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Elizabeth Polk Benson (13 May 1924-19 March 2018)

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ELIZABETH POLK BENSON (13 MAY 1924–19 MARCH 2018)

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Elizabeth Polk Benson at Teotihuacan, 1995. Photo by Monica Barnes

Elizabeth (Betty) Polk Benson occupied a central place in the nexus of scholars dedicated to Pre-Columbian Mexican and Andean art. Always elegant, always polite, and always well informed, she enjoyed the unusual distinction of being revered by both her colleagues and by taxi drivers in northern Peru. She, herself, made

major contributions to our understanding of ancient American cultures, while brilliantly fostering the work of others.

Elizabeth Benson was the daughter of Theodore B. Benson, a lawyer, and his wife, Rebecca Dean Albin, a descendant of President James K.

Polk. Betty grew up in Chevy Chase, Maryland, and attended the National Cathedral School in Washington, D.C. She obtained her bachelor's degree from Wellesley College in 1945, majoring in English, and studying Russian with famed novelist Vladimir Nabokov. Later she obtained an M.A. in art from The Catholic University of America. She developed her talents in creative writing, publishing poems in literary magazines, and detective fiction in popular venues. She also exhibited her paintings in the Washington area. Betty began her career as an art historian at the National Gallery of Art, but left temporarily for Europe in 1950, working for the U.S. Third Air Force in London, but also having the opportunity to tour continental Europe.

Betty's early knowledge of Pre-Columbian art came not primarily through formal academic study, but through her familiarity with the objects acquired by Robert Woods Bliss, a diplomat who had placed his Pre-Columbian collection on loan to the National Gallery of Art. As Assistant Registrar at the Gallery from 1954–1960, Betty handled loan exhibits and worked closely with Mr. Bliss as he added objects to his collection and oversaw its re-installation in a new gallery. She was especially sympathetic with his view that the objects he acquired were aesthetically elegant and worthy of display in art museums and not simply exhibited as examples of "primitive" art in natural history or ethnographic museums.

Mr. Bliss and his wife, Mildred Barnes Bliss, had owned the Dumbarton Oaks mansion and gardens in Georgetown, a Washington, D.C. neighborhood, and had donated them to Harvard University in 1940. The house served as a center for Byzantine art, and later would contain a library devoted to the history of gardens and landscape architecture. Following Mr. Bliss's death, his Pre-Columbian collection was left to Dumbarton Oaks, and a new wing, designed by noted modernist architect Philip

Johnson, was added to house that collection. It was while the building was under construction that Betty received the call to help with the installation. At the time, she had resigned from the National Gallery of Art, and was living in New York, pursuing a writing career and painting.

She put these ambitions on hold when she began life at Dumbarton Oaks, where she was to leave an indelible legacy. She served successively as Assistant Curator of the Pre-Columbian Collection (1963–1965), then as Curator (1965–1979), and finally and most influentially, as the inaugural Director of Pre-Columbian Studies (1973–1978). In 1987 she was also an Andrew S. Keck Distinguished Visiting Professor of Art History at the American University, Washington, D.C.

Betty organized the first conference on Pre-Columbian studies at Dumbarton Oaks in 1967, co-chairing it with Yale anthropologist and Mesamericanist Michael D. Coe. The papers were published as a volume entitled *Dumbarton Oaks Conference on the Olmec* (1968), edited by Betty, and inaugurating a tradition of groundbreaking symposia and publications that catalyzed developments in a rapidly growing field. Over time, these became indispensable references, setting a benchmark for the quality of their scholarship and production. The success of the conferences enabled her to begin building what has become the most important concentrated collection of books on Pre-Columbian topics, now incorporated into the Dumbarton Oaks Library.

In 1970, she founded a fellowship program that remains in place, seeding scores of scholars who have gone on to influential and successful academic and teaching careers. Richard (Dick) Fraser Townsend was a Dumbarton Oaks fellow in 1980–1981. He recalls with gratitude Betty's encouraging outlook while he was preparing his

book, *State and Cosmos in the Art of Tenochtitlan*, for publication. She also led frequent informal gatherings and sponsored public lectures at this time.

Betty was a prolific writer, authoring or editing more than a dozen important books on the Pre-Columbian cultures of the Americas. In addition to the *Dumbarton Oaks Conference on the Olmec*, they include *The Olmec and Their Neighbors*, and the *Dumbarton Oaks Conference on Chavín* which were instrumental in opening up sustained study of the continent's earliest civilizations. Many of her books reflect her keen interest in the Maya and the Moche cultures. Principal among them are *The Maya World*, *The Mochica: A Culture in Peru*, *A Man and a Feline in Mochica Art*, and *The Worlds of the Moche on the North Coast of Peru*. Other titles include *The Birds and Beasts of Latin America*, and the co-edited volume (with Anita G. Cook) *Ritual Sacrifice in Ancient Peru*. As Dick Townsend recalls,

Her abundant experience editing and publishing manuscripts covering a wide range of topics on ancient Mexico, Central America, and South America gave her an ability to decipher the symbolic imagery, and to characterize the expressive intention of ancient works of art and architecture. . . . Among Betty's many contributions to the field were her recognition of connections between ancient symbolic forms, the seasonal timing of different types of ritual events, and their links to components of the landscape.

Other colleagues, however, considered much of her work to be speculative (c.f. Chadwick 1973; Marcus 1989).

