

HELENE J. KANTOR

JULY 15, 1919–JANUARY 13, 1993

Professor Helene J. Kantor died of heart failure at Mitchell Hospital on January 13, 1993. She was born with *amortous congenital myopathy*, a rare muscular disease that progressively robbed her of her muscles and increasingly made her great mind the prisoner of a failing body. During the past two years, Helene Kantor suffered substantially from this disease. Despite this, her love for life, her unflinching optimism, and her radiant spirit not only sustained her throughout her life but also made her a heroic example of the triumph of mind over body.

Helene Kantor was born in Chicago in July 1919. Soon after she moved with her parents to Bloomington, Indiana, where her father took up a teaching position at Indiana University. She was taught at home by her mother, Helen Rich, until the age of fifteen when she entered college. Her vast and impressive knowledge of classical, medieval, and Renaissance art and literature was the product of her “cottage” education and her mother’s devotion to her upbringing. An accomplished artist herself, Helen Rich soon realized the artistic talent in Helene Kantor and devoted a great deal of time fostering it. Helene Kantor began to study the piano at an early age and developed sufficient skill to play Mozart’s sonatas with her teacher.

Confined to a life at home in the countryside, Helene Kantor developed an immense interest in animals and nature. She initially wanted to become a physician. She entered college and took a B.A. in zoology/biology. She was eventually dissuaded from pursuing her field of interest and was forced to study humanities, which was not unfamiliar to her—thanks to her mother’s teaching and the numerous trips they took together to Europe and the Middle East. Helene Kantor received the Edward L. Ryerson Fellowship for graduate study and entered the University of Chicago in 1938 and completed her Ph.D. in 1945. She was awarded the Alvin K. Brown Fellowship in 1943 and the Edward L. Ryerson Fellowship in 1944 for outstanding study in archaeology. She accepted a Research Assistant appointment in 1945 and became Assistant Professor in 1951. She was promoted to Associate Professor, then to Professor in 1963. Helene Kantor retired from the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago in October 1989, after a long and productive career in teaching and scholarship.

A scholar of impeccable credentials, Helene was also an exceptionally gifted teacher. To be unprepared for a class was for her an unthinkable act.

While she was active teaching, she taught her classes having read or at least having seen the latest work on the subject at hand. While she presented her lectures articulately and eloquently, her personal and human feelings for the subject matter instilled in students the enthusiasm and admiration she possessed for the ancient Near East. Professor Kantor was never parsimonious with time spent helping and guiding students, often at the expense of her own projects. She taught classes in a number of distinct fields of inquiry, including Iranian art and archaeology, Mesopotamian art and architecture, art and architecture of Egypt, and Aegean art and archaeology, all with admirable command of the subject and materials. She also directed dissertations in many of these fields, a feat that was as remarkable as it was vital to the academic growth and reputation of the Oriental Institute.

Her scholarly contributions to the field of ancient Near Eastern art and archaeology are precise, clear, exhaustive, well documented, and classical examples of a deep understanding of and intimacy with the subject matter. Her book, *The Aegean and the Orient in the Second Millennium B.C.*, as well as numerous articles are testimony to her rigorous style of research and her unsurpassed knowledge of ancient Near Eastern art and archaeology. Helene Kantor received the prestigious *Schimmel Prize* for her profound lifetime academic achievements.

Helene Kantor conducted field work at Nahal Tabur, Beth Yereh, and Nahariya in Israel and at Chogha Mish, Chogha Banut, and Boneh Fazili in Iran. Iran held special fascination for her and played a significant part in her archaeological career. Her investigations at Chogha Mish started in 1961 and ended in 1978, for a total of thirteen seasons. She contributed greatly to the understanding of the prehistoric and proto-historic life in southwestern Iran by publishing a number of important articles. Her *opus magnum*, however, was the complete report on the first five seasons at Chogha Mish. Despite her heroic effort to finish this monumental work, death denied her the pleasure of seeing it published. Nevertheless, because of her insightful and realistic nature, she made certain that her monumental work would be completed when she no longer is around.

Professor Kantor was a combination of Renaissance “man” and Victorian scholar. Her discussion of a piece of prehistoric painted pottery would very relevantly take her, for example, to Impressionism and vice versa. She possessed an unsurpassed knowledge of Near Eastern pottery, as well as other art objects. Her keen observation would reveal such subtle nuances of art objects and painted pottery that one would wonder whether she could “communicate” with them. However, despite, and perhaps, because of her vast knowledge of art and archaeology of the ancient Near East, she was never given to generalizations and had certain mistrust for theoretical elaboration.

While this abbreviated account of the accomplishments of Helene Kantor reveals her brilliance, it does not indicate what she meant as a person to others. Professor Kantor was not an anthropologist by training, but she had a deep understanding of cultural relativism and, more importantly, she used her understanding of human nature and cultural relativism in real life—it is no coincidence that she had *true* friends on five continents. Her love for Iran and the bond of friendship she had developed with the villagers in the vicinity of Chogha Mish had become so strong that she had planned to live in the village of Doulati, Khuzestan, after she retired. Unfortunately, the political upheavals in Iran deprived her from reuniting with, as she put it, her people, a calamity from which she never recovered. She was an ardent supporter of a number of important issues, such as gun-control, the pro-choice issue, wildlife preservation, and environmental protection. She was also a foster-mother and long-time supporter of a number of poor and orphaned children in various countries around the globe.

Helene J. Kantor will remain justly famous for her solid contributions to the study of ancient Near Eastern art and archaeology. The number and variety of ongoing projects she left behind is daunting, and a testimony to her unabated enthusiasm until the end. Although Miss Kantor has physically left us, her memory will always be with those who were fortunate enough to have known her.

A. Alizadeh