

# Esther Gordon Dotson

*October 21, 1918 — October 28, 2009*

Esther Gordon Dotson, Professor Emerita of art history died, after a long illness, a week after she and her family celebrated her 91st birthday. She was born in Westerly, R.I., a granddaughter of the Rev. Adoniram Judson Gordon, the founder of Gordon College in Wenham, Mass., and the daughter of the Rev. Arthur Hale Gordon, a Baptist minister who held pulpits in Atlanta, Buffalo, and Middlebury, VT. Her husband, Arch Dotson, a professor of government at Cornell, predeceased her in 2006. She is survived by her stepson, Bruce Dotson, a professor at the University of Virginia, his wife, Diane, their children and grandchildren, and nine nieces and nephews of the Gordon family.

Esther inherited her family's commitment to good deeds and causes and was a founding member of the Loaves and Fishes Ministry, serving meals to the poor at St. John's Episcopal Church; a long-time volunteer with the Southern Tier Episcopal Peace Fellowship and of Meals-on-Wheels; and one of the earliest drivers of the not-for-profit Gadabout Transportation Service, helping the elderly and disabled get to church and around Tompkins County. She actively supported challenged citizens, defended the rights of immigrant families, helped people to obtain affordable housing, and collected surplus food from stores for delivery to migrant workers.

Esther was an active member of St. John's, and was one of the first women to serve on the Vestry. Her brothers and sister shared in her life of active Christian commitment as well. Esther's brother John was a Presbyterian minister who, just after the Hungarian uprising of 1956, installed the erstwhile Hungarian minister of agriculture and his family on the Gordon family farm in New Hampshire. Esther's brother David administered the U.S. effort to blockade commerce with the Nazis during World War II.

At the Dotsons' farm on Danby Hill, where the whole department was invited for Christmas cheer and an opportunity to cut a Christmas tree, she sunbathed luxuriously in her solar-paneled, red barn, the first solo commission of her former student Richard Meier, Cornell '56—now an internationally known architect, and designer of Cornell's Weill Hall, the new Life Sciences Technology Building—preferring it to the old farmhouse on the property which was rented out. The barn accommodated her needs as an art historian, giving her a grand second-floor studio with a northern exposure and a twenty-foot ceiling, with a bookcase covering one whole twenty-foot wall.

Both Dotsons were interested in alternative energy and land preservation, working with the Finger Lakes Land Trust to protect large tracts of land, and helping to create a community park in Danby. They were staunch members of the “Updike Road Unimprovement Association,” a neighborhood alliance devoted to preserving their unpaved road in its unpaved condition.

Esther Dotson graduated summa cum laude (and junior Phi Beta Kappa) from Vassar College in 1939 and taught art history after graduation and during her graduate studies at New York University’s Institute of Fine Arts (IFA) back in the days when one could teach on the university level without a Ph.D. in hand. Survival was no easier then than now, however. When she was a graduate student at the IFA she subsisted on something she called the “wolf diet”—consisting of a large meatloaf that she sliced into seven pieces, one for each dinner of the week to come—though later, when she could afford it, she proved she was an accomplished French chef. She completed her Ph.D. in 1973 with a dissertation entitled “Shakespeare Illustrated,” a study of English painting, book illustration, aesthetic theory, and stage practice, and, after stints at Ithaca College and Wells College, became the first woman appointed to a full-time professorship in the Department of the History of Art at Cornell, from which she retired in 1989.

At Cornell Professor Dotson was an inspiring teacher whose course History of Art 240, “Introduction to the Renaissance,” became one of the most popular undergraduate courses at Cornell in the 1970s and 1980s, although she was a tough grader. Her ultimatum to her full-house audience was always the same: “Look at the images I am showing you. Think about what I am saying. I’ll give you a handout with all the names spelled properly and the dates written down correctly.” She received the College Art Association’s Award for Distinguished Teaching of Art History in 1986. The citation read in part: “The many letters from former students...all emphasize one quality above all others, and that is the immense amount of personal care that she takes with every one of her students.... She is praised for articulate and carefully planned lectures, for her breadth of learning, for her demanding standards and for her sense of humor, but it is by the personal attention far beyond that expected of any faculty member that she has distinguished herself.” In her acceptance remarks, Professor Dotson said with characteristic grace, “If I’ve been a good teacher, it’s because I have had good teachers.”