Her career as author, lecturer, advisor, and consultant to museums and institutions is widely credited with transforming Pre-Columbian

studies from the work of a small circle of scholars to a vibrant and far-reaching research enterprise revealing the art and advanced cultures of peoples living in Mesoamerica and Andean South America. In addition to books bearing her name as author or editor, Betty helped shape many others. She had an important role in the production of the catalogue of the Art Institute of Chicago's 1991 exhibition, *The Ancient Americas: Art from Sacred Landscapes* organized by Townsend.

Betty had a rare flair for putting the right people together, as she did to address the problem of understanding Maya hieroglyphic writing (see Elizabeth Boone's contribution, this volume). In that instance she invited both senior and up-and-coming scholars from linguistics, anthropology, and art history, and challenged them to tackle the mysterious inscriptions. Betty's efforts exemplified the collaborative approach that has enabled Maya writing to be decoded and read today. She pushed decipherment forward both at Dumbarton Oaks and at the annual Palenque round tables.

Her departure, in 1979, after eighteen years at Dumbarton Oaks, marked the start of a very active freelance career. She traveled to archaeological sites in connection with her books, and was a frequently invited speaker for both lay and academic audiences. She taught at Columbia University, the University of Texas at Austin, and American University. As Pre-Columbian sites became popular tourist destinations, she occasionally served as the scholar lecturing groups on cruise ships or land tours.

In addition to her lifetime association with Dumbarton Oaks, Betty was a Research Associate of the Institute of Andean Studies and an active member of the Pre-Columbian Society of Washington, D.C. She was elected a member of the Society of Woman Geographers in 1970, and was an early and active member of the Latin

American Indian Literatures Association, frequently attending its symposia and publishing in its journal. She supported the Northeast Conference on Andean Archaeology and Ethnohistory and *Andean Past* from the beginning, presenting papers at four of the early meetings and publishing her article, "The Moche Moon" in the proceedings of the Second Northeast Conference and "Bats in South American Iconography" in *Andean Past* 1.

As for the literary ambitions she put on hold? She was also elected a member of the exclusive Literary Society of Washington, whose membership has included presidents of the United States and one first lady. She loved Maine and had a cottage on Deer Isle where she wrote mystery stories with a Down East backdrop, some of which were published in *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine* and *Alfred Hitchcock Magazine* under the pen name of Augusta Hancock (see Benson as Hancock (1993[1987])).

Betty's life and career have left a lasting impact. Her scholarly initiatives, graciousness, and sense of humor are fondly remembered by her many colleagues and friends. These were formally recognized in 2004 when Betty, along with Christopher B. Donnan, was honored at a symposium in Lima, Peru, entitled "New Perspectives on Moche Political Organization" cosponsored by Dumbarton Oaks, the Museo Arqueológico Larco Herrera, and the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú. Betty described this as a "high point" in her life. The Pre-Columbian Society of Washington published a book in her honor, *Adventures in Pre-Columbian Studies*, in 2010.

In preparing this obituary we had the benefit of the recollections of Richard Fraser Townsend, retired chair of the Department of Pre-Columbian, American Indian, and African Art at the Art Institute of Chicago. Our starting point in constructing the bibliography of works

by and about Elizabeth Polk Benson is the one previously published by Julie Jones in *Adventures in Pre-Columbian Studies*. We also relied on entries in Hollis, Harvard University's on-line catalogue and on numerous issues of the *Bulletin* of the Society of Woman Geographers in which Betty reported her work from 1970 until her death. James Carder directed us to the on-line transcription of an oral history interview of Betty Benson conducted by Betty Boone. What follows are reminiscences by two of her successors as directors of Pre-Columbian Studies at Dumbarton Oaks, Elizabeth Hill Boone, and Jeffrey Quilter, and by another colleague, art historian Tom Cummins, who is now D.O.'s director, as well as a more personal tribute by one of us (Joan Wilentz) a close, long-time friend of Betty's who writes about aspects of her life apart from Dumbarton Oaks. Finally, this memorial section ends with a note by Betty's cousin, Martha King. The tributes by Boone, Quilter, Cummins, and Wilentz were first presented at a memorial service held for Benson at Dumbarton Oaks on October 4, 2018, on the eve of a symposium entitled "Reconsidering the Chavín Phenomenon in the 21st Century", held fifty years after the path breaking Dumbarton Oaks Chavín conference that Betty organized near the start of her career at the institution that meant so much to her. These reminiscences have been modified for publication in *Andean Past*.

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To help us understand just how important Elizabeth Benson was to the field of Pre-Columbian Studies and to Dumbarton Oaks, I want to take us back some sixty-five years to a time when the Pre-Columbian field did not exist and when hardly anyone but Robert Woods Bliss really thought of Pre-Columbian objects as works of art, and almost no museums had or displayed them. Dwight Eisenhower was president; the Korean War had just ended; the Cold War with the Soviet Union was going full bore. Patriarchy was the political and social norm, and the workforce was shaped by sexism: so, men were bosses, and women were secretaries, assistants, and housewives. This was a time when women's voices stayed in the background, which makes Betty's achievements all that more remarkable.

Living in Washington, D.C. at the time was a young woman in her late 20s named Elizabeth Polk Benson. She had grown up in the Washington area, had attended high school at the National Cathedral School, and went to Wellesley College for her B.A., where she majored in English and studied Russian. After graduation, she returned to Washington where she was writing and publishing poetry in literary journals and exhibiting her paintings. She also began to work at the National Gallery of Art, and in 1954, she accepted the position of Assistant Registrar. Her responsibilities were to keep track of incoming and outgoing objects and to be vigilant about secure storage and display. The Gallery was, and still is, a museum principally of paintings, but on display at the time in the ground floor was a smallish assortment of polished stone sculptures, jewelry, and figurines of gold and silver,

and fine textiles from Pre-Columbian Latin America that were on loan from Robert Bliss.

