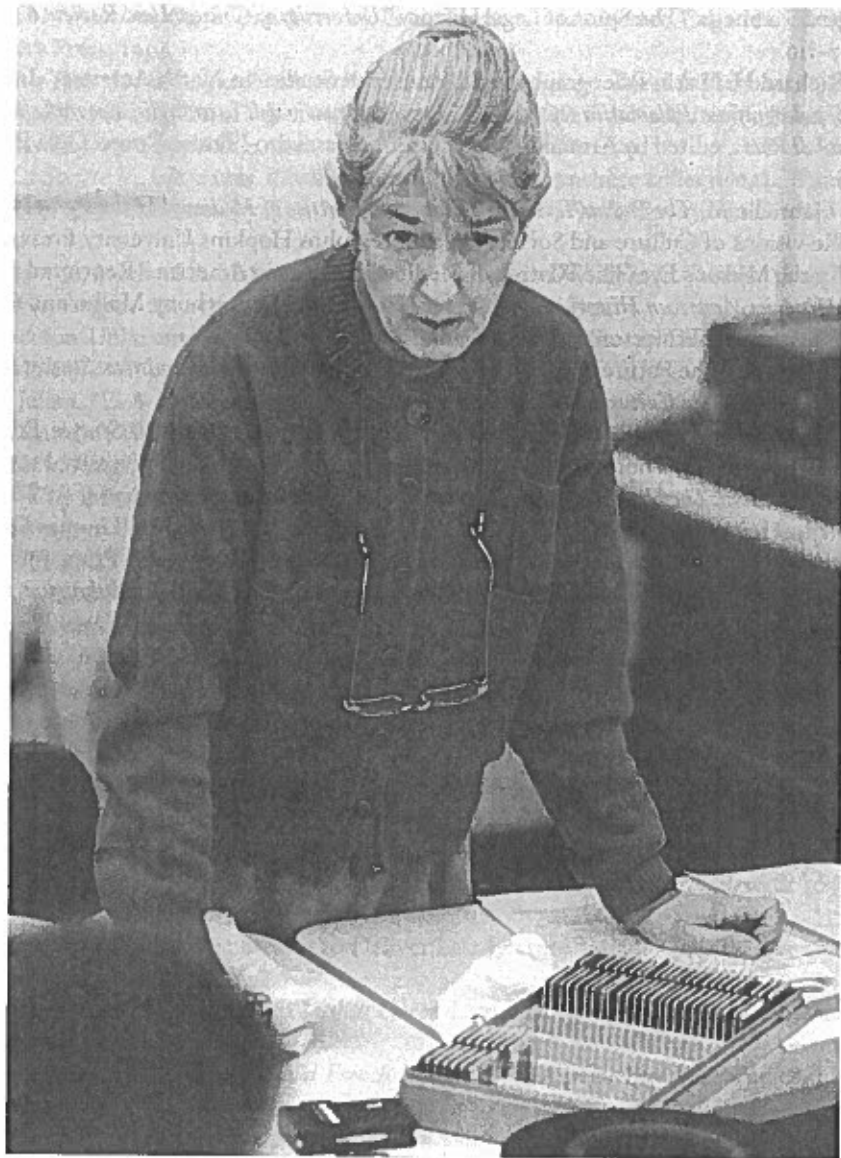
1. Women medievalists—Biography. 2. Middle Ages—Bio-bibliography.

I. Chance, Jane, 1945—

DT16.5.W66 2005

940.1'092'2—dc22

2004025225



CHAPTER 67



Ars Longa, Vita Brevis (1932–)

MEREDITH PARSONS LILlich

ONCE UPON A TIME there was no penicillin, no plastic, and no pizza. No interstate highways and no jet planes; no microwaves, no frozen foods or freezers, no clothes dryers. No nylon, acrylic, Lycra, polyester; no videos or even TV, no long-playing records (and that was before tape cassettes). No battery wristwatches or ballpoint pens. No Xerox machines (just carbon paper), no electric typewriters; no fax machines, and, of course, no e-mail.

