Dumbarton Oaks, I. Introduction

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Dumbarton Oaks

I. INTRODUCTION

William R. Tyler

The Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection became part of Harvard University just thirty years ago. This seems an appropriate time to recall its origins and objectives, and to describe its organization and activities today. The opportunity offered by the Harvard Library Bulletin to publish an article on Dumbarton Oaks is greatly appreciated, and it is hoped that it will be of interest not only to friends of Harvard but to all those concerned with the protection and survival of humanist values in a world subject to unprecedented change with unforeseeable consequences for mankind.

The article is in two parts, the first of which deals with the Center for Byzantine Studies and with the Research Library, which lie at the heart of the scholarly activities of Dumbarton Oaks and absorb the greater part of its resources. The second part will follow in the next issue of the Harvard Library Bulletin and covers the Byzantine Collection and certain other works of art at Dumbarton Oaks, the Pre-Columbian Collection and scholarly program, and the Garden Library and garden program.

In November 1940, when Dumbarton Oaks was formally conveyed by its founders, Mr. and Mrs. Robert Woods Bliss, to Harvard University, the fortunes and prospects of western civilization were at a low ebb. France had fallen, the United Kingdom seemed to be about to fall, and there were many who feared that Hitler’s “New Order” was destined to become the new reality for Europe. Those present on that occasion were poignantly conscious both of the tragic character of the times and of the symbolic quality of the event as an affirmation of faith in the future.

Dumbarton Oaks was acquired by Mr. and Mrs. Bliss in 1920. Mr. Bliss retired from the Foreign Service in 1933, his last post having been that of Ambassador to Argentina. Mrs. Bliss and he then settled
down at Dumbarton Oaks in order to undertake the task of planning and carrying out the extensive alterations and additions required to display their collection of Byzantine and related art and to provide for library and office facilities for the time when Dumbarton Oaks was to be handed over to Harvard.

It is hard to say just when it was that Mr. and Mrs. Bliss decided to transform Dumbarton Oaks into a center for scholarly research and publication in the humanist tradition, but it was probably shortly after they became its owners. From that moment on, they devoted the rest of their lives to the fulfillment of their ideal. When Harvard took over, Dr. John Seymour Thacher was appointed Director, a position he relinquished only after Mrs. Bliss’s death in 1969. During some thirty years, Mr. and Mrs. Bliss, in close cooperation with Mr. Thacher, continued to enrich the collections and to add to the buildings and facilities. A wing in which to house the Garden Library, designed by Frederic Rhinelander King, was completed in 1963; and a museum for the Pre-Columbian Collection, designed by Philip Johnson, was inaugurated in the same year. Unhappily Mr. Bliss died in 1962, and thus did not live to see the completed buildings.

In addition to the scholarly activities described in the article, music plays an important role in the life of Dumbarton Oaks. Mr. and Mrs. Bliss were very fond of music and liked to invite friends from time to time for a musical evening. Some of the greatest artists performed on these occasions, and in April 1947 Stravinsky himself conducted the “Dumbarton Oaks Concerto,” which he had composed and dedicated to Mr. and Mrs. Bliss. After they had left Dumbarton Oaks, this musical tradition was perpetuated through a group called the Friends of Music at Dumbarton Oaks, under whose sponsorship a series of concerts is given each year in the music room. Students and teachers of music as well as performing artists from the local community are invited to attend the concerts and recitals.

Mrs. Bliss herself defined the aims and the role of Dumbarton Oaks in terms expressing simply and movingly the values which inspired the vision shared by her and Mr. Bliss for the future of the place they loved so much. I can think of no better way to introduce the reader to Dumbarton Oaks than by quoting the following passage from the preamble to the will of Mrs. Bliss:

I call upon the present and future President and Fellows of Harvard College and all those who determine its policies, to remember that Dumbarton Oaks...
is conceived in a new pattern, where quality and not number shall determine
the choice of its scholars; that it is the home of the Humanities, not a mere
aggregation of books and objects of art; that the house itself and the gardens
have their educational importance and that all are of humanistic value.

Those responsible for scholarship at Dumbarton Oaks should remember
that the Humanities cannot be fostered by confusing instruction with edu-
cation; that it was my husband’s as well as it is my wish that the Mediterranea
interpretation of the Humanist disciplines shall predominate; that gardens have
their place in the Humanist order of life; and that trees are noble elements to
be protected by successive generations and are not to be neglected or lightly
destroyed. I charge those responsible for carrying forward the life at Dumb-
arton Oaks to be guided by the standards set there during the lifetime of my
husband and me. The distinction of the scholars themselves as well as of their
writings; the interpretation of the texts and the arts; the quality of the music
performed; the free discussion within the limits of good deportment, and the
whole tempered by the serenity of open spaces and ancient trees; all these are
as integral a part of Humanism at Dumbarton Oaks as are the Library and the
Collections. The fulfillment of this vision of high intellectual adventure seen
through the open gates of Dumbarton Oaks will add lustre to Harvard, to the
academic tone of our country and to scholarship throughout the world.
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