

Margaret Lowenfeld in the New World: An Appreciation



By Rhoda Metraux

Margaret Lowenfeld first visited the United States in 1950. She arrived in early April and departed for home on June 18th. In that short period – just over ten weeks – she met a great many people in various disciplines – some known only through their work, some attracted by what they had heard of her, some already old friends in a new setting. In terms of experience of a society new to her, she covered an amazing amount of ground. This visit came about largely through her very new friendship with Margaret Mead. Here I shall speak very briefly about that friendship – how it began – that visit, and one outcome – among many that were important and enduring.

Margaret Lowenfeld and Margaret Mead met in August 1948. ML (if you will allow me) had just got through an international conference on the Mosaic Test held at ICP; the participants were, I believe, British and continental European – an important thing to remember. MM (also if I may) had come to England to take part in the founding meeting of the World Federation for Mental Health, and gave there, as a cultural anthropologist, her first very widely international address. The initiative was taken by ML, who wrote a note in which she explained that as Madeleine Kerr, who had offered to introduce her, was working in Jamaica with children, she herself proposed they might meet. [1]

And meet they did – and immediately took a great liking to each other. [2] In an October letter to Gregory Bateson, MM wrote that “I learned more from her in two days than from the whole rest of the summer put together” (Letter #4). Congenial as they were, they were in many ways extremely different from each other. Yet they had certain things in common, particularly their constant, and enthusiastic, exploration of the thought and vision of human life held by others – no matter how distant in formal discipline – who might contribute something new to their own thought and the central core of their own discipline. They shared also a capacity for observing, recording and analysing very fine detail in patterning within a holistic framework. They both were deeply committed teachers. And unquestionably, committed as each was to her discipline, she was also to some extent set apart from – and set herself apart from – certain individuals and groups among her colleagues.

More immediately, they were each in a crisis situation. Within weeks of their first meeting, MM's closest friend and colleague, Ruth Benedict, suddenly died, leaving her the overall responsibility for a large, government subsidized program of research that was as yet only partly organized. [3] This at a period when her own plans for the future were undecided (Letter #4). In the same period, ML had to recognize that the future of ICP and her own means of carrying on therapy and research on children and others were at risk owing to the lack of a sure financial base – at least until, as she hoped, government planning and planning within the wider discipline in Great Britain provided some assured support and a measure of stability.

From ML's letter to MM (#2, dated October 12) it appears they must already have had conversations about the problem. MM's response (Letter #3, October 15) was to advise ML immediately to write out a project covering two or three years and to suggest what to include. Not long after, she was able to arrange for a loan (Letter #4 and later) of private English money to tide ICP, and in a late November letter (#8) she urged ML to get going.

From then on, through most of 1949, their correspondence had to do with "the project" (Letters 9-28) i.e., the preparation of an application to the Rockefeller Foundation for funds. ML prepared at least three – and perhaps more – versions. Meanwhile, encouraged by the possibility of success, she began planning to come to the United States. She also asked MM to write a foreword to the volume of papers presented at the 1948 ICP conference. Her hopes for the usefulness of the volume and for her projected trip coalesced. She wrote (Letter #16): "The idea that USA might allow me to unload some of the thought about cultures and about inter-communication by concrete methods that I have been working at all the war, is alluring..." MM decided against the foreword.

In mid-April MM visited ML briefly at Cherry Orchards. Soon thereafter (Letter #19) ML wrote both about "shrinking" ICP expenses and about people she hoped to see in the United States. But by July, she gave up that plan – for 1949. And on September 30th (Letter #28), she wrote: "It is with a heavy heart that I write" that her Rockefeller Foundation application was turned down. Also that Winnicott was in difficulties. "It is difficult", she wrote, "to see more than a days work ahead." It was perhaps the lowest point.

In October MM came to Birmingham to give a series of lectures and to receive an honorary degree. Again she was in personal contact with ML, and certainly they discussed the future and a possible trip to the United States. For soon after (Letter #30, December 9th) MM suggested that ML could stay with her in New York and said she would explore the possibility that the Rockefeller Foundation might give ML a travel grant, but in February 1950 (Letter #32) MM was informed that this, too, had been turned down.

Nevertheless, some private funds were found, and on March 28th, ML sailed on the *Britannic*, and so busy and successful was her visit that she stayed two extra weeks. Ellen Godwin, MM's appointment secretary, handled her trip.

