

# Portrait of Yale's first seven women Ph.D.s unveiled

By Román Castellanos-Monfil

Walking through the halls of the nave in Sterling Memorial Library, visitors can see portraits of past Yale alumni, professors, and other important figures. On April 5, a new portrait was added to its walls: that of the first seven women to earn Ph.D.'s at Yale.



Portrait by Brenda Zlamany

The seven women in the portrait — Cornelia H.B. Rogers, Sara Bulkley Rogers, Margaretta Palmer, Mary Augusta Scott, Laura Johnson Wylie, Charlotte Fitch Roberts, and Elizabeth Deering Hanscom — graduated in 1894, two years after Yale opened its doors to 23 women seeking graduate degrees, becoming one of the first universities to admit women.

The portrait project began in 2009 in the wake of a symposium celebrating 40 years of coeducation in Yale College. Jon

Butler, former dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, was inspired to commission a portrait of the first woman to have earned her Ph.D. at Yale. The co-chairs of the symposium and members of the Women Faculty Forum (WFF), Paula Kavathas and Laura Wexler, were excited by the idea and soon learned from Judith Schiff, chief research archivist, that there were in fact seven women who graduated as the first cohort in 1894.

In a lecture before the unveiling, Schiff noted that the 23 women who came to Yale in 1892 as part of the first cohort endured "open hostility" by their peers and were caricatured in undergraduate magazines and plays. The climate they faced at Yale was characteristic of a time when women were marginalized socially and politically, she said.

While women had not yet obtained the right to vote in the United States (a battle that would not be won until 1920), Schiff said, women were enjoying unprecedented educational opportunities as women's colleges like Vassar, Smith, and Wellesley opened in the 1860s and 1870s. As Yale began admitting women to its graduate programs, The New York Times wrote in March 1892: "There has long been a feeling ... that the superior educational

facilities at Yale should not be entirely denied to women seekers after knowledge."

Learning about the struggles the women faced galvanized the project, and WFF chair Kavathas and alumna Mira Vale '13 organized a national competition in January 2014 to select an artist to paint the portrait. Brooklyn-based artist Brenda Zlamany was chosen for the project.

Zlamany, who was raised in New Haven, said at the unveiling that she worked hard to win the competition because she felt she had a "big debt to Yale," explaining: "Yale was very special to me. If I hadn't come here as a high school student on the College Before College program, I probably wouldn't have gone to college at all."

Before the reception, Zlamany said the portrait took over a year to create, involving extensive research about the lives of the seven women and of women in general during the late-19th century. Starting with Google searches to learn about the seven women, Zlamany then visited costume shops to find clothing from that era; she also did research on hairdos and even chairs and typewriters to ensure complete accuracy in the portrait.



Artist Brenda Zlamany. (Photo by Román Castellanos-Monfil)

One of the challenges she faced, Zlamany said, was trying to depict women who have long been dead and of whom very few photographs exist — in fact, no photographs are known to exist of Sara Buckley Rogers. Unable to work from photographs of the seven women, Zlamany had her daughter pose in the costumes and also found real-life women to act as surrogates in order to replicate skin tones.

However, the biggest challenge, she said, was figuring out how to incorporate the women and their objects onto a "relatively small" canvas. "A great portrait is more than a likeness; it says something about the individual and humanity in general," she explained. Another problem she faced was finding a way to pose the women together in a group, noting that the way women interacted with each other is different today than it was back then.

Her solution was to create "paper dolls" of various poses of each of the women, arranging them on a piece of paper, photographing it, and comparing it to other arrangements side-by-side. After finding the arrangement she liked best, she created a larger drawing before finally



Zlamany's "paper dolls." (Photo courtesy of Brenda Zlamany)

painting it onto the canvas.

"What I hope for this painting is that it will be timelessly relevant; enduring in its style, its vivid depictions, and its intense psychology; that it will harmonize with the architecture of Sterling Memorial Library; be in scale with the neighboring paintings while catching the visitor's eye; and that it will inspire curiosity of these seven remarkable women and tell their

story," she said.

At the reception, President Peter Salovey thanked the WFF and Zlamany for their dedication to honoring the seven women, noting that the portrait reflects the "path-breaking" role the women played in shaping the diversity of the university today. "Those who graduate from Yale today come from every country, every heritage and identity, every background, and of course the intersection of all of those," he said.

