

## Mildred Constantine, pioneer in graphic design musealization

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By Samuel López-Lago

Mildred Constantine did a great job, achieving the penetration of design objects in the field of museology.



Mildred “*Connie*” Constantine was born on June 28, 1913, in Brooklyn, Nueva York. Her father was a prestigious jeweler and penman, while her mother was a caring housewife with outstanding abilities for embroidery. She was raised with them, having, according to herself,

a simple childhood, within the context of a midlow class jewish family.<sup>1</sup> Once she finished high school with good results, in 1930, Constantine joined the *College Art Association*, where she performed stenography and editorial assistance for *Parnassus* magazine.

Afterwards, she received her *Bachelor's degree* and *Master's degree* in New York University, attending later to a postgraduate in the Autonomous National University of México. There, she joined the Committee against War and Fascism, discovering during her journeys how certain groups in the area applied graphic design as a resource to exalt populist sentiments. In 1937, she joined the *Coordinator Office of Inter-American Affairs*, an organism depending of the U.S. Government, where she'd meet René D'Harnoncourt, who would later become the director of the Museum of Modern Art of New York.

Her contact with Latin America allowed her to organize a large collection of latin american posters for the Library of Congress, currently part of the *Metropolitan Museum of Art* collection. In 1993, she married Ralph Bettelheim, although in her professional field she kept her maiden name. Ten years later she joined the Department of Architecture & Design of the MoMA, founded by Phillip Johnson; shortly after D'Harnoncourt took charge of the prestigious museum, and, aware of the investigator's keen interest in graphic design, didn't hesitate on encouraging her to pursue this way.

The MoMa will be the point of mounting for several expositions about Graphic Design, many times of social interest, such as *Polio Posters*, of 1948. Her interest in graphic design will continue to emerge through time in other exhibitions such as *Olivetti: Design in Industry* in 1952, *Signs in the Street* in 1954 or *Lettering by Hand* in 1962. Also, she devoted individual exhibitions to renowned designers such as Bruno Munaria, Tadanori Yokoo and Massimo Vignelli. Without question, one of her grand contributions in this field was *Word and Image*, an outstanding retrospective of the museum's poster collection, which cause great impact and whose catalog is a fundamental publishing in order to understand the history of posters. Constantine also compiled what she called *Collection Ephemera*, an anthology of stationeries, cards and other graphic objects collected by German typographer Jan Tschichold.

Despite Mildred left MoMA in 1971, she exercised independently as researcher and exhibition curator, featuring *Frontiers in Fiber: The Americans* (1988) and *Small Works in Fiber* (2002), co-organized with Jack Lenor Larson. She also wrote several books, including *Art Nouveau* (1959), *Contemporary Package Design* (1959), *Beyond Craft: The art fabric* (1973), *Revolutionary Soviet Film Posters* (1974) or *Tina Modotti: A Fragile Life* (1998).

She died December 9th, 2008, due to a heart attack. Death surprised her as she was working on an ambitious project about the universal history of textile. Clearly she'll be remembered for allowing the entrance in the "house of muses" to certain fields, such as graphic design, back then marginated as objects of study; those "fugitive materials", as she described them herself.<sup>2</sup> Thank you, Connie.

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1. CONSTANTINE, Mildred, *The Museum of Modern Art Oral History Program*, Entrevista realizada por Sharon Zane. «Testimonio de Mildred Constantine», 11 de abril de 1991. Cinta 1, Cara 1.
  2. HELLER, Steven. (2008). *Mildred Constantine, 95, MoMA Curator, Is Dead*. *New York Times*.

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