

# Remembering a Teacher

by Judith Witkoff Sussman

Last September Hunter College's art department arranged a memorial tribute to Edna Wells Luetz, who headed the department from 1948 to 1962 and directed the master's program in art through 1973. Several of Luetz's associates and students spoke on that occasion; they recalled—with great affection and some lingering awe—a woman who had a clear vision of the kind of education students should receive (in a word, the best), and the determination to see that they received it. We know that Luetz never stopped caring about Hunter students as her will stipulated a major gift to benefit them.



Edna Wells Luetz c. 1960.

Judith Witkoff Sussman ('59), one of Luetz's students, sent us the following tribute of her own; it arrived too late for inclusion in the memorial ceremony, but we thought it a very good addition to this collection of writings about teaching. Those who knew Luetz can see if their experience of this outstanding teacher agrees with that recounted by Mrs. Sussman; the rest of us can enjoy it as a picture of the complex

relationship between a memorable teacher and an admiring but independent-minded student.

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When the Hunter Magazine arrived, I thumbed through and saw the bold announcement that Mrs. Luetz had died. She was ninety. What a long life!

She was an alumna of Hunter herself. She was head of the art department when I was a student there. She saw to it that I received a scholarship. For me she was a strong teacher, and I wanted to do work for her—even though she laughed at me when I tried to explain the stage design I submitted for *King Lear*.

She was sharp and impersonal as a Chinese cleaver. Her life was her own, its thrust clear. She was not touched by me as I was by her. Any opportunity I was to take was simply mine to take.

When Paul Tillich appeared she took the entire class down just to hear a great man speak.

I walked in to see her one day near the end of my Hunter education. She was talking to one of her peers, a woman, and I felt much the intruder, as a student might when two grownups have a tête-à-tête. I told her that I would be stopping school for a time as I was pregnant. She cried out accusingly, "What did you do that for?" I had no words.

I returned to Hunter and graduated much the better for having experienced motherhood.

When my husband, my two daughters Hannah and Rachel, and I went to Europe in 1962, she invited us to stop and visit her at her home in Konstanz. Fred Riedl [Edna Luetz's long-time friend]

was there and it was he who took my husband, Hannah, and me to a beautiful hotel on Lake Konstanz and spent a leisurely afternoon with us during which we took refreshment of food and environment.

She minded the baby, six-month-old Rachel. It was when she held her up, or when I was changing the baby's diaper, that she said, "Look Freddy, it's just like a cherub." She had not before looked at a baby so closely, I gathered. She was childless and already a widow when I met her in 1954 or '55.

Two years ago, on a trip to New York after an absence of 18 years, I telephoned her. She must have been surprised and rather taken aback by my brashness, for she asked, "Why are you calling me?" She told me to call the next day or so, and when I did and suggested coming to see her or meeting for tea, she turned me down. She was watching the funeral of the Pope on TV and that took precedence. She was a serious Catholic.

On my return to Albuquerque, I wrote her a letter in which I told her that, after 26 years of formulating a retort to something said by Robert Motherwell (who taught art history when I was at Hunter), I had gotten the answer on a walk through Central Park. My retort, I thought, was brilliant, but she never replied.

Now Edna Wells Luetz is dead. That makes a difference to me for reasons I cannot explain.

photo courtesy of Dorothy Doob Baumritter