I was a child of the Second World War—born during the Depression in an unquestionably middle-class neighborhood that no longer exists on the south side of Chicago. A child of this land: my father's family had arrived in Massachusetts in 1635, and my mother's in Quebec about the same time, Normandy peasants serving the Jesuits. My parents had both graduated from the University of Illinois—the first of their families, as far as I know, to go to college. My father, who employed his journalistic training to run a small advertising business, became interested in modern design when I was small; in his enthusiasm he actually bought a couple pieces of Noguchi furniture (which I still have) and hired John Lloyd Wright (son of Frank) to remodel a small summer cottage near Valparaiso, Indiana.¹ Polio having arrived at the Chicago beaches, I spent all my summers there from age four to seventeen. My mother was a lifelong homemaker who did my father's bookkeeping but never received a paycheck in her life. When I was very young she learned to weave at Hull House; as a suburbanite much, much later in life, she gave classes for ladies and studied at the school of the Art Institute—where Lenore Tawney once arranged for her to “substitute teach” her classes.²

Growing up smart and female presented challenges. My grandmother and mother taught me that women had to make the family decisions but that the real trick was to learn how to plant the ideas with the head of the house and get him to think they

were his own. The girls' magazines of the day cautioned me to hide my brain whenever possible and offered me the career choices that, they decreed, were the only ones available to females who could not be full-time homemakers: nurse, teacher, or librarian. Nursing repelled me only slightly more than school teaching, but since I loved books I assumed I would have to be a librarian.

The city elementary schools solved the problem I presented by skipping me ahead, a semester at a time (since during the war years there were classes starting in September and again in January), until at the fourth skip my parents complained. I missed the multiplication tables, which I had to drill with my father, and the geography of the states (forty-eight in those days), which I never did learn. I was, however, allowed to give the valedictory speech when my primary class moved to high school—something to do with the Founding Fathers and America as the melting pot and Chicago as the hog-butcher of the world, as I recall.

The public high school's solution was different. In place of free or study periods in my schedule, I was enrolled in more major courses, ultimately six instead of the usual three or four. When graduation time arrived, I was again, statistically, the valedictorian, but since I was female—and the next candidate was male—we reigned as covaldictorians.

I flew to Oberlin College like a bird out of a cage. Oberlin, with its venerable history as the first college to grant undergraduate degrees to women, was a rare and special place in the early 1950s; later it seemed to me as if they didn't notice whether you were a boy or a girl until you graduated. For the first time in my life everything I really cherished was not only tolerated but enthusiastically encouraged and rewarded. I felt that I had been born. Not reborn; life-before-Oberlin seemed a gray, disquieting morass from which I had emerged, unexpectedly, into the full sunlight. I had gone to Oberlin as a good school where I could also pursue voice lessons, since singing had been an acceptable activity for a midwestern girl-child, but as a freshman I couldn't pass required music theory; I was tutored and given a C, provided I would drop the major. What Oberlin provided to fill the void was serious and quality instruction in art history from mentors such as Wolfgang Stechow and Ellen Johnson.³ When I graduated Phi Beta Kappa with a double major in art history and English, the only thought in my head was to go to Europe—something not possible during the war. My mentors helped me apply for and win one of the early Fulbrights—to Belgium, since I spoke French, and they thought I would have a better chance than in the heavy competition for France. I did also apply for and get a French government grant to Paris, but my mother insisted on Belgium because Fulbrights were “safer”—chaperoned by the United States government. My mentors had helped me craft a research project about the Belgian painter James Ensor, but when I arrived in Brussels at age twenty-one, the Belgian Fulbright committee would not hear of it and enrolled me in the Université libre de Bruxelles.