Esther happily contributed to team-taught courses as well as her own. For a number of years she co-taught the Renaissance Culture Course with Carol Kaske (English), and continued to offer lectures on Michelangelo after her retirement, when Bill Kennedy (Comparative Literature) took her place as course leader with Carol. Her lectures to “Art, Isotopes, and Analysis,” at the time cross-listed among five departments and three colleges, were among

the highlights of the course. Several of the engineers and scientists enrolled in the course subsequently took Art History courses. When the Sage Collection of Casts of Greek and Roman Sculpture was still on display in Goldwin Smith Hall, she would take a newly-cleaned statue and surround it with photographs of all the Renaissance and later art that had been inspired by it. The exercise was of benefit to both the classicists and the Renaissance art historians in Goldwin Smith.

Esther's commitment to her students and the time she gave to them, in person and in comments on their work, was remarkable. She was equally generous to graduate students, who were deeply devoted to her, and to her younger colleagues, not only offering hospitality, but arranging meals with some of the prominent scholars on campus. She was the engine behind the appointment of the distinguished British art historian Michael Baxandall as A. D. White Professor at Large. She also served as Director of Undergraduate Studies in the history of art department.

Esther Dotson's extensive, two-part article, "An Augustinian Interpretation of Michelangelo's Sistine Ceiling," published in the *Art Bulletin* in 1979 argued for the authorship of the theologian Egidio da Viterbo of the program for the narrative scenes. Presenting aspects of the ceiling in relationship with Egidio's writings along with the pervasive influence of those of St. Augustine, particularly *The City of God*, she reveals a profound knowledge of the religious and philosophical ideas current in the papal court. The question behind this essay and its mixed critical response is how much theological significance to give to details of the narrative scenes and what kind of theological messages were being promulgated in the papal court of the early sixteenth century. Dotson's study has been taken seriously by both critics and defenders and is still—over 30 years later—considered canonical for its valuable and original observations.

At the time of the Sistine ceiling's restoration Professor Dotson served as a consultant to the project and in recognition of her scholarly contribution was received at the Vatican by Pope John Paul II. She was also editor-in-chief of the journal *Marsyas*, and she published articles in Collier's *Encyclopedia of Art*.

In her article "Shapes of Earth and Time in European Gardens," published in an issue of the *Art Journal* devoted to earth works in 1982, Esther understood Renaissance gardens first of all as earth shaping. In a strikingly original analysis of the Sacro Bosco, or Sacred Grove, at Bomarzo near Viterbo, the creation of the aristocrat Vicino Orsini, she pointed out fallen and semi-ruined architectural elements that suggest a process of creation and destruction that was purely fictitious. She related these both conceptually and thematically to a very popular forged account of an Etruscan golden age first published in 1498 by Nanni di Viterbo.

In addition to all these serious matters, Esther set some sort of record at Cornell for locking herself out of her office, to the point where one of us was given a master key by the building manager with which to let her back in. Her many one-liners, among them: “O Salome, please, not in the fridge!” are not the sort of thing one finds in a scholarly publication, but were recalled by many former students and colleagues at the time of her memorial service at St. John’s last winter.

Esther was preoccupied over many years with the 18th-century Austrian architect Johann Bernhard Fischer von Erlach. Her research has come to fruition in a posthumous book, written in collaboration with her former student, photographer Mark Ashton, which will be published by Yale University Press in late 2010 or early 2011. On hearing of the positive reviewers’ reports and its acceptance by the press last fall, she said that at last she could rest.

Service and scholarship were the traditions in which Esther Dotson grew up and in which she lived her life. She lived greatly. She loved the world deeply, loved those around her deeply, and gave her utmost to her work, to her family, students and colleagues, and to her community.

*Peter Ian Kuniholm, Chairman; Claudia Lazzaro; Carol V. Kaske*

*Many thanks to Esther’s nephew, John Hellegers, some of whose family information and prose we have used, with his kind permission, for this memorial statement.*