Bliss, a wealthy diplomat, had been collecting Pre-Columbian materials for some years, considering them not as artifacts or archaeological specimens that belonged in natural history museums, but as works of art with a high aesthetic resonance. He was the first of a small group of wealthy men who were beginning to build Pre-Columbian art collections; David Rockefeller would soon begin his own collection, but Robert Bliss was the first pioneer. He and his wife, Mildred Barnes Bliss, had already given their magnificent property across town, Dumbarton Oaks, to Harvard University. So, he had time to focus on his Pre-Columbian collection, and, in 1947, he put it on loan at the National Gallery, where it remained until 1962.

It fell largely to Betty to manage this collection as it grew and shifted. I want to quote Betty Benson, what she recalled in her oral history (Benson and Boone 2008), because it preserves the flavor of the times. Periodically Mr. Bliss would come in, "sometimes with a little object in his pocket, a piece of jade or something, and he would say, 'I want you to see my latest temptation', or something like that. Or his chauffeur, a very nice man named Garrett, would come in with a basket or a box, or carrying some kind of package with another object to be seen." The pieces began to pile up in the registrar's storage vault. Attuned, as she was, to Mr. Bliss' aesthetic sense, Betty very soon came to share his appreciation for, and knowledge of, these objects from ancient Mexico, Central America, and South America, and to recognize them as objects being newly conceptualized as works of art. She desired to secure for the pieces a space where they could be displayed to their best advantage, so she got permission from the National Gallery's Director and Chief Curator to orga-

nize and mount a significant reinstallation on the ground floor of the Gallery that showcased the collection like never before, to present the objects as works of art, ready to stand beside the Old Master and French Impressionist paintings. This was a time when almost no museums had Pre-Columbian objects; the Rockefeller collection at the Museum of Primitive Art would not open to the public until 1957. There was no roadmap, no precedent, for what she did; this was just one of the first times that she found herself leading the way into new territory.

After the installation, Betty left the National Gallery and was in Maine when the director of Dumbarton Oaks, Jack Thatcher, called her down to Washington to come and set up Mr. Bliss' Pre-Columbian collection at D.O. Mr. Bliss had died, his collection had come to D.O., and the new Philip Johnson Wing was being finalized to exhibit it. She came in 1963 with the understanding that it was a temporary job, but, of course, she was later compelled to stay. Her first reaction to the Johnson Wing was, as I quote from her oral history "It's a beautiful building. How do you put anything in it?" Wooden and metal cases were out of the question because they would conflict with the pavilion's features. Ideally, she thought the objects should hover in space, but it wasn't possible to levitate them on puffs of air (as one scientist has recently done with his kitchen utensils), so she and Mr. Thatcher turned to a new material, plexiglass, that was just becoming available. This allowed her to float the objects in those exquisite spaces. Now all sorts of museums are using plexi, but Betty was the first to choose it for full cases and for a full installation. She was a hands-on curator who worked closely with Mr. Thatcher. She recalled that before the Palenque panel was mounted, it was laying flat on the floor in its three large pieces, and she and Mr. Thatcher got down on all fours with water

and cloths to scrub off the bad restorations of the figures' profile; apparently it was very easy to do. When all was finished, the resulting exhibition of Pre-Columbian art, which opened in 1963, was both a stunning display and a paradigm shifting statement that would forever change the way the public conceptualized Pre-Columbian art.

Betty remained and continued to build the collection, expanding into some media, like ceramics, that Mr. Bliss had not collected, and filling in some holes, but she, like Mr. Bliss, was principally after artistic excellence, so she would not acquire anything just to fill in. Of course, this was before the UNESCO Convention on Cultural Patrimony (1972), so the rules and accepted practices were different then. However, Bliss always purchased from reputable dealers, and Betty was attuned to these issues and was very careful in what she added.

She recalled, also—and she wanted particularly to make this clear—that she was not a scholar in the field when she began, so she relied also on the expertise of others. An advisory committee had been set up when the collection became part of Dumbarton Oaks; it included the greats in archaeology and art history at the time: Junius Bird and Gordon Eckholm, who were, respectively, the curators of South American and Mesoamerican archaeology at the American Museum of Natural History, the art historian George Kubler of Yale, archaeology professors Gordon Willey and Joe Brew of Harvard, and Samuel Lothrop of the Smithsonian Institution. Lothrop died shortly afterward, and was replaced by archaeologist Michael Coe of Yale. Betty knew exactly who to call for advice, and she made good use of them; she consulted with Bird, Eckholm, and Coe for potential acquisitions, and with Willey and Brew for what she called "tactical advice".

When Betty came to Dumbarton Oaks in 1963, there was only the art collection, a small library of five hundred books that had belonged to Mr. Bliss, and herself. There was nothing else. The field of Pre-Columbian studies was much less developed than it is today, which means that it was also more open, and had much more room for scholarship and growth. Betty had an extraordinary amount of freedom to shape the collection and build the library and program, to do what she wanted. But she was very *good* at finding people to do things, and had very *good* ideas of her own. And here I purposefully use the term “good” rather than brilliant or extraordinary because “good” is the word she most often used to describe the best people, events, and ideas. Good to her meant exciting, sound, forward looking, just right, and a host of other qualities that meant that the thing was exactly what was needed at the time. And she was a master of identifying just the right idea, approach, person, object, and event at the right time.