This is not the place or time to outline the events of that trip. But I shall describe very briefly, one occasion that took place at the offices of RCC (Columbia University Research in Contemporary Cultures), that is, the day, May 26th (Letter #55), that is, the day we met with ML and Ursula Stewart to see the very large collection she had made of elementary school children's Mosaics and to hear ML speak about the Mosaic Test – which few of us had seen, and none had tried. There were perhaps 15 of us – most of them senior people, among them Theodora Abel [4], and one or two guests, especially the poet, Léonie Adams, a close friend of MM. As there were not enough chairs we stood around a long work table while Dr. Stewart showed us one and then another and another harsh crayon reproduction of a child's mosaic. What struck us, however, was the sense of extreme shock with which ML responded; in her view, it was inexplicable (as far as we could tell), but these were the productions of very disturbed children! But then quite unexpectedly, Léonie spoke about the handling of massed colour and someone else (I am now not sure who, perhaps Abel) about the use of space, not as background, but as an integral aspect of the designs. [5] And we were reassuring: for those of us who had field experience as anthropologists, ML's initial response was not an unfamiliar one. And we were impressed that a projective test could evoke this kind of response. We wanted to know more. A great deal more – and some of us wanted to use the Mosaic Test ourselves.

As it happened, MM was not one of those present on that occasion. As so often, she was away from New York. But it was to her that ML, in a letter (#59, dated July 11th; see Appendix A on American Mosaics), presented her first considered assessment, including a

bold, but highly simplified comparison of the stylistic characteristics of British and American Mosaic performance. Like the rest of us, MM saw the possibilities for research in our own field.

In 1953, when MM planned to return to Manus (in New Guinea) with Ted Schwartz and his artist wife (later Lenora Foerstal) and I at the same time planned to go to Montserrat [a small British West Indian Island] and Theodora Abel (with whom I had worked in RCC) and I planned for her to come to do the psychological testing in a new collaborative style, it was also agreed – by MM and myself – that we would, in both expeditions, carry out certain research in common, for example, both use the Mosaic Test with the hope that, later, ML – as well as Dr. Abel – would take a look at both series. As it worked out, ML made a very detailed analysis only of Paliau, the native leader who opened the way to the future for the Manusó; on another American visit, she and I worked together very intensively on the Montserrat collection. [7] These were certainly not the first use made of the Mosaic Test in research on cultures outside the wider European cultural tradition, but almost certainly in integrated ethnological and psychological research. Since then, Abel has, as far as I know, made the most varied use of the Mosaic Test and also, in some cases, Kaleidoblocs in both intra-cultural and cross-cultural studies. [8]

Margaret mead herself found the World Technique the most valuable for her own thinking about children, and about individual growth and maturation in terms both of any specific cultural setting – and of inborn temperamental fit within that setting – and of what may be universal in human development. Certainly this was the kind of concern and illumination that must have brought MM and ML together in their first talks in August 1948. But at all stages of their friendship, MM was also deeply concerned, on the one hand, that ML have personal access to other very gifted persons – not only in England and on the continent – and, on the other hand, that her approach become widely known and understood abroad.

Notes

1. See Appendix B, Letter #1, dated August 8, 1948, ML to MM. Later letters will be noted in the text by number and date.

2. In fact, there is no specific record, at least in MM's file, of their first and probable subsequent meeting in London in August 1948. This is also true of later meetings to which brief reference was made in both MM's and ML's letters, at least for the period here considered.

3. This was Columbia University Research in Contemporary Cultures (familiarily known as RCC), in which more than 100 persons, members of various disciplines, participated over time and in various capabilities.

4. Theodora M. Abel, then at the Post Graduate Center for Psychosocial therapy (later, Post Graduate Center for Mental Health), had worked earlier at Letchworth village and was familiar with T. L. McCulloch's use of the Mosaic Test in the assessment of mental defective persons.

5. The reference here was specifically to Mosaic Designs made by two gifted children, on whom full records were available (unlike the schoolchildren tested by Dr. Stewart), which were displayed on Mosaic boards, so that everyone could see both the actual tiles and two examples of performance.

6. See Margaret Mead, 'New Lives for Old, Cultural Transformation' – Manus, 1928-1953 (Morrow, 1956), p. 200.

7. In Montserrat, the Mosaic Test was one of a group of projective tests individually administered to slightly more than 100 volunteers whose life history and place in the community was known (see Bibliography for published articles), but the analysis made by ML has not been published.

8. See Bibliography for selected references.