The university had no more light, heat, or amenities than the rest of Europe in those years, and several of my professors made the trip up from the Sorbonne once

every three or four weeks to lecture. My salvation was the local Belgian professor in my schedule: Suzanne Sulzberger, a specialist in sixteenth-century northern painting.⁴ I found out many decades later that her brother had died in a Nazi concentration camp. She took one look at this young American naïve, and told me I was *not* to stick around the cold dark halls in Brussels but to *travel*. In postwar Europe third-class train travel was cheap, and travel I did, visiting those museums, cathedrals, and monuments that were then open from Oslo to Rome, Granada to occupied Vienna. When I got back from one of my trips, Mlle. Sulzberger and I would have tea, and the quiz would begin: "Where did you go?" "Venice." "Did you go to the Accadèmia?" "Yes." "What's in the first room? The second room?"

So far the Middle Ages have not been mentioned in this story. There weren't any in Chicago; my father had enrolled me in a children's art class with the Bauhaus theorist Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, and I had haunted the Art Institute during the period it was housing the world-class Picassos and Matisse's of the Chester Dale collection.⁵ My art history training at Oberlin had centered on early Renaissance through baroque (Stechow) and modern painting (Johnson). Traveling throughout Europe as a twenty-one-year-old Fulbright, I saw my first Gothic vaulted spaces. My life's research has been devoted to stained glass, and I can still vividly recall the first medieval windows I ever saw—it was on an early trip across the channel, in Canterbury—the north ambulatory windows, as I remember. I was transfixed. I had never dreamed anything so magnificent existed on earth, and when I found old sepia postcards of those windows for sale in the nave and read the captions, my only thought was "You can actually *study* these gorgeous things?" Some traveling buddy told me about the Sainte-Chapelle, where I went on my next trip out. And the rest, as they say, is history.

Well, not quite. On my return from the Fulbright, married to Richard Lillich, an Oberlin classmate, we headed for Cornell, where my husband attended law school.⁶ I worked in the art museum and then the art library, earning what was in those days called my "P.H.T.": Putting Hubby Through. As we would be there three—and only three—years, I took one course a semester, two during summer schools, and eked out an M.A. degree in art history during the same period my husband was in law school. I was their first grad student, and since no one knew much about the Middle Ages, much less about stained glass, they really didn't know what to do with me. I did research papers in undergrad courses and wrote my thesis from books, self-taught, and nobody knew enough to seriously criticize it. Cornell was not particularly supportive. One semester I had had a large and unexpected dental bill and couldn't pay my one-course tuition, so I went to the administration to plead my case, my grades record, and my three-year deadline. I was seated in the dean's office, and his first words to me were "Why do you want this degree? You're married!" Nothing in my Oberlin years had prepared me for such a confrontation, and I don't really recall what I did, except that it approached the hysterical. I got the course tuition money.

In 1958, with my husband's law degree and my M.A.—and a new baby daughter—we headed for New York and his beginning law-firm job. Very shortly, however, my

husband became restless with that routine and began a two-year program at New York University for a doctorate in law, preparatory to a law teaching career. I applied to Columbia's art history program, dirt poor and with a baby to mind, proposing to do my required work for the Ph.D. one course at a time and in the summers, as at Cornell. Part-time students were then as rare at Columbia as they had been at Cornell. Miraculously I was accepted. The chair was then Rudolf Wittkower, and many years later I learned that my Oberlin mentor, Stechow, who had known Wittkower in exile at the Warburg Institute in London, wrote to him and said, "Rudi, take care of her."⁷ And Rudi did. In order to make my two-year deadline I was allowed to break or bend every regulation in the graduate manual, postponing requirements that could be done from a distance—such as language exams—and concentrating on those for which residence was of the essence.

To my immense good fortune, Robert Branner was beginning his brilliant career as Columbia's medievalist, and Wittkower must have instructed him concerning my off-the-record special status.⁸ "Mr. B" (I could never bring myself to call him by his first name) was my height (five feet two inches) and living a research life at white heat. Role model, mentor, ultimately he was—as he identified himself in a phone call just before his tragically premature death—my "guardian angel." I had the great honor and responsibility to be the graduate student who spoke at his Columbia memorial service.

Branner was no feminist; our relationship existed on some other plane. One incident says it all. One day as we were returning to the campus from some seminar trip, he got on the subject of female graduate students and voiced the opinion that they should be encouraged to become art librarians, where they could best provide services for the (real) scholars in the field. Why is he telling me this? I thought with alarm! But as the conversation unfolded it became clear that *I* was not in his category of "female grad students."