She grew the program in an organic way, one small step at a time. Throughout, she knew what was right at the moment. Remember, there was nothing before her; it was for her to establish the way. First there was a public lecture by Michael Coe the spring after the collection opened. She decided it should be published, so the title “An Early Stone Pectoral from Southeastern Mexico” became the first in the series of *Studies in Pre-Columbian Art and Archaeology*. Thus, she launched the Studies series in 1966; it was originally intended as an occasional series concerned chiefly with objects in the collection. So it was for most of her tenure, although she did expand its purview to include art historical analyses of other works and styles outside the collection. Its size grew from twenty pages to nearly eighty-one with a second volume of plates—but she conceptualized it as a series of relatively brief essays.

Shortly after the Studies series was launched she had the idea of a conference. So with Michael Coe’s advice and help, in 1967 she organized the first Dumbarton Oaks conference, with the Olmec as its theme. It was a watershed in Olmec studies. The scholarly climate was absolutely perfect (Betty would have called it “good”). There were people who thought that the Olmecs were later than the Maya. But at this time radiocarbon dating was just beginning to make its mark on archaeology, so there were radically new dates presented. There were several major excavations going on at both San Lorenzo and La Venta, and new findings coming from Oaxaca and central Mexico. So it was exactly the right moment to have that conference. Betty’s intent was not to start a series of symposia, but to catch the moment. The roster is a who’s who of Olmec studies at the time. There was a panel of six: Ignacio Bernal, who chaired the meeting; Michael Coe; Kent Flannery; Robert Heizer; Tatiana Proskouriakoff; and Matthew Sterling. Some two dozen other Olmec scholars participated. The final volume also included papers by Matthew Sterling, Peter Furst, and David Grove.

Betty conceived of these conferences as relatively small gatherings of scholars who worked in a particular topic or area; throughout her tenure, the conferences were by invitation only. Her idea was “that all of the people in the audience . . . should know just about as much on the subject as those presenting the papers.” For this reason, she built into the program long discussion periods. When invitees wanted to present their own material pertinent to the topic, she extended the meeting to Sunday morning to accommodate them, and sometimes the volunteered contributions became more influential than those of the original panel. Her goal was to bring together just the right people: those working in and knowledgeable of a subject—but she also wanted to

introduce different voices, to have not just the usual cast of archaeologists and art historians, but others like Peter Furst who could contribute a different perspective. His paper “The Olmec Were-jaguar Motif in the Light of Ethnographic Reality” resonates still.

Sometimes her desire to embrace different voices revealed tensions, as it did with the second conference, on Chavín. She recalled that she invited (and I quote) “a number of people who either didn’t approve of each other professionally or had had some personal problems, and I thought, ‘Oh my Lord, what have I gotten into? What’s going to happen?’ And I had a very pregnant assistant at the time, and I said ‘Penny, if these people start throwing things at each other, I’m going to put you in the middle.’ But I counted on the civilized environment of Dumbarton Oaks, and everyone behaved beautifully.” That conference, too, was a watershed.

Betty was also the catalyst for the early great breakthroughs in the decipherment of Maya hieroglyphic writing, although I don’t see that she ever gets credit for this in the histories of decipherment. In the 1970s, Floyd Lounsbury was a Visiting Scholar in Pre-Columbian Studies; he and Betty went down to the Palenque Roundtable, where he, Linda Schele, and Peter Mathews managed to work out the Palenque king list. Betty had a little extra money left over at the end of the fiscal year, so she invited to Dumbarton Oaks all the people who had worked on the Palenque inscriptions. Tatiana Proskouriakoff, David Kelley, Peter Mathews, and Linda Schele came to join Lounsbury. By the time the weekend ended, people were talking animatedly in groups and looking at books, and “all of a sudden they were all down on the floor by a copy of Maudsley, and they got a new glyph, and each one of them knew or saw something that the others didn’t. And I thought, ‘This is why

I did this.’” She then got them together several other times, as she said, “whenever the moment seemed right.”

All the while, Betty was building the library from a private collection toward a proper research library. But there was no space. In the basement under the Phillip Johnson Wing, she had a beautiful paneled library room, her office next door, and a wide space in the hall. So she ran bookshelves all along the side of the hallways—and when the fire marshal came, he had a fit! In the 1970s, “when [again] the moment seemed right,” she instituted the fellowship program, with a single fellow, and because there really was no space, she made an office of sorts for him in that wide space in the hallway. She grew the fellowship program slowly, and it stayed relatively small, but she supported individuals who subsequently became major figures in the field. Especially at the very beginning, Betty and the advisory committee identified whom to bring, but she soon opened it up to applicants.

How did Betty know whom to invite as speakers and fellows, and what conferences and gatherings to organize, and when? She went to meetings—archaeology and art history conferences, roundtables, lectures, and other gatherings—where she listened to what was new and promising, with the goal of bringing those ideas back to her Pre-Columbian program at Dumbarton Oaks. She read widely in the field, and she talked to people, the fellows and others. She had Advisory Committees, certainly, but she was always the one who conceptualized and actualized the ideas; she was the driving force of the program, and she did all of this in a different era when there was a fainting couch in the main floor ladies’ room, and well before women were allowed to join the Cosmos Club. Betty accomplished all of this with a quietness and profound modesty; she consistently redirected attention to others,

and was pleased to see her projects, products, and the people she supported succeed. This was all work that she called “good”, that special “good” of hers.

