



Nathalie Ginoux et Laurent Olivier (dir.)

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LES HÉRITAGES D'UNE ŒUVRE PIONNIÈRE*

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FRANÇOISE HENRY AS ART HISTORIAN: HER LEGACY IN IRELAND

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Françoise Henry as art historian: her legacy in Ireland

Eileen Kane

Françoise Henry (1902–1982) was a brilliant student, a pioneering researcher, a scholar of international renown. She was founder and Head of the Department of History of European Painting (now the School of Art History and Cultural Policy) in University College Dublin (UCD), a member of The Royal Irish Academy and of the Board of Governors and Guardians of the National Gallery of Ireland.¹ A woman of indomitable spirit, intrepid and deeply loyal to her native France, she was a Chevalier of the *Légion d'honneur*, an honour conferred upon her in 1947 in recognition of her services to France during and after the Second World War.

Undoubtedly, Françoise Henry is better known as an archaeologist and specialist in Celtic Studies than as an art historian. Her research on Irish High Crosses, her doctoral thesis on Irish Sculpture during the first twelve centuries of the Christian era, her excavations on the island of Inishkea North, off the north-west coast of Ireland, her subsequent publications, both in Ireland and in France, her commentary on the *Book of Kells*, are the basis of her scholarly reputation and constitute a rich legacy to Celtic Studies. She has, however, left another legacy, one that is not so much about Ireland as to Ireland. That legacy resides in the establishment of the study of history of art at an academic level in Ireland, through her work at UCD. The aim of this article is to draw attention to that legacy, and to its strong connections with Dr. Henry's own formation as an art historian in the Paris of her youth. In her entry in the Royal Irish Academy's *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, the late Hilary Richardson (1930–2015) wrote an account of the life and work of Françoise Henry.² It is an authoritative account, based on information given by Dr. Henry personally to a younger colleague in

1 University College Dublin and « Dublin University » or « The University of Dublin » are entirely separate entities. University College Dublin (UCD) was created by the Irish Universities Act of 1908, as a constituent College of the National University of Ireland and came into being in 1909. In its buildings (e.g. Newman House) and some of its staff, it was the successor of the Royal University, and ultimately of the Catholic University of Ireland, opened in 1854 by the Catholic Bishops of Ireland, with Dr. John Henry Newman as its first Rector. UCD's main building, at Earlsfort Terrace, was completed in 1912, but very quickly became much too small for the expanding university, which now occupies an extensive campus at Belfield, on the southern outskirts of the city. « Dublin University » and « The University of Dublin » are appellations used by Trinity College Dublin (TCD), which was founded in 1594 by Queen Elizabeth I. It occupies a very large site in central Dublin and possesses a magnificent and historic library. It was because, historically, Catholics were excluded from Trinity College that the Catholic bishops decided to provide a university for them in Dublin. Exclusion on the basis of religion no longer applies, and both universities are open to all. See Donal McCartney, *UCD, a national idea. The history of University College Dublin*, Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1999.

2 Hilary Richardson, s.v. « Henry, Françoise », in James McGuire and James Quinn (eds.), *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, vol. 4.

the Department of Celtic Archaeology at UCD, a scholar with whom she had much in common, and to whom, in 1965, she would entrust the curatorship of her photographic archive. Hilary's account is as full and as personal as the quietly reserved and modest Dr. Henry would have wished. While few important facts can be added to it, two elements of it—Dr. Henry's family background and her professional formation in Paris—are here brought into focus because of the important bearing they would later have upon her work as an art historian in Ireland.

On 16th June 1902, in Paris, Françoise Henry was born into a family in which scholarship, and writing, works of art and conversation about art and artists were part of daily life. Her father, René Henry, was a political scientist. He held a doctorate in Law from the University of Paris, and had a particular interest in the international political questions of his day, especially in what was called, in the years before the First World War, the 'Austrian Question'. One of his books, *Questions d'Autriche-Hongrie et question d'Orient*, was published in 1903, the year after his daughter was born.³