Mr. B insisted on training me in Gothic architecture and sculpture and instructed me in the mysteries of the old Bibliothèque nationale reading room, the Sorbonne (how, and at what hour, to approach scholars like Marcel Aubert), and the photo archives of the postwar Monuments historiques. For stained glass, my heart's desire, he was content to arrange an interview with Louis Grodecki during one of the latter's trips to the United States. Grodecki was the most influential scholar, and nearly the only one, working in the field of French stained glass.⁹ The interview was in French and intended to produce a dissertation topic for me. After introductions Grodecki said to me: "What do you want to work on?" I responded that I wanted a single monument, and not in the early or High Gothic period but perhaps in the later thirteenth century. He said, "Saint-Père de Chartres." And that was to become my dissertation, my first book, and ultimately the root of my magnum opus on western French glass of 1250 to 1325.¹⁰ Grodecki promised to help me get photographs, and the interview was over. He returned to France, and I was on my own.

The dissertation took eleven years to come to term—another broken record in

the Columbia art history department—and in that time my life was to make a 180-degree turn.

We arrived in 1960 at Syracuse University, where my husband was to teach law. I was to be a “faculty wife” and shortly to have a second daughter. Work on my dissertation and various postponed Columbia exams went forward as time, money, and the fatigue level allowed. We spent the year 1963 in England, my husband on a research grant to London and Cambridge, the toddler in Montessori schools, the baby with a part-time nanny, and me (via Wittkower’s letters of introduction) putting in a few precious hours on my dissertation at the Warburg Institute and then Cambridge University Library. There, since I was typing at that point, they installed me in the little-used but frigid Lord Acton collection (“Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”) I typed chapter 1 on my nine-pound, portable, manual typewriter, in those gloves with the fingers cut off that street musicians use.

Upon our return to Syracuse we bought a little house (where I still live), and my husband left me.¹¹ I was faced with raising children aged about eight and four, a mortgaged house, a car held together by spit and Scotch tape, a folder full of my husband’s debts, and—oh yes—an unfinished dissertation. It was time for another miracle.

And lo! It came to pass. Into the chaos came a phone call from the chair of the Syracuse University art history department, William Fleming.¹² He introduced himself and said that he needed someone to teach a graduate seminar in medieval art, had called Rudolf Wittkower at Columbia, and had received the response: “Do you know Mrs. Lillich? She lives in Syracuse, New York.” (No Equal-Opportunity-Affirmative-Action in those days!) I taught the seminar (on Chartres sculpture) and was hired the following year (1968) full-time as an instructor (not having a Ph.D.); over a third of a century later I am still there, teaching medieval art and architecture. In time my daughters were both in school for the full day, and my dissertation was finally defended in 1969, when they were about eleven and seven. I thought then and have often thought since about an early study of academic women by the sociologist Eli Ginzberg, which concluded that women with two children had a chance for a career, but those with three or more most probably not.¹³

The 1970s and 1980s were, from our present perspective, a golden age for the support of scholarly research. While my children were young, we spent every summer abroad: Paris, of course, Poitiers, Dublin, the beach at Ostend, a small village in French Switzerland, the rugged Normandy coast, where the wind comes straight from Boston, a farmhouse in the peach fields outside of Verona, even the London suburbs one year. I took a graduate student along as a helper, and the requirements were that we could manage in French or English and rent a vacation house or apartment of some kind. During the month of the summer that my daughters spent with their father, I was free to devote myself to my summer research grant, and I had repeats of all kinds: American Philosophical Society, National Endowment for the Humanities, American Council of Learned Societies.

