



## ACKERMAN, PHYLLIS

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**ACKERMAN, PHYLLIS** (b. Oakland, California, 1893; d. January 25, 1977, Shiraz, Persia), author, editor, teacher and translator in the fields of Persian textiles, European tapestries, Chinese bronzes, iconography, symbolism, Assistant Editor of the *Survey of Persian Art*, wife and collaborator of Arthur Upham Pope, the editor of the *Survey of Persian Art* (q.v.). A prodigy in mathematics at the University of California, Berkeley, Ackerman changed disciplines after taking courses given by Arthur Upham Pope in the department of philosophy and aesthetics, becoming Instructor while preparing her doctoral thesis on Hegel and Pragmatism (1917). She and Pope married in 1920.

While living in New York and continuing her post-graduate studies, Ackerman was art columnist at the *New York Globe* (1920), writing dozens of short articles on a variety of subjects intended for popular consumption (furniture, bookbinding, wallpaper, mosaics, etc.), publishing scholarly work and lecturing. Throughout her life, Ackerman's writings and lectures bear witness to a keen analytical mind, freely ranging to embrace many cultures and historical periods. She frequently arrived at conclusions that were original, even provocative, and often controversial. In her book on Chinese bronzes (1945) for example she analyzes phallic imagery in the designs, also suggesting that Chinese gods came from the West. (cf. reviews of this and other publications in her bibliography in *Surveyors of Persian Art*, the joint biography of Arthur Upham Pope and Phyllis Ackerman). In 1926 in Philadelphia, they organized an exhibition of Persian art at the Pennsylvania



Museum, the first ever devoted to Persia, and helped create the First International Congress of Oriental Art (on subsequent occasions called “International Congress of Iranian Art and Archaeology” (q.v.).

Early in her career, Ackerman studied tapestries, particularly of the Gothic period, writing the catalogue to an exhibition she organized at the Palace of Fine Arts in San Francisco in 1922. This was followed by a widely read book, *Tapestry: The Mirror of Civilization* (New York and Oxford Univ. Press, 1933, repr. 1970). She re-discovered an important Flemish tapestry in the storeroom of San Marco in Venice in 1925 (*Daedalo* 6, 1925-26, pp. 441-56). Her reputation as an expert on tapestries but also textiles of Europe and the Far East became firmly established. Ackerman eventually specialized in the textiles of early Islamic period of Persia, having determined their pivotal role in East-West exchanges. At the First Congress in 1926 her talk concerned Oriental origins of Gothic tapestry. She understood well and could clearly explain the technical details of weaving, evolving as an important element in textile studies. However, her research and publication were never limited to textiles (cf. the *Survey*). Ackerman and Pope, increasingly convinced of the importance of the arts of Persia, were instrumental in preparing the famed Persian Art Exhibition at Burlington House in London in 1931, which coincided with the 2nd International Congress of Iranian Art and Archaeology. It was the first large-scale European exhibition devoted to the arts of one civilization and helped to better introduce Iranian art to Europe. Ackerman arranged several exhibits, notably the hitherto unknown Luristan bronzes, which attracted much attention. Ackerman, among others, published them. She also assisted with the exhibitions in Leningrad, 1935 (3rd congress). She wrote the catalogue and installed many of the exhibitions, held at the Iranian Institute in New York, in 1940.

Their most important and enduring legacy remains *A Survey of Persian Art*, (Oxford University Press, 1939) In six Imperial folio volumes, it was the largest and most significant publication dedicated to the art of one culture from its earliest times. Pope was Editor, Ackerman Assistant Editor, with seventy-one contributing authors. Dr. Ackerman performed an impressive editorial task, proofreading the 2800 pages several times, including 5000 footnotes and more than 8000 cross-references; she also translated 33 of the 115 chapters from French, German and Italian, occasionally adding her own comments and footnotes. Her own numerous contributions are listed with the bibliography. In 1928, Pope had established the [Asia Institute in New York](#), a post-graduate



school, offering at one period study of 33 Oriental languages and courses on Oriental art. Ackerman usually held an official post (1930-1953), and was co-editor with Pope of the *Bulletin of the American Institute of Iranian (later Persian) Art* (1931-1946) which also published several of her monographs. She instructed classes primarily in iconography and interpretation. Her interest in sexual symbolism became more pronounced. During the VIth congress (Tehran, Isfahan, Shiraz, 1968) her lecture concerned phallic imagery in the void patterns of early Islamic woven silks. Her interests in symbolism, myth, Mother/fertility goddesses, ancient religions, Tarot, have prevented some scholars from considering her work seriously. But many of her ideas, ready for print, remained unpublished so she was never able to present and eventually defend them. This material remains in Shiraz, final home of the Institute, along with her iconographic index, containing around 28,000 items, now housed in the Nāranjestān-e Qawām Museum.

During their early years in New York, 1920s and 1930s, Pope and Ackerman bought works of art and sold them to collectors and museums in order to fund the Institute as well as the *Survey of Persian Art*, expeditions, and exhibitions. They were always financially insecure mainly due to Pope's insatiable appetite for large-scale projects to increase awareness of Persian art. Reactions to these activities, which were largely carried on by Pope, damaged the reputations of both, particularly as some of the objects sold by them were later discovered to be very clever forgeries. Ackerman believed in the authenticity of some early Persian textiles, which she published, but which upon later analysis were found to be modern. Opinions differ as to whether they were fooled by these and other pieces in their collection.

While in Cairo in 1930 Ackerman, 36, was struck by a rare type of polio. Recovering in Paris, despite a negative medical prognosis, she taught herself to walk again. By all accounts a formidable woman, Ackerman was a feminist, with strong political ideas which she supported in various ways. In 1964 she accompanied Pope on a State Visit to Persia, her first, at which time they were asked to revive the Asia Institute in Shiraz. At the age of 73, she left her cats and garden in Connecticut, USA, to accompany Pope to Persia in 1966, when the Institute became attached to Pahlavi University and revived under the directorship of Pope. He was succeeded in the directorship by Richard N. Frye in 1969. This change was difficult and aggravated the loss of her mental stability. She outlived her husband, who died in 1969, and remained in Shiraz until her death, living on a pension granted by the government of Persia at the



request of the Empress Farah Diba. Ackerman shared the respect accorded her husband by the Iranians for her part in promoting their culture in the West, and in 1936 was awarded the Insignia of the Order of Scientific Merit (*Nešān-e 'elmi*, First Class). The couple was honored by being given a burial site and mausoleum near the K̄wāju Bridge in Isfahan.

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