

Mabel Wilkerson

August 22, 1885 — November 20, 1969

Miss Mabel Wilkerson came to Cornell University as assistant professor of house furnishings in the Department of Household Art, College of Home Economics, in 1943 and was promoted to associate professor of housing and design in 1948 (the same department with a change of name). She retired from Cornell in June 1953.

Miss Wilkerson was born in Tuscarora, Nevada. She received preparatory education at the University of Nevada at Reno, a diploma from the University of Arizona at Tucson, and a Ph. B. in science and arts from Arizona in 1909. She studied food and nutrition at the University of Berkeley, California, but the focus and direction of her professional life began at Simmons College, Boston, Massachusetts, where she specialized in clothing and house furnishings. Next, she studied art at the Sacker School of Art in Boston for one year, and then continued her study at the New York School of Fine and Applied Art in New York City for two years, completing work in interior design in the Paris branch of that school in 1926. At Columbia and New York Universities in New York City she added work in psychology and education. Later, she also studied the history of art at the Louvre, in Paris.

Her early positions were as instructor of clothing, textiles and dress design at Simmons College, 1915-1917, and instructor of clothing and house furnishings in the extension program at the University of Illinois, Urbana, Illinois, where she was the first specialist in house furnishings. There she worked with Dean Isabel Bevier, a pioneer in home economics, who felt the home environment was very important to the quality of family life. She served as assistant state leader of Illinois from 1921-23. She resigned from that position, first to study and then to teach in the New York School of Fine and Applied Art (Parsons School of Design) in New York City. After teaching there one year, Mr. Parsons appointed her associate director of the Parsons School in Paris, and she held this position from 1927-33. During this time she also spent her summers as a lecturer at sessions conducted by the school in Italy.

In 1934 Miss Wilkerson became owner-director of the Montreal School of Design in Montreal, Canada. The school was highly successful and attracted students not only from Canada but also from the United States and other countries as well. Each summer she took selected, advanced students from the school to study abroad and experience at first hand the historic architectural monuments and art treasures of the museums, galleries, palaces and towns, focusing especially on historic interiors, though also noting design of all kinds. Unfortunately, the war took almost all of the male students from her school and in 1942 she was forced to close the school “for the

duration.” It was during this period, (the ‘30s and ‘40s), that she practiced the profession of interior design, chiefly in Paris but also in New York City and Montreal, and became well known in the field.

Thus, when she came to Cornell, her exceptionally fine background and experience enabled Miss Wilkerson to develop the type of course work in interior design needed for the department as it was evolving into the Department of Housing and Design. Her influence with colleagues and students was constructive and helpful. She demonstrated intellectual integrity and uncompromising scholarship, and was a constant stimulus toward the improvement of the work of the department. As a member of the graduate faculty, she guided students to strive towards the highest possible academic accomplishment, insisting that they extend themselves intellectually, creatively.

During her Cornell career, Miss Wilkerson executed numerous professional commissions. In 1943 she was in charge of the redecoration of the dean’s office, the auditorium, and the faculty lounge in Martha Van Rensselaer Hall. When the Statler Inn and the Hotel School facilities were being planned in Statler Hall, she was invited to be the designer in charge of all interiors and furnishings. She declined because of the time involved in such a program. Other campus jobs were as a consultant on plans for Anabel Taylor Hall, and for several offices, including one in the Industrial and Labor Relations School. When Dean Sarah Blanding left Cornell to become president of Vassar College in 1947, she asked Miss Wilkerson if she would accept the commission to redesign the interior of the president’s house. She did and, a year later, also designed the Student Recreation Rooms there.

Known affectionately as “Peg” to her friends, her wit and sparkle as a raconteur made her a lively and interesting companion to all who knew her. After her retirement from Cornell in 1953, she continued to live in Ithaca. She was visiting a niece, Mrs. Leo R. Collins, in Mentor, Ohio, when she died unexpectedly, November 20, 1969.

The quality of a University lies in great measure in its faculty, and although Mabel Wilkerson was at Cornell just ten years, she contributed to the University very considerably and with verve, as a scholar and as a professor concerned with environment in her specialized area of interior design, historic and contemporary; as a practicing professional designer; and in personal contacts with colleagues and students.

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