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Lyla Vivian Marshall Harcoff: The Pursuits of a Small-Town Dreamer

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The name Lyla Vivian Marshall is one to associate with passion, and on first read, her life is simply fantastic, full of excitement, and enviable. However, the story of Lyla is not just a shadow to be illuminated, but an example of hope. Exploring a Native American Mesa, moving to Chicago to pursue art full-time, studying abroad in Paris, and opening her own gallery in California all demonstrate Lyla’s intentional attitude toward life. Lyla was one of the most interesting and successful members of the class of 1904, yet information about her life is hard to find—her fullest biography comes not from art historians or other scholars, but is
published on the website of a gallery that carries her work. She exemplified the life of a beautiful exception because she lived beyond fear to pursue her dreams, disregarding pessimism, pursuing hope, and making her small-town dreams a reality.

At first glance, the memories of Oak Lawn in Lafayette, Indiana, the childhood farm of Lyla, epitomize classic rural agrarian society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A closer look, however, reveals inklings toward a slightly unconventional atmosphere. Gravel roads at Oak Lawn are the first indication that the farm was out of the ordinary. During major storms only those fortunate enough to have added gravel to their driveways were able to leave their homes, as opposed to those with dirt driveways who were forced to wait out the drying process. Furthermore, according to an early family historian, the Marshalls stocked a library “far more excellent than the library” of even a city home. The man of the house, George Linley, thought beyond his life as a farmer and tinkered with the more scientific approaches to agrarian life. Consequently, he became involved in the experimental matters at Purdue University and became increasingly knowledgeable about the agricultural sciences of the time. Could the irregular emphasis on formal education in the Marshall household have
prompted Lyla to think beyond cultural expectations? George had a fairly simple education until he took matters into his own hands, acted on his ambition, and partnered with Purdue to gain beneficial knowledge to aid the community. Perhaps the expansive Marshall library led Lyla toward the life of the “New Woman” and the search for a home beyond her childhood farm’s pastures. Her father’s experimental quest for knowledge seemed to have fostered a deep appreciation for intellect in this young farm girl and pushed Lyla toward independence.

Lyla made her first documented step toward personal independence with the pursuit of higher education by enrolling at Purdue University and joining the class of 1904. Though she was initially from Oak Lawn in the Lafayette area, the move to West Lafayette and life on campus opened up a new world for young Lyla. This uncommon choice of pursuing higher education at a time when it was not an expectation for women is even more noteworthy when considering that Lyla had an older brother, Linley Marshall. Linley, though two years older, did not move to Purdue University until he followed Lyla’s footsteps and joined the graduating class of 1905.

At the start of her college career, Lyla dabbled, as current college students do. She tinkered with her
interests until she solidified her true passion of art. The 1904 *Debris* lists her as a member of the Philalethean Literary Society her freshman through junior years. As a freshman, she served as a literary society critic and secretary. Not until her senior year did Lyla find her calling as an artist on the *Debris* staff. Though Lyla’s family described her as having artistic interests from early childhood, inspired by the beautiful surroundings of Oak Lawn, Lyla truly seems to have discovered and honed her interests while in college. Her time at Purdue University was a time of friendship and self-discovery, similar to the experience of current college students. Lyla graduated with a bachelor’s in science and a focus in art, a surprising achievement considering art was not offered at Purdue University as a formal course of study in 1904. Lyla entered the University as a student and emerged as an artist, with her senior thesis on the topic of French Impressionism.