Even more important, in terms of formative influences upon her, were her mother, and her mother's own family background. Françoise Henry's mother was Jeanne Clément, daughter of Charles Clément (1821–1887), an art critic and historian of quite extraordinary erudition. Charles Clément was immensely influential in his own time, and left a large body of published and unpublished material behind him when he died. His study of Théodore Géricault (1791–1824) consisting of a biography and *catalogue raisonné* is still an indispensable source for the study of that artist.⁴ Particularly important for Françoise, was her grandfather's friendship with Charles Gleyre (1806–1874), whose name is familiar to us as the painter in whose studio the young Frédéric Bazille (1841–1870), Claude Monet (1840–1926), Auguste Renoir (1841–1919) and Alfred Sisley (1839–1899), first met, in 1862. Gleyre had named Charles Clément executor of his will, and left the contents of his studio to him. The result was that Françoise Henry's grandmother's home, where the future archaeologist and art historian spent much of her time as a child, was full of paintings, drawings and prints as well as books about art and artists.

Having received her secondary schooling in Paris, at the lycée Molière, during the war and post-war years of 1914–1920, Françoise went on to both the Sorbonne and the École du Louvre. At the Sorbonne, she enrolled as a student of history of art, and studied first under Émile Mâle (1862–1954), and then, after Mâle had been appointed Director of the French School at Rome (in 1923), under his successor Henri Focillon (1881–1943). Both of these men were outstanding scholars, and both had done pioneering work in their fields. Émile Mâle's work was in the area of religious art in mediaeval France. In elucidating the symbolism and the iconography of the sculpture and the stained glass of the great cathedrals of France, and relating them to the writings of the mediaeval theologians, in particular of Vincent of Beauvais (1190?–1264), he was opening up new fields of study and research, prioritising the thematic aspect of works of art. Émile Mâle's doctoral thesis on religious art in France in the 13th century was published in three editions. Its 3rd edition was translated into English as *The Gothic Image*, by Dora Nussey, and published as a paperback in 1961, and for

3 René Henry, *Questions d'Autriche-Hongrie et question d'Orient*, Paris, Plon-Nourrit et Cie, 1903.

4 Charles Clément, *Géricault. Étude biographique et critique* [1868], Paris, Didier et Cie, 1879.

Dr. Henry's students in UCD, not only was it required reading, they were expected to own a copy of it.⁵ Henri Focillon, too, in his studies of mediaeval art in France, especially of the Romanesque, was doing pioneering work. He was tracing the development of form in art, attending, therefore, to the aesthetic quality of a work of art, looking at it not merely as an historic document with a date and a place of origin attached to it. It was an approach that differed radically from what he called the 'Chartiste' approach, which was strictly historical, archival and factual, rather than aesthetic. These two complementary approaches, prioritising thematic/iconographic as well as aesthetic values, are both reflected in Françoise Henry's work of teaching art history in Dublin. She delivered, for example, a series of lectures at degree level in Iconography, and always, in studying a work of art, she was attentive to its aesthetic aspect as well as to its objective, documentary values. Often, too, she would use the word 'feel', as in 'it feels like', in front of a painting.

At the same time as she was a student at the Sorbonne, Françoise Henry also attended lectures at the École du Louvre. Enrolled in both sections of the school's programme, the ancient and the modern, she followed courses on modern art as well as on the art of pre-historic France, and on Celtic Art. On modern art, she heard the young Robert Rey (1888–1964), from whom she gained a systematised knowledge of the art of her own time and of the recent past in France and continental Europe. In fact, she always had an interest in modern and contemporary art, and in Ireland, she not only numbered the Irish painters Sarah Purser (1848–1943), Evie Hone (1894–1955) and Mainie Jellett (1897–1944) and the sculptor Dómhnaill Ó Murchadha (1914–1991) among her friends and acquaintances, she also owned works by them. Notably, in 1962, she was one of the principal organisers of a retrospective exhibition of Jellett's work, and lent two of her own pictures to it. Entitled *Mainie Jellett 1897–1944: a Retrospective Exhibition of Paintings and Drawings*, it ran from July to October at the Municipal Gallery of Modern Art (now the Hugh Lane Gallery) in Dublin.