"I hope this isn't the last portrait that we will be unveiling that has themes of this kind," added Salovey. "Someday, and I hope it's before I retire from this place, we will all be able to see portraits of a very different nature during our times at Yale." Salovey said he also hoped the new public art committee will take the time to look at the current representations and find ways to represent the ["new Yale" across campus](#).

## Biographies

An alumna of Wellesley College, Cornelia Hephzibah Bulkley Rogers, was an expert in Old Spanish as well as Italian and French. Her dissertation, written in Spanish, was titled "Sinalefa, sineresis, e hiato en los romances del Cid." A 1920 Yale publication about alumnae of the Graduate School pointed out that "the very first candidate for the doctor's degree in Romance languages at Yale was a woman ... Miss Cornelia Rogers of Bridgeport. Miss Rogers began her studies here in 1892, and proved to be exceptionally well prepared for them." The alumna spent her professional life teaching Romance languages at Vassar and providing translations for the American Academy of Political and Social Science.

Cornelia's sister, Sara Bulkley Rogers, was also a member of that first cohort. She received her B.A. from Columbia University in 1889 through the Collegiate Course for Women, which later became Barnard College.



Cornelia Hephzibah Bulkley Rogers

She then earned a master's degree in history from Cornell. Her Yale dissertation was on "The Rise of Civil Government and Federation in Early New England." She was a writer of fiction, and her stories were published in the New York Evening Post, the Commercial Advertiser, and other periodicals. Her 1897 novel, "Life's Way," was published in London by Bentley & Son.

Margaretta Palmer earned her B.A. from Vassar College in 1887 and was hired to be an assistant in the Yale Observatory, where she worked until she was able to enroll in the Graduate School five years later. Her dissertation, titled "Determination of the Orbit of Comet 1847 VI," was a study of the comet discovered by Maria Mitchell, one of her professors at Vassar. After graduation, Palmer continued to work at Yale. When the observatory was closed in 1918, she worked part time in the Yale Library classifying scientific and mathematical books and part time on her research.



Sara Bulkley Rogers

Before coming to Yale, Mary Augusta Scott earned a B.A. and master's degree from Vassar. Her dissertation was titled "The Elizabethan Drama, especially in its Relation to the Italians of the Renaissance," and she remained immersed in the scholarship of that period all her life. Her published works include an annotated bibliography titled "Elizabethan Translations from the Italian" and an edition of "The Essays of Francis Bacon." She contributed essays to The Dial and other literary and academic journals. In 1900, she presented "The Book of the Courtier: A Possible Source of Benedick and Beatrice" at the Modern Language Association's December meeting, held at the University of Pennsylvania. In a published version of the paper she described herself as a "Sometime Fellow of Yale University" and "Instructor in English at Smith College."



Margaretta Palmer

Laura Johnson Wylie graduated from Vassar in 1877. She taught Latin and English at Packer Institute in Brooklyn for 14 years prior to pursuing graduate work at Yale when the opportunity opened up. Her dissertation, "Studies in the Evolution of English Criticism," was published by Ginn & Company in 1894 "at the expense of the University, in the hope that it may be useful to other students of the period which it covers," wrote



Mary Augusta Scott

Yale English Professor Albert S. Cook in the preface. Wylie was the longtime partner of Gertrude Buck, with whom she led the Department of English at Vassar during the Progressive Era. She was on the faculty at Vassar from 1897 until 1924 and was a leader in the women's suffrage movement, serving as president of the Dutchess County (N.Y.) Suffrage Organization 1910-1918.



Laura Johnson Wylie

Charlotte Fitch Roberts graduated from Wellesley College in 1880. Yale chemistry professor Frank Gooch called her book, "The Development and Present Aspects of Stereochemistry" (1896), "the clearest exposition of which we have knowledge of the principles and conditions" of the field, which studies the relative spatial arrangement of atoms in molecules.

Roberts became a full professor at Wellesley in 1896 and devoted much of her scholarship to the historical development of her field. She was described by the Wellesley Alumnae Magazine as "one of the pioneers in America of the 'New Chemistry.'"

Elizabeth Deering Hanscom came to Yale with a B.A. and M.A. from Boston University. Her dissertation analyzed the Middle English poem "Piers Plowman," by William Langland, but at Smith College, where she taught English for over 35 years, she was best known for teaching American literature. When she died in 1960 at the age of 94, her obituary in The New York Times said she "introduced the study of American literature at Smith College in 1899, at a time when the subject was not studied generally in American institutions of higher learning."



Charlotte Fitch Roberts



Elizabeth Deering Hanscom