When she left Dumbarton Oaks in 1980, she had the wonderful grace not to interfere or continue to shape the program she had created and nurtured for so long. I remember that in my first year, I tried to do exactly what she had done (not succeeding of course), and a few times I called her to ask what she advised or what she had done in that situation. Her reply was always wonderfully vague—that she couldn’t quite remember, or the situation was a little different—and in any case, she said, “whatever you do will be the right thing.” I am sure she felt this way about all the directors of the program who followed her.

THE TWINKLE IN HER EYES, THE WARMTH
OF HER SMILE, AND A MIND FULL OF
WONDER

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It is a very great honor and even more, it is a very great privilege to express my profound affection and deepest respect for Elizabeth Benson. I write affection first, because although I so respect all that Betty accomplished at Dumbarton Oaks, and in the field of Pre-Columbian art and archaeology, it is she, her person, her character that I so admired. She had that soft but commanding voice, and a gentility that exuded the warmth of human kindness (*calor humano*), but always doing so with a no nonsense sensibility that was never verbally expressed, but nevertheless always commanded, and she backed it all by a wicked sense of humor that was so special. But it was a sense of humor that never ridiculed or belittled, yet it was, at the same time, also so expressive, often about things that she left unsaid, but with a smile. She commanded a presence without demanding it, because whatever it was, it was not about her, but it was about what was at Dumbarton Oaks or Pre-Columbian art and culture. It was about Dumbarton Oaks, the legacy of the Blisses to the humanities, and although she was an integral part of it from the very beginning, she made it clear that what made it so important as an institution was that D.O. exceeded any one, or group of things, or individuals.

In fact, Betty embodied in so many ways the critical place of humanities in the world. Would that she were still here to fight for that place, needed now almost more than ever before. And she did so until the end, upholding the ideals that we all share, young and old.

Elizabeth Polk Benson commanded Dumbarton Oaks as no other, even after she retired, and she commanded the place that pre-Columbian studies has in Dumbarton Oaks with the truly incredible demeanor of someone who had seen it all. And she had seen it all, but she could stand back, seeming a bit aloof at first, but with a sense of joy that radiated through eyes that simply sparkled, and she would share a few of the triumphs and travails without any interference of her own ego. Yet there was always her presence that she shared as she recounted the early, middle, and late tales of the creation, growth, and present of Pre-Columbian art at Dumbarton Oaks.

All this occurred with a naturally unassuming humility. One could always ask Betty about D.O.'s past, and her part in its formation, or about herself before D.O., at Wellesley or in Paris. She was always there in the narrative but not as the protagonist, but rather more like a Greek chorus, leading you on, wondering as to what would come. And yet she was, at least to me, always also, really the main protagonist, the hero/heroine; extremely strong, extreme smart, extremely funny, and extremely kind, especially to all of us who entered through Dumbarton Oaks' doors for the first time, and who were not from the hallowed halls of Harvard and Yale. We were all welcomed. She created a family of people in common bond, yet who in fact did not agree at all in many things. Pre-Columbian art history and archaeology could have all gone wrong at Dumbarton Oaks because of personalities and the nature of the formation of the two disciplines, but Elizabeth sutured the early conferences and their volumes into masterpieces that can take their place in our minds as models of interdisciplinary scholarly exchange.

It is therefore fitting, I believe, that we returned after fifty years to a conference on Chavín. It is fitting for two reasons. The first

Pre-Columbian conferences organized at D.O. concerned what were thought to be “the mother cultures” of Mesoamerica, the *Olmec*, and of the Andes, *Chavín*. It was a wonderful way to begin Pre-Columbian Studies at D.O. with the examination of the beginnings, and Betty edited both volumes, the first entitled *Dumbarton Oaks Conference on the Olmec*, and the second, *Dumbarton Oaks Conference on Chavín*. Elizabeth joined with Luis Lumbreras, John Rowe, Thomas Paterson, Donald Lathrap, and other scholars to discuss the Chavín phenomenon and to publish the conference papers three years later. I suppose time really does fly when you are having fun.

These were foundational conferences and books in so many ways, and they set us on the right path. But along with this, Betty curated the fabulous collection of Pre-Columbian art at Dumbarton Oaks, which was given its own showcase in 1963 when Philip Johnson’s little jewel box was ready for occupancy. Betty worked to equal and integrate the masterworks from Ancient America into Johnson’s modernist masterpiece. Her vision of what and how to do it was brilliant. I marveled, and still marvel, at how she integrated the structure with these exquisite objects that seemingly float timelessly on their translucent bases, while existing against the background of the gardens through the translucent walls of Johnson’s building. I think that it was fitting that when the collection was re-installed after repairs, that Juan Antonio Murro, the present curator, decided to re-use the materials and displays that she originally designed. That is a truly fitting and lasting tribute. I am reminded of Claude Levi-Strauss’s praise in the *Way of the Masks* of Franz Boaz’s installation of the Northwest Coast of North America material in the New York Museum of Natural History, arguing that they should never be changed. Sometimes things need to be left as they are,

as they are so right as they are. Betty certainly got it right.

She dealt with stubborn people and resistant objects, and turned them into works of beauty and intelligence beyond their individual natures. And she did it all with a grace that, I am afraid to say, is now almost a thing of the past. She not only welcomed us to Dumbarton Oaks, but she welcomed us into her home and her life.