Through Grodecki, who wanted to know what everyone in stained glass was up

to, I had met Jean Lafond, the French scholar who is installed in my pantheon of heroes.¹⁴ I first came across his limpid French prose when locked in my ivory tower at Cornell producing my master's thesis. Lafond never held a teaching position, since he wrote but was never allowed to defend his Sorbonne dissertation. His family controlled the newspapers in Rouen, which had editorialized for the Vichy government. As I heard the story, which may be apocryphal, when Lafond handed in his doctoral thesis, his mentor put it on his desk where it was to remain — unread. Beyond Lafond's graceful writing style, his uncanny and never-failing eye, and his total devotion to stained glass, what I loved in him was his old-world graciousness and his indomitable spirit. When I discovered that, in the face of his difficulties, he had published something every single year but one, I made that my goal. (Well, some years it has been just a book review.) I felt, and feel, that I somehow owed it to him for his great skill, for his unfailing kindness, and for his example.

As everywhere in American academic life, medieval studies have waxed and waned at Syracuse University, as have graduate programs, medieval/Renaissance majors and students, research support, library resources, and so on. I quickly abandoned any idea of administrative power when, as appointed chair of a committee, I learned that the committee members (all male) had held a "smoker" the previous evening to decide what they would vote for. For the majority of my Syracuse years, women were exploited, poorly paid, and not readily promoted. Promotions I have achieved through my publication and grants records, but salary is something else. Academic poverty, of course, is always with us, but at a certain level it impacts on one's ability to seize opportunities for research and for high-profile career advancement. Scholarly publication has therefore been my arena. The university was moderately supportive of my requests for leaves for fellowships and with honorary awards (for graduate teaching in 1987, service to one's field in 1989, and exceptional academic achievement in 1999). Salary would have been more useful. Thus, for me the university has been a safe haven from which to raise my children and to plot my research, with that occasional bonus of self-education that comes along with the routine of teaching and, of course, the reward of the unpredictable appearance of a brilliant student.

When my children were launched into prep school and beyond, I was able to apply for research fellowships involving travel and residence elsewhere: the National Endowment for the Humanities (1976), the American Council of Learned Societies (1980-81), a senior Fulbright to Paris (1983), the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts at the National Gallery in Washington, D.C. (1987-88), and the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton (1988).¹⁵ And I was able to teach in my university's programs abroad, twice in Strasbourg (1984, 1991) and once in Florence (1985).

After my children (and now my four grandchildren), my research in French Gothic stained glass has always been the glue that holds my life together. The epiphany I experienced standing before that first Canterbury window in 1953 was not so much a new beginning as the final denouement of a Sherlock Holmes story, where all the chaotic pieces fall succinctly into place to reveal the truth. I was born with a medieval

aesthetic sense. If a thirteenth-century Frenchman wished to explain something beautiful he had seen, aesthetic language not yet having been developed, he would first tell you how much it cost, he would describe it as intricate and multicolored (many colors being automatically more beautiful than only one), and, finally, in desperation, he would impress upon you that it was light-passing or light-reflecting, shiny, translucent. Glass is the most beautiful and profound thing the Middle Ages produced, on their own terms, and so it has always seemed to me. Translucence is better! As a child I filled my room with tiny colored bottles and mirrors. The full-page illustration of gems in my children's dictionary was my favorite page. In the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago, one of my frequent haunts, I always saved the "jewel room" for last, absorbing all that light and color and sparkle before reeling out the door home-ward. Canterbury and the Sainte-Chapelle finally put a name and a direction to this inborn passion.