Many themes of college life remain consistent, and Lyla faced the same kind of discrimination in the 1900s as anyone exceptional or different might still experience in the twenty-first century. Lyla was one of eight women in the class of 1904, a class of around 230 students. The men of the class were not overly hospitable to the entrance of women to the University, and this coed tension may have been a major force en-
couraging Lyla to join the Philalethean Society. The Philalethean Society was the premier women’s debating society at Purdue University and a social safe haven for women at the predominantly male university. Weekly meetings afforded the female members a place of mental exercise and community.\textsuperscript{11} Not only was the club beneficial for forming friendships, but it also aided in helping to form well-rounded women at a technical institute like Purdue. The Philalethean Society undoubtedly aided Lyla by creating an atmosphere of inclusion at the University, not only for her character, but also for her slightly off-kilter interests as compared to the athletic and mechanical or agricultural focus of the male-dominated student body.

Upon graduation in 1904, Lyla listed in the \textit{Debris} her intention of furthering her art education at the Art Institute of Chicago, and true to her word, Lyla followed through on her plans. She enrolled in the Art Institute for two years and, as she grew more active in the art scene, journeyed to the Académie de Paris to continue her education.\textsuperscript{12} She took three separate stints abroad in 1905, 1907, and 1912—another unusual choice for a time period when many of her friends were settling down and starting families.\textsuperscript{13} She did not allow the fear of danger or traveling alone hinder the pursuit of her true passion—art. Lyla exemplified
independence, and undoubtedly gained incomparable insight into the art world through her journeys.

A whirlwind of a woman, the young Lyla found herself in Chicago with years of artistic experience and no opportunity to practice her passion. According to an interview with her daughter, Jane Martindale, Lyla painted ceramics at Marshall Fields and Company in Chicago as a fine arts designer. Lyla desired to practice her honed artistic talent but was unable to find work teaching, so she intentionally pursued art with the only job available to her in the Marshall Fields fine arts department. Once more Lyla centered herself in a new, major artistic trend. Large department stores had begun to install fine arts departments to offer handcrafted merchandise and, in the Chicago area especially, many fledgling artists from the Art Institute were hired for work.

Lyla worked at Marshall Fields for close to a year to accrue two weeks of vacation time. With the time, she fancied a trip out West and bought a train ticket. Her two-week trip grew into over two months away from home, as Lyla on a whim stepped off the train at a station in Winslow, Arizona, and took a pack train out to the Second Mesa, one of three mesas upon which the Hopi Indians centered their civilizations. Pack trains, or lines of animals, were used on especially difficult
terrain. The 1914 Purdue *Alumnus* reports that Lyla “mounted to the Second Mesa of Hopiland” where she summered, sketching and painting the native culture until the change of seasons.\textsuperscript{18} Her trip culminated in the creation of six finalized, beautiful canvases.\textsuperscript{19} Lyla’s summer with the tribe allotted her a deeper connection with the native lifestyles, reflected in many of her later works.

According to Jane, the story neared the more fantastic realm as Lyla packed up her belongings toward the end of the summer, intending to take the train. Her return stub only allowed her one seat, and a nameless conductor informed Lyla that she would need to buy a second ticket for her paintings. Unable to afford a ticket, Lyla remained undaunted and slept through the night in a shelter of her own paintings, weathering a rather untimely storm in a shield of canvas. Upon the train’s return the next day, the conductor was shocked to see the woman had survived the night alone. The powerful symbol of womanhood impressed even Mr. Ripley, the CEO of the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad line, who coincidentally seemed to be riding the train that very day.\textsuperscript{20} Ripley purchased two of her paintings on the spot, perhaps as impressed with her spunk and tenacity as he was with her artistic ability, and allowed Lyla to continue her journey in spite of the miserly conductor.\textsuperscript{21}
In this way, Lyla was once more flung into the beginning of an art movement. Just a few years earlier the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad line had developed an interest in art acquisition. Encouraging eastern artists to paint native western tribes, the company began commissioning artwork in 1892 and then used the paintings on calendars or advertisements for westward movement in the early 1900s. The calendars truly began to gain popularity about the time of Lyla’s stint in Arizona, and they remained desirable through the middle of the century.

