

First female Ph.D.s memorialized

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Something is different about the newest painting hanging in Sterling Memorial Library: The subjects are women. On Tuesday, a portrait of women was placed in the nave for the first time — a historic event witnessed by more than 100 members of the Yale community.

After years of research and planning, the nave is now home to a portrait of the first women to earn Ph.D.s from Yale. The Women Faculty Forum's "portrait project," an initiative started in 2009 to honor the first seven females to receive Ph.D.s in 1894, culminated in the presentation of the portrait before an audience of over 100. The WFF organized a national competition to select an artist, and Brenda Zlamany of Brooklyn was selected from four finalists. The seven women in the portrait — Elizabeth Deering Hanscom, Margaretta Palmer, Charlotte Fitch Roberts, Cornelia H.B. Rogers, Sara Bulkley Rogers, Mary Augusta Scott and Laura Johnson

Wylie — earned their degrees in a variety of disciplines ranging from English to history to mathematics to chemistry. The unveiling of the portrait also comes amidst broader campus debates about visual representations of females and racial minorities on campus.

“We are just so thrilled,” Laura Wexler, former co-chair of WFF and a professor of American Studies and Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies, told the News. “I think this is going to be one of the new favorite portraits at Yale.”

Wexler called the women “brilliant rebels” for facing “the barrier against women obtaining advanced degrees” and finding careers at a time when most women filled conventional marital roles.

Attendees at the unveiling expressed great admiration for the women. Liena Vayzman GRD '02, who along with Ruth Vaughan DIV '09 conducted the research for the portrait project, said the women were inspiring examples of success.

“They were all incredible feminists,” Vayzman said. “They were all highly accomplished before they came to Yale.”

Vayzman said there is a significant bias toward images of men on campus. She cited a study by the WFF showing that over 90 percent of the images on campus were of men, which provides little representation of powerful females to female students. She also said it was as if the seven women had been “wiped off the face of history” at Yale, adding that she and Vaughan had to investigate archives at Wellesley College and Vassar College to find photographs of the women, some of whom were professors at those institutions.

Vayzman said that she sees this portrait as a beacon of female accomplishment at Yale and expressed hope for the future of women on campus. Wexler said that by celebrating the representation of the women, Yale and the WFF are honoring their commitment to diversity and inclusiveness.

“It was great to see myself in the legacy of these groundbreaking women,” attendee Emilie Egger GRD '21 said. “They represented not just themselves, but other people who have pushed boundaries here at Yale and made it a more diverse place.”

At the unveiling, Zlamany mentioned that there are relatively few portraits of women at Yale. She said she was moved to win the competition because

she came to Yale as a high school student on the College Before College Program, an experience without which she might not have attended college.

Creating the portrait took over a year and was quite grueling, Zlamany said. Speaking before the unveiling, she detailed the extensive process behind the portrait. She started with "late-night Google searches," investigated paintings of the time period, went to a costume shop to pose in fabrics similar to the women's clothing, researched hairdos and found real-life surrogates for the women in order to replicate skin tone. She also made hundreds of collages of "paper dolls," she said.

"At some point, I had become so obsessed that I was dreaming about the women," Zlamany said. "I hope that [the portrait] will be timelessly relevant, and that it will inspire curiosity about the seven remarkable women and tell their story."

University President Peter Salovey also spoke at the event to congratulate the WFF on the success of the project, which he said was "a long time coming." Salovey said the portrait represented the women's accomplishments as well as the groundbreaking role that they played at Yale. Thanks to courageous women like these, who were different from those who came before them, students today come from "every country, every heritage and identity, and of course the intersection of all of those," he said.

"When I view portraits like this, of path-breaking women, it's inspiring to me personally," Salovey told the News. "These women must have felt that they could do anything, and it makes me think that we can do anything."

According to the WFF, 47.4 percent of the 2,813 degree-seeking students currently in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences are women.

Correction, April 7: A previous version of this article incorrectly stated that Laura Wexler is the current co-chair of the Women Faculty Forum; in fact, she is a former co-chair.