At the École du Louvre, Françoise also attended the course of lectures on the General History of Art, given by André Michel (1853–1925). André Michel was an older scholar. From 1905 to 1918, he had published a multi-volume study of the *History of Art from the Early Christian period to the 20th century*. The work would eventually reach 18 volumes, the last one published in 1929, after his death. Françoise Henry had a full set of those volumes, the *Histoire de l'art d'André Michel*. In their brown binding, they were part of the core stock of books—in the beginning, mainly her own—in the Reading Room, now named the 'Françoise Henry Reading Room', of her Department of History of European Painting at UCD. In 1920, at the École du Louvre, those lectures on the General History of Art became the obligatory, core course for students. In UCD, Dr. Henry adopted the same principle, both for the Purser-Griffith lectures, which she inaugurated in the academic session 1934/1935, and also for the Degree course, beginning in 1965/1966.

Founded in 1888, the École du Louvre was still a relatively young institution when Françoise Henry began attending there in the early 1920s. The school's Mission was 'To extract from the Collections [of the National Museums] for the instruction of the public, the knowledge they contain,

5 Émile Mâle, *The Gothic Image. Religious Art in France of the Thirteenth Century*. translated from the third edition by Dora Nussey [1913], London/Glasgow, Collins/The Fontana Library, 1961.

and to train curators, heads of mission and excavators' (*de tirer des collections, pour l'instruction du public, l'enseignement qu'elles renferment et de former les conservateurs, les missionnaires^[sic] et les fouilleurs*). The School is therefore closely connected to the nationwide network of National Museums in France, particularly, as its name suggests, to the Louvre Museum, in which it is physically housed. It gave its students opportunities to hear the lectures of specialists and experts who worked directly with the material in which they had specialised, and to have lectures in front of, or in the presence of the works themselves. This practice of working directly with the works of art themselves was also a very important aspect of the teaching of Henri Focillon, and his insistence that the history of art 'begins with the works of art' was essential, too, to the teaching of Françoise Henry. Dr. Henry made sure to include in the programmes of study she devised for her students, at every level, regular tutorial sessions in the National Gallery of Ireland. Focillon's practice was also embraced by Charles Sterling (1901–1991), a fellow pupil with Françoise, and notably by another of his students, Louis Grodecki, (1910–1982), who was the first External Examiner invited by Dr. Henry to assess her students' work for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts, in 1967. The students whose work was examined in 1967 had been taught by Dr. Henry to consider not only the author, the dates, the dimensions and the historic contexts of the works of art they studied, but their content, form, structure and techniques as well.

In connection with Dr. Henry's professional formation, two other names must be mentioned—those of Salomon Reinach (1858–1932) and Henri Hubert (1872–1927). Reinach had been a co-founder of the École du Louvre in 1882, and was also head of the Museum of National Antiquities (*Musée des Antiquités Nationales*) at Saint-Germain-en-Laye until the year of his death, 1932. Hubert was a specialist in pre-historic and proto-historic France, and Adjunct Curator at the Museum at Saint-Germain-en-Laye until his premature death in 1927. At the École du Louvre, the course that he taught and his research interests centred upon the Celts. This was one of the courses that Françoise Henry followed, and, quite evidently, she was fired with enthusiasm for that topic. Hubert, for his part, no doubt saw in her the aptitude for scholarship and the energy required for the work that needed to be done at Saint-Germain-en-Laye, and in 1924, while she was still only a student, appointed her as an 'attachée libre' at the Museum. This position, though not remunerated, was very demanding of her time, but it did give her access to the material finds and the reports of excavations that had previously been carried out in France and abroad, and facilitated the thesis that, a little later, she would dedicate to the memory of Henri Hubert.⁶

Saint-Germain would prove to be a turning point in the life and career of Françoise Henry. It was there that a young Irish friend, named Carrie FitzGerald, and Carrie's mother came to visit, and invited Françoise to visit them at their home in Ireland. Françoise accepted, and in the summer of 1926, went to stay with the FitzGeralds near Cashel, Co. Tipperary. Having followed Henri Hubert's lectures on Celtic art at the École du Louvre, she went with a prepared mind, but it was still a voyage of discovery. On that visit, she saw not only Cashel, and Cormac's Chapel—which would be the subject of her first article, published in 1928—but, more importantly, she saw a number of the Irish

6 The thesis, entitled *Les Tumulus du Département de la Côte-d'Or*, was the "thèse secondaire" pour le doctorat d'État, and was published in Paris, Librairie Ernest Leroux, in 1933.