Proving facts of the beautiful tale is a difficult task; however, several clues allow a layer of doubt to be whit-tled away. According to the Sullivan Goss Gallery, which carries Lyla’s paintings today, the remaining paintings from that summer have tide marks marring the back of the canvas. The gallery explains the origin of these marks as due to a severe soaking of the canvas. Not only do the tide marks point to the truth of the tale, but an old Purdue Alumnus clipping also mentions Lyla’s work, “Moonlight in Mishongnovi,” as purchased by the Santa Fe Railroad. Additionally, Artists in California, 1786–1940 lists Lyla’s work as displayed in a Santa Fe Railroad art exhibit. The story of her overnight stay on the railroad platform seems plausible, given Lyla’s determined character.
Though her next trip is only briefly mentioned in the Purdue alumni magazine, Lyla received the honor in 1914 to join “a small party of artists to take a six weeks’ sketching trip through Estes Park, Colo., the Yellowstone Park, and Shoshone Canyon as a guest of the Burlington railroad.”

Perhaps her trip served as an advertising technique for the newly expanding railroad line to stay competitive.

She lived a busy lifestyle, refraining from settling but remaining attached to the University after her graduation in 1904. Lyla proved her dedication to Purdue by subscribing to the Purdue Alumnus upon the magazine’s initial publication. She even carved the time out of her busy schedule in 1914 to return for the Purdue Alumni Day and visit her colleagues once more.

Purdue University was evidently very dear to Lyla, and as she grew more practiced in her art, she even donated several paintings to the University. Two paintings were donated specifically for Fowler Hall: one of Rural Route 1, and a second of Rip Van Winkle, which was placed in the College Inn in 1914.

Though Lyla’s choice of Purdue may have been initially tied to her father’s experimental interests at the University, the decision to pursue higher education should earn Lyla a good deal of respect. Higher education was not a practical necessity for women in the
early 1900s—especially for Lyla, who no doubt was busy enough on the family farm. Lyla’s step of attending Purdue University set her apart from just a small-town dreamer and pushed Lyla to reach her childhood aspirations.

In 1916, Lyla married Constantine Harcoff, a Russian engineer.\(^{31}\) Lyla made the choice to take on her husband’s name in spite of all the work she had done building up the name of “Lyla Marshall” in the art community. Though Lyla was a self-made woman, cultural patterns still swayed her lifestyle, and to maintain a maiden name or hyphenate both names as is currently common was nearly unheard of at the time.\(^{32}\) The couple lived together in Chicago for several years, but it was still too early for Lyla to fathom settling down, even after Jane arrived. The small family moved to Santa Barbara in 1927, and Lyla served as the artist managing director of the Balcony Gallery at 29 East de la Guerra Street.\(^{33}\) *The Argus*, a critical art magazine, mentions Lyla as having the most “striking” painting at an exhibit, proving Lyla had the artistic skill to be competitive in the industry.\(^{34}\) Lyla was actively involved in the Santa Barbara art scene upon the family’s move and joined the Art League of Santa Barbara.\(^{35}\)

The mid-1930s once more catapulted Lyla into the hub of art and culture, working through the Great De-
pression with many famous counterparts for the Federal Art Project (FAP), a branch of the Second Deal Works Progress Administration. The program encouraged art appreciation and supported many young artists before they later reached fame. Since Lyla worked in the Mural Division, she may have had the opportunity to work alongside a young Jackson Pollock or Arshile Gorky. Lyla is credited as the author of three murals for the Santa Ynez High School. One of the murals is of Native American influence, possibly a reflection of her time spent with the Hopi tribe in her younger years.

By 1941, the FAP was winding down and facing budget cuts in the face of World War II, but Lyla had already sensed the changing tides and moved on to build her own studio. She asked a strong, independent contemporary of the time, Lutah Mariah Riggs, to rework an old carriage house into a studio and living quarters. Lutah was one of the nation’s first female architects and more specifically the very first woman with an architect’s license in Santa Barbara. She lived the lifestyle of a woman of independence, even compared to today’s standards. She never married, preferring to balance several part-time jobs and pursue her passions. Though scorned as a woman in her field, even by a partner at her firm, Lutah proved herself and
her skill and established quite a following, designing unique styles inspired by exotic foreign cultures. Her patrons ranged from locals to Hollywood movie stars.