Stained glass is the monumental painting of the Gothic period, but it is much more than that. The medium of glass *is* the message.¹⁶ Two Christian metaphors are at play: God is light, and the church is the City of God, the heavenly Jerusalem. "Ego sum lux," said Christ. Light symbolism is basic to Augustine, and Scholasticism refined the differences between *lux* and *lumen*; light is not only the symbol of God but also his attribute, the action of God. Three themes are present: the mystery of translucence, the marvelous gemlike richness of glass, and the ideal of a building made with walls of light. Concerning translucence, if light is matter and glass is also another matter, how can one pass through the other without breaking it? Glass however is a matter different from others because it does not stop the light but allows itself to be penetrated. The connection to the Incarnation had been made by the mid-twelfth century. As for gemlike preciousness, everything about medieval glass encouraged this idea. Red stained glass was called ruby; the blue was called sapphire (for example, by Abbot Suger of Saint-Denis). Made of sand and wood ash transformed, via an unapproachable molten state, to the hard brilliance of gems (and nearly as expensive), glass assumed qualities associated with gems: magic powers, as described in the lapidaries, and sacred meaning, as in the pectoral of Aaron. The idea of a building with walls of light is a venerable biblical theme (Isaiah 54:11-12, Tobias 13:20, Apocalypse 21:18ff.), which returns us to the concept of the church (or any church) as God's abode, the heavenly Jerusalem. This conceit was extended to romances and the Grail literature (such as von Eschenbach's *Parzifal*), where chapels have walls of precious stones. The (contemporary) Sainte-Chapelle is such an artifact. For the first century of Gothic art, moreover, by "light" one did not mean foot-candles, intensity, wattage. As masons were able to enlarge window openings more and more, the glass that filled them became darker and more color-saturated. The concept of Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite is at work, identifying the light of God as incomprehensible, God as the Divine Gloom.

It is not really so surprising that I have worked and learned in isolation, since at the time I first saw that Canterbury window in 1953, the study of medieval stained glass was in its infancy. The reasons are obvious, if one thinks about it. The discipline

of art history itself is no older than photography, since serious visual comparison requires accurate images. The early decades of photography produced exquisitely precise exterior views of medieval monuments but scarcely anything useful for interiors because the available light was inadequate. Stained glass is normally located far from the eye, in nearly inaccessible locations, and shining artificial light on it (when interior lighting became available) is pointless and counterproductive. Glass lit from the front (that is, by surface light) turns dull and opaque to the eye.

The destruction of World War I alerted European nations in possession of stained glass treasures to remove and store them whenever time and circumstances allowed in the late 1930s, providing (during and after the war) the first chance for close-up photography under studio conditions, panel by panel. In France—which has more medieval stained glass than the rest of the world combined—this archive of photographs was only gradually being processed and made available for study during the 1950s. These were the photographs of Saint-Père de Chartres that Grodecki promised to obtain for me, in our interview in 1959, and he did so. Panel by panel, I mounted them myself, with my household iron, into vast montages identical to those in the *Monuments historiques*—and I still have them in an upstairs closet.

Modern scholarship on stained glass dates from the founding of the international *Corpus Vitrearum*, established in 1952 by European medievalists from Austria, France, Germany, and Switzerland. The aim was to take advantage of the wartime photography noted earlier, to create a published “database” of stained glass, dealing with questions of authenticity, condition, history and documentation, bibliography, and photo archives.¹⁷ I have been a member of the United States committee since it joined the *Corpus* in 1982. Thirteen countries now participate, with over fifty volumes already published and many more to come. The hope has always been that trustworthy information about stained glass will encourage medievalists to include it in their scholarly venue. As Madeline Caviness puts it, “Those who venture into the field to make their own observations are encouraged to take a *Corpus* volume and a pair of binoculars!”¹⁸

The *Corpus* endeavor was in its infancy when I had my interview with Grodecki in which he named my dissertation topic, the Benedictine abbey church of Saint-Père in Chartres. His choice was fortuitous beyond anyone’s (certainly including his) expectations, since it proved to be the kingpin of a regional type of stained glass that occupied me for decades. I published my recast dissertation materials (1978), without the chapter that had stretched in that direction, and thereafter began the study and publication of the related western French monuments, one by one, grant by grant. My book on them, the Gothic school of the West, finally dragged through publication as a Centennial Book at Berkeley in 1994 (*The Armor of Light*). As most authors know, by the time it finally materialized I had long since finished (what I had thought would be) my life’s work on the West, given myself twelve months to decide what to do with myself (Should I learn to play the organ? Go to med school?), and faced the fact that Gothic stained glass was as necessary to me as breathing. I looked around to avoid where other scholars were, by that era, working, and decided to begin at the northeastern