carved High Crosses *in situ*, in particular at Ahenny, in Co. Tipperary.⁷ These crosses fascinated her. On her return to France, she showed her photographs of them to Henri Focillon, and embarked, under his direction, upon a major thesis focussing upon them, which would result, at the end of 1932, in the award of the Doctorat d'État, and, in 1933, in her major publication on Irish sculpture in the first twelve centuries of the Christian era⁸. There is no doubt that at that stage, Françoise Henry still envisaged for herself a career in France, at the Museum of Saint-Germain-en-Laye, but, as Laurent Olivier has demonstrated, that was not to be.⁹ Instead, Ireland, and specifically UCD would be the beneficiary of her very considerable talents and ability.

Françoise Henry's first contact with UCD came, in 1932, through another French scholar working in Ireland, Roger Chauviré (1880–1957). Chauviré was a scholar and also a novelist of some distinction, and one of his novels, *Mademoiselle de Bois-Dauphin*, would win for him the Grand Prix du Roman of the Académie française in 1932.¹⁰ He had come to Ireland in 1918 to take up the Chair of French and Romance Philology in what was then still quite a new institution—UCD, the Dublin College of the National University of Ireland, founded by the Irish Universities Act of 1908¹¹. His invitation to Françoise to join his Department as Assistant, though originally temporary, was maintained by his successor, Dr. Louis Roche, and was the start of a career in UCD that would last for more than forty years, until Dr. Henry retired from teaching, in the summer of 1974.

There are two phases in the continuum of Françoise Henry's teaching of art history at UCD. The first phase, consisting of the Purser-Griffith lectures, began in 1934, just two years after her first contact with the University, and resulted from her friendship with the painter and art-activist Sarah Purser. Miss Purser had been, for many years, a member of the Board of Governors and Guardians of the National Gallery of Ireland, and had witnessed at first hand the sometimes convoluted and unsatisfactory process of appointing a suitably qualified Director or other officer to that institution. What Ireland needed, she felt, was a body of people with a good knowledge of the history of art, from among whom these appointments could be made. To form such a group of people, she decided to create a scholarship that would enable its holder to travel and study the history of art in some museum or gallery outside of Ireland. She persuaded a relative, the distinguished civil engineer, Sir John Griffith (1848–1938), to join her in establishing the scholarship fund, the income from which would provide the travelling scholarship and a prize to the two candidates who performed best at an examination. Through her extended family, Sarah Purser had connections with Trinity College

7 See « La chapelle de Cormac à Cashel. Note sur les influences étrangères en Irlande au début du XII^e siècle », in *Année 1927-1928. Travaux des étudiants du Groupe d'histoire de l'art de la Faculté des Lettres de Paris*, Paris, Institut d'Art et d'Archéologie, 1928, p. 109-117.

8 See *La Sculpture irlandaise pendant les douze premiers siècles de l'ère chrétienne*, Paris, Ernest Leroux, 1933.

9 See Laurent Olivier, « Françoise Henry (1902-1982) et le musée des Antiquités nationales. La chance manquée de la recherche française », *Antiquités nationales*, 2015, t. 46, p. 163-176. Françoise Henry was a very private person and rarely spoke about herself. However, the present writer once asked her whether she had any regrets about having spent her career in Ireland, rather than in France. Her response was, « I would have liked to have got the job at Saint-Germain ».

10 Christopher J. Woods, s.v. « Chauviré, Roger », in James MacGuire and James Quinn, (eds.), *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, *op. cit.*

11 See note 1, above.

Dublin (TCD), but Françoise Henry, with her UCD connections, succeeded in bringing it about that the scholarship fund would be administered by both universities, and that the examination would be conducted in alternate years in each university, beginning in June 1935 with TCD.¹² Françoise was involved in this scheme from the very beginning, and it is clear that it was she who shaped it.¹³ It only required an invitation to her from the President of UCD, Dr. Denis Coffey (1865–1945), to give a course of lectures in preparation for the examination, and the Purser-Griffith Lectures were under way.