I would suppose by now that it is rather obvious that Elizabeth Polk Benson is one of the people I most admired and respected. Betty was the last of the links with the Blisses, and she kept their spirit alive by her presence and her memory. Betty, like all of us, aged, but she never grew old. She was always wise beyond the years that she lived, and she lived her years with grace, humor, a love for the humanities, and pre-Columbian art.

For those of you who will now never have the chance to meet her, I can only say that unfortunately that you have missed the opportunity of knowing one of D.O.’s most valuable treasures, and one can say, with great regret, that Dumbarton Oaks will never be quite the same, nor will those of us who knew her in all the different aspects of a most wondrous life.

REMEMBERING BETTY BENSON

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Elizabeth Polk Benson was a remarkable woman. She played a critical role in establishing Pre-Columbian art as a discipline through her work at Dumbarton Oaks; she pioneered museology in her innovative exhibit strategy in the Philip Johnson Pavilion; and she made great contributions to the study of the ancient cultures of the pre-Columbian world. In addition to her many academic and administrative accomplishments, she was a very fine person, a dear friend and colleague.

For younger readers, I wish to emphasize how important her contributions were. She was a key figure in shaping contemporary pre-Columbian art history. Visitors to the Johnson Pavilion are commonly astounded at seeing those outstanding artifacts in a beautiful context, my wife, Sarah, and I included, separately, long before we were married. Once, when I brought a friend, an English lady, a former neighbor, into the gallery, she gasped, “My lord, it’s, it’s . . . not just terra-cotta!” Thousands of others have been similarly amazed and inspired by what Betty helped to create in the dearly beloved place called Dumbarton Oaks. Many an art historian yet unborn will owe a debt of gratitude to Betty. And not just art historians, because Betty had broad interests and many friends and colleagues; she was as interested in “dirt” archaeology as much as in anything else; and those diggers owe an equal debt to her. She was as interested in European and Latin American scholars as much as Americans. Whenever someone was visiting in town, she usually held a party for them, and she always wanted to meet and entertain Dumbarton Oaks Fellows.

In terms of Andean studies, Betty’s first major contribution at Dumbarton Oaks was her organizing the Chavín symposium of 1968, following the previous Olmec Conference. Sequencing the two earliest civilizations of the New World was a significant act, as the first two D.O. symposia resulted in published volumes, and they set high standards for all subsequent meetings and publications. Indeed, the Chavín volume is still required reading for anyone interested in the topic, as I am sure the many specialists in the topic will agree; and it is a fine thing that Dumbarton Oaks returned to the topic fifty years later, in 2018, with the symposium “Reconsidering the Chavín Phenomenon in the 21st Century”. It bears noting, too, how important those publications were. Our online world has made access to information easy, but has dulled the excitement of new publications. Every time a new D.O. conference volume was published, people took note. More often than not, you ordered a copy because you knew that it was the *non plus ultra* presentation of the topic at hand, even if it was not exactly in your area of official interest. It was Betty who worked to produce those outstanding volumes.

While Betty had wide interests throughout the ancient Americas, she was particularly interested in the Maya and the Moche. Indeed, more than once in her career, she returned to the topic of comparing these two contemporaneous ancient cultures. Some of the articles in her bibliography are such comparisons, including her 1988 article on deer hunting and her 1998 publication on jaguar symbolism. As is obvious from this list, she also wrote many articles on Moche topics. Indeed, her publication record is impressive by any standard, and even more so when we consider that she also was working on museum and administrative matters for D.O. at the same time. She wrote about individual objects, repeating motifs, and about animals, all favorite subjects of hers, especially the animals. Her approach to Moche

art was thematic, producing those insightful works with such intriguing titles as “The Bag with the Ruffled Top”, and “The Men Who Have Bags in their Mouths”. All such publications into the early 1990s were written at a time when much of Moche scholarship was carried out by the study of pottery collections, many of which lacked detailed proveniences. With Christopher Donnan of UCLA, Betty led Moche research during this time. Betty was quick to realize the importance of the discovery of elite tombs at Sipán, however, as noted in her 1993 article asking what the Sipán grave goods might tell us. That was another of her great strengths: she actively kept up with the field archaeologists as well as with the art historians and other researchers, so that she always was aware of recent discoveries and new trends in scholarship. A few years ago, my wife and I were astounded to see Betty at the January meeting of the Institute of Andean Studies, at the University of California, Berkeley; she was eager to learn more right up to the end. Remarkably, she began her Moche publications with a book and ended with another book, both with her own keen observations and insights, as well as expressions of the latest finds by other researchers. She literally “book-ended” her career.

I first came to know Betty through her first book, *The Mochica: A Culture of Peru*. It was published in 1972, and, at the time, it was the only monograph available in any language completely devoted to that ancient culture. Thus, when I was given the honor to serve as Director of Pre-Columbian Studies and Curator of the Pre-Columbian Collection here, I had the added delight of getting to know Betty. She was a generous, gracious, and kind person. My most cherished memories of her are the wonderful parties she held with Alban Eger, in their beautiful Bethesda home. She knew how to throw a party—plenty of alcohol and good food. My wife and I learned the advantages of pre-cooked, spiral-cut ham. The mix of people was always

interesting. I especially remember looking through a telescope that had been set up on a patio and how Betty always was considerate and interested in our youngest daughter, a grade school student, at the time, who still remembers looking at stars through that telescope, in a clear sky, on a crisp fall night.