It is possible to imagine the kindred relationship that may have formed between these two women who did not fit the mold of their era. Each pushed boundaries and practiced her art form with skill and irrepressible vitality. Lutah helped Lyla design the studio of her dreams, with a bit of humor. Retrofitting an old carriage house, the phrase “Adios Caballos,” or “Goodbye Horses,” danced in the doorway.

In 1956, after years of travel and excitement, Lyla said good-bye to her family and passed away. A woman of determination, she instilled that quality in Jane, who petitioned for their home in Santa Barbara to become a historical monument.

Starting her young life with the choice of Purdue University and higher education, Lyla swam against the cultural current and societal dictates to passionately pursue her goals. She acted intentionally, demonstrating strength of character and a nearly infectious vitality for life that seemed to parallel passion. Lyla metamorphosed from a small-town farm girl into a high-fashion Californian gallery director. To learn from the life of such an irrepressible woman is a beautiful opportunity afforded to those who follow. However, she lived more than an interesting life. Lyla Vivian
Marshall Harcoff may have been a cultural anomaly, but she demonstrated the power of determination and hope by achieving so much beyond the usual realm of possibility.

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Weigle, Frederic H. 1934. Purdue *Alumni Directory* (1875-1934). The Virginia Kelly Karnes Archives and Special Collections Research Center, Purdue University Libraries.

**Notes**

3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. “Lyla Vivian Marshall,” *Purdue Debris*, 1904, the Virginia Kelly Karnes Archives and Special Collections Research Center, Purdue University Libraries.
11. “The Philalethean Society,” *Purdue Debris*, 1901, the Virginia Kelly Karnes Archives and Special Collections Research Center, Purdue University Libraries.
19. Purdue *Alumnus* II (1914), the Virginia Kelly Karnes Archives and Special Collections Research Center, Purdue University Libraries.
21. Ibid.
25. Purdue *Alumnus* VI (1919), the Virginia Kelly Karnes Archives and Special Collections Research Center, Purdue University Libraries.
27. Purdue *Alumnus* VI (1919).
28. For more information on the highly competitive nature of the railroad lines in the early 1900s, see the life of Fred Harvey, an entrepreneur managing the food services and eventual resorts in the growing West. Stephen Fried, *Appetite for America: How*
Visionary Businessman Fred Harvey Built a Railroad Hospitality Empire that Civilized the Wild West (New York: Bantam Books, 2010).

29. Purdue *Alumnus* II (1914).

30. Purdue *Alumnus* VI (1919).


32. Lucy Stone, married in 1855, is the earliest recorded example of a woman keeping her maiden name. The Lucy Stone League, in honor of Lucy Stone, devoted efforts to help women retain personal identities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A study by Harvard focusing on Harvard alumni listed 4 percent of women as keeping their names after being married in 1975. C. Goldin and M. Shim, “Making a Name: Women’s Surnames at Marriage and Beyond,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 18, no. 2 (2004): 143–60.

33. Frederic H. Weigle, Purdue *Alumni Directory* (1875-1934). The Virginia Kelly Karnes Archives and Special Collections Research Center, Purdue University Libraries.


39. One remarkable design by Riggs was a temple and yoga studio inspired by ancient South Indian temples. She designed the temple and conferred with Frank Lloyd Wright for the landscaping design. Ann Louise Bardach, “Shangra-La,” *LA Yoga Magazine* 9, no. 3 (2010), http://layogamagazine.com/content/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=566%3Aashangri-la&catid=160%3Aapril-2010-issue&Itemid=55.


42. Ibid.