There is much about the Purser-Griffith course devised by Dr. Henry that is redolent of the early days of the École du Louvre.¹⁴ The lectures were given in the early evening, at 6 o'clock. Also, no fee was charged for attendance at them. They were open to anyone who wished to attend, whether or not they were students at the university. Nor were those who attended obliged to sit the examination. Indeed, there was a sense that the lectures were a service to the general public that UCD was happy to offer.

The course itself consisted of two strands, two series of lectures given on two days of the week. On Tuesdays, the lectures covered the General History of European Painting from about the year 1200 to about 1900, and were given as a two-year cycle: in the first year of the cycle, they reached a date around the year 1500; in the second year, they concluded in 1926, the year of the death of Claude Monet. This was the core course, the foundation upon which further studies could be built. On Wednesdays, Dr. Henry lectured on the historical techniques of painting and the conservation of paintings. She began with fresco, then tempera, oil, watercolour, gouache and pastel. She examined the printing techniques of woodcuts, engraving, etching and lithography, and finished with several lectures on the various techniques involved in examining, cleaning, conserving and repairing paintings. If requested to do so by any of the students present, she would also devote a lecture to the techniques of enamel or stained glass, or mosaic.¹⁵ Dr. Henry also scheduled weekly tutorials for her students and visits to the National Gallery of Ireland.

The lectures and the examination were designed for one another and were clearly a single whole, in the mind of Françoise Henry. For the examination there were three tests. The first was an examination on the General History of European Painting from 1200 to 1900. For the second test, candidates had to choose a 'special topic' from a list of about twelve, and were examined more closely on that. Those topics included e.g. 'The Van Eycks and their immediate successors', 'The Venetian *Cinquecento*', 'Fresco painting in Italy'. The third test was an oral examination in the National Gallery, which was described as 'a practical test in identifying period, author, technique, and condition of particular paintings'. During Françoise Henry's time in UCD, three successive Directors

12 The setting-up of the scholarship and prize, and other details regarding the course are fully documented by Carla Briggs, « Metamorphoses: a history of art history at UCD », in Carla Briggs, Nicola Figgis, Lynda Mulvin, Paula Murphy (eds), *Art History after Françoise Henry. 50 years at UCD, 1965-2015*, Kinsale, Gandon, 2016, p. 13-25.

13 See correspondence of Sarah Purser in John O'Grady, *The Life and Work of Sarah Purser*, Dublin, The Four Courts Press, 1996, p. 136-138.

14 See Philippe Durey, « De la collection à l'enseignement, le rôle particulier de l'École du Louvre », in Jessica Desclaux (ed.), *Louvre. Le Collège de France et le musée du Louvre*, Paris, Collège de France, 2020. Consulted on line October 2021.

15 Personal recollection of the present writer.

of the National Gallery of Ireland participated in conducting the oral examination. They were George Furlong (Director 1935–1950), Thomas McGreevy (1950–1963) and James White (1963–1980). Suggested titles for reading in preparation for all three parts of the examination were published in the UCD Calendar for each academic year. All this made for quite a daunting examination, and not many candidates presented themselves for it each year. Also, some candidates attended the lectures continuously for several years before presenting for it.

For many years, Françoise Henry gave the lectures herself. During the war years of 1939–1945, when she was absent, either in London, in the entourage of General de Gaulle, working in a munitions factory, or in France, working for the French Resistance movement, she entrusted them to her friend, the art critic Elizabeth Curran.¹⁶ In the academic year 1967/1968, Dr. Henry entrusted them to her new 'Assistant', the present writer. Since the latter's retirement in the year 2000, they have been in the capable hands of Carla Briggs.

It would be hard to exaggerate the importance of the work that Françoise Henry did through the Purser-Griffith programme. No such education was previously available in this country. Indeed, it could justifiably be said that with the Purser-Griffith course, she laid the foundations upon which the whole edifice of academic studies in the history of art in Ireland would be built. Also, the lectures undoubtedly raised the level of awareness and appreciation of art, and especially of the value of the National Gallery of Ireland, among the general public. The idea, which she clearly shared with Sarah Purser, of training a body of people who might go on to fill in curatorial posts in museums and galleries in Ireland, in particular in the National Gallery, would eventually come to fruition, but, for that, further studies, at a higher level, would be needed. That would be the next project Françoise Henry would undertake at UCD.