Betty’s personal graciousness was matched by a strong *tonali*, as the Aztecs called it, or *camay*, in Quechua. When Luis Jaime Castillo and I organized the first off-site D.O. conference at the Larco Museum in Lima, we advised Betty and Chris Donnan that we wanted to dedicate the conference in their honor. Both of them were pleased by the gesture, but they did not wish to sit idly by; instead, they both asked for, and gave, papers that were subsequently published in the conference volume.

In 2011, on one of Betty’s almost-annual trips to the North Coast of Peru, she visited Luis Jaime and me, as he was excavating at San José de Moro, on the tall hill, filled with Moche walls, temples, and residences, that overlooks the modern town of Chepén. Betty had heard about this work and wanted to see the site. It was already late in the day. The digging had stopped and the sun was low. Betty asked if Luis Jaime and I could take her to Cerro Chepén. “Uh, well, Betty, it is a big hill, you know, and quite a climb. . . .” “That’s OK.” “Ummm . . . well, are you sure you want to do this?” “Oh yes.” So, we drove her out to the base of the hill. Only standing at the foot of that hill, looking up at the several hundred-foot climb over rocks piled on top of more rocks did Betty finally relent. It was sad, sweet, and amusing, all at the same time. Betty had a way of artfully doing something like a “slow burn”, as was perfected by many a silent-film comedian. I can still see her standing straight as a ramrod at the foot of the hill and then slowly raising her head to look at the summit and see that slight, but quite clear look of recognition come across her face that a

climb up that cerro just was not going to happen.

I offer one more example of Betty's spirit. When she moved to her apartment in Bethesda, she contacted my Sarah, who has had a business in selling books online. Betty asked if she could help sell some of her books. Sarah agreed, and we went to visit Betty. We selected about three dozen books, put them in cardboard boxes, and awkwardly hustled them down the hallway and into the elevator. We still were challenged to move the boxes from the hallway out the door and down the street to our car, however. Betty said, "Wait a minute", (as if we had a choice) and scooted down the hallway. The next thing we knew, we saw her pushing one of those large, brass carts, the kind you see at upscale hotels, with long vertical poles on all corners and a big brass ball at the top, pushed by doormen dressed like stereotypical Latin American dictators. But it was Betty who was pushing the cart, not someone out of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and it was hard to know if she was actually pushing it, or kind of being dragged along with it by the momentum of its careening down the hallway, but it got the job done. And so did Betty. She not only had smarts, she had pluck and lots of it. My whole family and I admired her as an exceptional human being, as well as an important scholar.

I have very many memories of Betty, but the one that remains with me, strongest of all, is when she looked at me, straight in the eye, and said, "Always remember this: All of this—the fellowships, the library, and the conferences—is due to the collections. There would be no Dumbarton Oaks, no library, no researchers or fellows, without the collections." I took her advice to heart and still do. It is as true at the Peabody Museum and many another museum as it is here. More importantly, that was Betty, getting to the heart of the matter and no monkeying around. She was gracious, kind, magnanimous, generous, and smart. She is greatly missed. I am glad that we are honoring her, and I appreciate the opportunity to share my memories of her.

Joan Wilentz

When I was asked to talk about Betty at her memorial service held at Dumbarton Oaks on October 4, 2018, I realized that most of the people in attendance would be Pre-Columbian scholars at the start of the academic season, present in Washington, D.C. for an annual research meeting. As that word “season” popped into my head it triggered the phrase “A Man for All Seasons”, the name of a 1960 hit play that premiered in London’s West End theater district, and the 1966 film based on it. I realized I was not sure what the phrase meant, so I did what we all do these days: I googled it. I discovered that the playwright, Robert Bolt, wrote in homage to Sir Thomas More, a man of conscience who refused to condone King Henry VIII’s divorce of Catherine of Aragon so that he could marry Anne Boleyn. It was a stance that would cost More his life. I found that Bolt had taken his title from a contemporary of More’s, Robert Whittington, who, in 1520, wrote:

More is a man of an angel’s wit and singular learning. I know not his fellow. For where is the man of that gentleness, lowliness, and affability? And as time requirith, a man of marvelous mirth and pastimes, and sometime of as sad gravity. A man for all seasons.

Wow, I thought. That’s not a bad description of Betty, too! So with some further play on the word season, I will describe some aspects of Betty’s life beyond her Pre-Columbian seasons.

The first I will call her cooking season (word play intended). It came to my attention shortly after we met. I was living in New York at the time, but met Betty at a party in Washington, introduced by a mutual friend. We hit it off right away, so much so that at some point later

in the evening, when she mentioned that she would be coming to New York in a couple of weeks, I invited her to stay with me, which she did, cementing the start of our friendship.

These events happened shortly after Betty had completed a course in Chinese cooking with the wife of the then-current Chinese ambassador. This was at a time when Chinese cuisine in America was largely a matter of chop suey with a side order of extra noodles. However, this was a sign of Betty’s great good taste, along with her excellence as a hostess. All her life Betty enjoyed giving small, but elegant, dinner parties, liking to mix people, but ever sensitive to putting guests at ease. Her Chinese know-how did not mean she created whole meals in that style, but she could add touches, like shrimp toast in the cocktail hour, or almond cookies to embellish dessert. I particularly remember the almond cookies, because they were so succulent. I later learned that perhaps the reason was that the shortening used was not butter, or oil, or Crisco, but pure unadulterated lard. Certainly they were not kosher cookies, but they were delicious.