francophone border and look at Lorraine and Champagne. The francophone line goes down the Vosges Mountains and has not moved over three miles since the early Middle Ages. I hoped to produce another book, on eastern France, but it soon became obvious that the wars in that area—every thirty years since Caesar—had erased the evidence. Lorraine and Champagne undoubtedly were related, but the proofs are gone. So I wrote up my work on Lorraine (*Rainbow like an Emerald*, 1991) and have been devoting myself to Champagne ever since, circling and closing in on Reims Cathedral, with the goal to attempt to place that supremely famous medieval achievement within its regional milieu and to comprehend its familial, as well as its magnificently unique, character. If I live long enough, after Champagne, as I have always intended, I will move my campaign of attack to a third regional front. At seventy-two years of age I am superstitious enough not to tempt fate by identifying it here.

NOTES

1. On the Noguchi table, manufactured 1947–53, see Hiesinger and Marcus, *Landmarks of Twentieth-Century Design*, 159, no. 193. On Wright's Indiana houses ca. 1936–1939, see Chappell and Van Zanten, *Barry Byrne, John Lloyd Wright*, 52–56, 70; our house, not mentioned, may have been among those whose archives were lost in Wright's studio fire of the winter 1938/39 (56).
2. A Hull House weaver appears in Johnson, *Many Faces of Hull-House*, no. 11. Weaving was "de-emphasized" in 1938 (Bryan and Davis, *100 Years at Hull-House*, 225). That was about the time my mother began studying weaving with Marli Ehrmann at Moholy-Nagy's School of Design (see n. 5). On the Chicago period of Lenore Tawney, who also trained there under Ehrmann, see Mangan, *Lenore Tawney*, 17–20, 151.
3. Obituary of Wolfgang Stechow. Obituary of Ellen Johnson.
4. Obituary of Suzanne Sulzberger.
5. Moholy-Nagy, *Moholy-Nagy*, 171–72. On Moholy-Nagy, see Margolin, *Struggle for Utopia*. Regarding the Dale collection, see *Twentieth-Century French Paintings from the Chester Dale Collection*. These paintings were loaned to the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., in 1952 and, upon Dale's death in 1962, were bequeathed to that museum. See "Dale Pictures Leave Chicago for Washington"; "National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C."
6. See n. 11.
7. Obituary of Rudolf Wittkower.
8. Obituary of Robert Branner.
9. Caviness, obituary of Louis Grodecki.
10. See the last paragraph of this essay.
11. Obituary of Richard Lillich (1933–1996). He married twice more and had one more daughter before dying at age sixty-three.
12. *Directory of American Scholars*, 7th ed., s.v. "Fleming, William." See also obituary of William Fleming.
13. I recall this as a statement in Ginzberg et al., *Life Styles of Educated Women*. In looking through this volume a third of a century later, I cannot put my finger on the statement, but see the chart on p. 102 ("High and Good Achievement Levels").
14. Jean Lafond (1888–1975): see biographical note and bibliography in the handsome new edition, by Françoise Perrot, of his book *Le Vitrail*, 209–14.

15. The two Fulbrights I have held, one as a rank beginner and the other as a prestigious senior scholar, both provided giant boosts to my career, and I had the joy of writing as much to the senator before he died and of receiving his predictably generous, warm reply. Senator Fulbright died in 1995 at the age of ninety.

16. The initial scholarship on this area was by Louis Grodecki, in Marcel Aubert et al., *Le Vitrail français*, 39-45. See also Meredith Lillich, "Monastic Stained Glass: Patronage and Style," in *Monasticism and the Arts*, ed. Timothy Verdon (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1984), 207-54, reprinted in Lillich, *Studies in Medieval Stained Glass and Monasticism*, 302-54. For a more recent bibliography, see Caviness, *Stained Glass Windows*, 58.

17. A succinct sketch of the Corpus Vitrearum is in Caviness, *Stained Glass Windows*, 67-69, with a full list of volumes then published and projected on pp. 30-38. Several countries are publishing initial census volumes; twenty-three of the fifty states of the United States of America appeared in 1985-89 (see bibliography). The glass cataloged in the United States of America dates up to 1700 and arrived via the art market.

18. Caviness, *Stained Glass Windows*, 10.

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