In June 1964, the decision was taken by the Academic Council of UCD to recommend to the Senate of the National University of Ireland (NUI) that a new subject—History of European Painting—be made available for the degree of Bachelor of Arts (BA) at UCD, starting from the session 1965/1966.¹⁷ The recommendation was accepted, and so, in a new Department, with Françoise Henry at its head, the study of art history was offered for the first time at Degree level at an Irish University. It is noteworthy that, although she was head of a Department, Dr. Henry's title was not Professor, but Director of Special Studies and Head of the Department of the History of European Painting. That was in accordance with her own wishes.¹⁸

In UCD, students for the degree of BA follow a taught course for three years in two subjects.¹⁹ The course Dr. Henry devised for each of the three years reflected once more the sound principles she had seen in practice at the École du Louvre. The core course of the first year was, once again,

¹⁶ Elizabeth Curran was art critic for *The Bell* magazine.

¹⁷ Carla Briggs, « Metamorphoses », art. cit., p. 17.

¹⁸ In conversation with the present writer, in about 1977, Dr. Henry said that she never wanted to have the title "Professor", nor had she ever applied for a professorship.

¹⁹ In Dr. Henry's time, the choice of the second subject was restricted by a system of grouping, so that students who wished to take History of European Painting were obliged to choose as their "second" subject, History, Archaeology or a modern language.

the general history of art, with regular tutorial sessions in front of real paintings, not slides or photographs, in the National Gallery of Ireland. In the second and third years, there were detailed studies, over several weeks, of some major painters. For instance, her lectures on Eugène Delacroix were particularly memorable. There were lectures on what Dr. Henry called 'sites', by which she meant ensembles like Karlstein, Urbino, Versailles, that included, besides painting, architecture, sculpture, the minor arts as well as political and dynastic history. There were also, lectures on what she called 'trends'—like Mannerism, or Rococo. There were seminar topics, like Impressionism, or Art at the Valois courts. In the beginning, Dr. Henry gave most of these lectures herself, and they were not the one-hour, or fifty-minute lectures of nowadays, but sessions that lasted at least an hour and a half, and sometimes longer. As students or fledgling staff members in those early years, we marvelled at the breadth and the depth of her knowledge, and, indeed, at her energy, and at the amount of work and travelling she would undertake in preparation for her lectures. We knew we were in the presence of an outstanding scholar, a committed teacher, and we greatly appreciated our good fortune in having her as head of department.

Françoise Henry's work as an art historian bore fruit, and would continue to do so, in that graduates of the department she founded have become curators, directors, conservators not only in the National Gallery of Ireland, but in other museums and galleries in Ireland and abroad. Books and other scholarly works have been published by her former students. Her Department of History of European Painting, so closely linked initially to her own student experiences in Paris at the École du Louvre, has morphed and expanded, been renamed, changed with the times and flourished under its successive heads.

A word must also be said about Françoise Henry's contribution as an art historian to the work of the National Gallery of Ireland. She was a member of the Gallery's Board of Governors and Guardians from February 1962 to December 1979. She also gave a gift of paintings to the Gallery, in 1977. These were two oil paintings and five watercolours. One of the oil paintings, entitled 'Phaeton in his chariot in the sky', is attributed to the 17th-century French painter Sébastien Bourdon. The watercolours are by two Irish women artists, whom she knew personally, Evie Hone and Mainie Jellett. Two of the Jellett paintings are of religious subjects. One of these is a preparatory study for an oil painting, which is also in the National Gallery—'I have trodden the Wine-press Alone'.

In the summer of 1974, Françoise Henry retired from teaching in UCD. She could have stayed longer, but she wanted to give her undivided attention to a task that she certainly relished—her study of the illumination of the *Book of Kells*.²⁰ There is something very fitting about that particular project, at that particular time in her life, for now, at the end of her career, she was calling again upon all the expertise she had gained, not only through teaching the history of art, but also through those early years of studying the early Christian art of Ireland, attending not only as an archaeologist, but also as an art historian, to the aesthetic values as well as the material facts of the history of that great work of Irish art.

20 *The Book of Kells, Reproductions from the manuscript in Trinity College, Dublin*, with a study of the manuscript by Françoise Henry, London/New York, Thames and Hudson/Alfred A. Knopf, 1974.