Preceding and overlapping her cooking season was Betty’s active pursuit of painting and art history. She was an English major at Wellesley College, and whether she took studio courses there, I don’t know. I do know that she spent a *wanderjahr* in Europe after graduation, working for the U.S. Air Force in London during the winter, and touring the continent in summer, ending up in Italy, where Florence was a highlight. In any case, once back in the States, she was painting seriously, studying one summer with German born American painter Hans Hoffman (1880–1966), considered to be both a predecessor of, and an influence on, the Abstract Expressionists. Betty’s work, mostly landscapes, but also abstracts, was exhibited at galleries in D.C. She won a regional contest sponsored by the Corcoran Gallery, a fact I learned while sorting through her books and

papers, discovering a letter from the Corcoran congratulating her for receiving the first class medal in a competitive exhibition. Betty also found time to acquire an M.A. in art history from The Catholic University of America around this time, no doubt part of her credentials for her positions at the National Gallery of Art. However, painting as a serious pursuit had to be abandoned once Dumbarton Oaks beckoned.

Still another season of Betty's creative life is represented by her vocal studies. Those who have heard her lecture, or interacted with her in everyday discourse, know she had a lovely speaking voice. Few know that she had studied voice. I don't know when, or for how long, or with whom, but among her books and papers I found scores and librettos, as well as her annotated sheet music of lieder by Schubert, Schumann, and other composers. She remained an avid vocal arts supporter, concert goer, and CD collector throughout her life. I can add that I inadvertently discovered how serious a student she was when I was sitting next to her at a Schubert recital and heard her almost inaudible mumblings as the soloist was performing, "My God!" I said to myself. "She knows all the words!"

Finally, there was a season of Betty's that never ceased until her death, and that is writing. Her output was prodigious—articles, books, commentaries, catalogues and the like, but in addition to works of Pre-Columbian scholarship, Betty produced poetry and fiction. As with painting, she was good enough to have her work presented to the public early on; her poems appeared in literary magazines, and she also wrote short stories and novels. At archaeological sites she invariably carried a spiral-bound notebook where she jotted down her observations, descriptions, and sometimes poems or sketches of people, places, or things.

Longer excursions into creative writing were reserved for summer seasons. Maine was the venue. Betty probably had discovered Deer Isle in Penobscot Bay through college friends whose parents had summer places there. In the sixties, Betty bought a small cottage in the town of Sunset, so-called because it had western views. Indeed, many's the time we would trek up the small rise from the house to the top of the road, martini pitcher in hand, to watch gorgeous sunsets over the bay. The cottage was charming and primitive. It had electricity, yes, but plumbing was the outhouse, and water was supplied by a well until successive years of drought meant resorting to bottled water. It was blissfully quiet, ideal for writing, and here Betty worked on novels and stories, and in a lighter vein, turned to Maine itself as a backdrop for a series of mystery stories which were published in *Ellery Queen* and *Alfred Hitchcock* mystery magazines. She used a pseudonym: Augusta Hancock—Augusta being the capital of Maine, and Hancock the county where it is located.

Maine is where Betty wanted to be buried, not on Deer Isle itself, but in Penobscot Bay. She was not a religious person. She wanted no funeral, and requested to be to be cremated with her ashes deposited in the Bay.

In recounting aspects of Betty's life I have not alluded to the specific traits that Whittington saw in More, the mirth and gravity, the singular learning and affability, nor have I emphasized the qualities of conscience and integrity that Bolt so admitted, but I believe that Betty's many friends and colleagues are well aware of them. She was, indeed, a woman for all seasons.

MY COUSIN BETTY BENSON

Martha King

A friend of mine, more genealogically adept than me, tells me Betty was my third cousin, once removed. My great-great grandmother and Betty's great-grandmother were sisters.

I suppose this tells you a lot about the South. However, the visceral connection is via my grandmother Agnes, who was Betty's second cousin. Agnes was an artist, quite a fine watercolorist, and a woman who struggled all her life for autonomy and independence despite all the social rules of the Southern society into which she had been born. She was one of Betty's earliest supporters, helping her to steel herself against the waves of disapproval that stood in the way of her ambitions.

I met Betty first because of Agnes: as a teenager and already an art lover (Agnes again) I wanted to visit Washington, D.C. to see paintings by Chaim Soutine, which I had learned from a book were in the Phillips Collection. Agnes arranged the visit. I came up from Chapel Hill by bus and stayed in Betty's apartment across from a park, and near the zoo. She warned me that I might hear lions in the night. At that time she was working at the National Gallery—and we hit it off instantly, not only about Soutine, but the Gallery had just purchased a large crucifixion by Dalí, which was attracting much media attention. My total lack of enthusiasm for that work won Betty's heart.

There she was—both practical and aesthetically alive, both independent and in the best sense of the word, a lady. Those last two were definitely opposites in what was then contemporary thinking, when I was a teenager, some 60-odd years ago.

There's a common saying that one chooses one's friends, but gets the family one is born into. Wrong of course. We tolerate family and choose the family members we cherish, and because we do, the bond is then quite special. I am now, and will always be, tremendously proud of Betty's life and work.

As for the family part, my daughter Mallory gave her son the middle name of the family that connects Agnes, Betty, and me: Garth. He is Kirin Garth Sawasdikosol, now age sixteen. Yes, he is part Thai, and he is now sleeping on a bed made on the Garth plantation for the mother of the house, Betty's great-great grandmother. It was her gift to us.

Sleep well, Betty. We are grateful for the model you set for all of us.

