

## Mirella (Luigia) Levi D'Ancona

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In September 1938, Mirella Levi D'Ancona was registered as a university student in the literature faculty in Florence and graduated in 1941 with a thesis on art history. In February 1944 she fled to Switzerland with three of her brothers and returned to Florence after the liberation of Italy. In 1946 she moved to the United States, where her mother Flora lived.

[Link to other connected Lives on the move:](#)

[Flora Aghib Levi D'Ancona](#)

[Ezio Levi D'Ancona](#)

[Vivaldo Levi D'Ancona](#)

### Family History

Mirella Levi D'Ancona was the daughter of Ezio Levi D'Ancona and Flora Aghib D'Ancona. Her father, a professor of Romance Philology at the Università di Napoli, was expelled from the institution in 1938, following the implementation of the Italian racial laws, after which the family moved to Florence to the home of Flora's parents.

Ezio emigrated to the USA with his wife, in 1939 and, following a period fraught with difficulty, eventually found work in Wellesley College, Massachusetts in 1940. He died the following year in 1941. Initially, the family had planned for Mirella to accompany her father to the States, with her mother and siblings joining them at a later date. In the end, it was decided that 20-year-old Mirella, who was the only daughter, would remain in Italy with her four brothers<sup>1</sup>. Flora's English was excellent so it was logical that she travel with Ezio, while Mirella and her brothers would stay in Italy with their maternal grandfather, Arturo Aghib<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> USCISF, *Visual History Archive*, interview of Mirella Levi D'Ancona conducted by Marta Baiardi, 16 March 1998, available online in *Ti racconto la storia: voci dalla shoah*, <<http://www.shoah.acs.beniculturali.it>> (accessed on registration 10 May 2019); much of the information in the text comes from this source.

<sup>2</sup> Written testimony of Luisa Levi D'Ancona, 5 December 2018.

## Education and qualifications up to departure

Until the age of 15, Mirella was educated privately, after which she attended the high school Liceo Giambattista Vico in Naples. In 1937, she was registered in the literature department of the Università di Napoli, and then transferred to the Università di Firenze. Kept away from the Biblioteca Nazionale, she was invited to use the private library of the History of Medieval Art Professor, Mario Salmi, who was also her thesis advisor; she graduated in 1941 with a thesis on the 13<sup>th</sup> century Florentine miniaturist, Francesco d'Antonio Del Chierico.

On 8 September 1943 (Armistice of Cassibile) the family was staying in a holiday home in Ortignano Raggiolo (Arezzo); the various family members dispersed around Casentino. With the help of local farmers, Mirella hid away with her grandfather and youngest brother Viviano<sup>3</sup>.

## Moving around

In January 1944, Mirella and her brothers Antonio and Pier Lorenzo decided to flee to Switzerland with their little brother. They paid smugglers to get them over the border on 24 January; it was a difficult crossing on foot, from Cannobio to Brissago in the Ticino Canton. They were separated in Switzerland, staying in different refugee camps until the liberation of Italy<sup>4</sup>.

On 24 August 1946, with her youngest brother, Viviano, Mirella boarded the Marine Flasher ship, having decided to join her mother in the United States; they reached New York on 3 September 1946<sup>5</sup>. As she had come of age, Mirella required an affidavit, which would be provided by Max Ascoli. Viviano, on the other hand, was a minor and did not need one<sup>6</sup>. The only brother in

<sup>3</sup> USCSF, *Visual History Archive*, interview of Mirella Levi D'Ancona, cit.

<sup>4</sup> Written testimony of Luisa Levi D'Ancona, cit.

<sup>5</sup> NARA, *Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, Passenger and Crew Lists of Vessels Arriving at New York, New York, 1897-1957*, T715, R7169, *List or Manifest of Alien Passengers for the United States Immigrant Inspector at Port of Arrival*, Genoa, 24 August 1946 (available online at <<https://www.ancestry.com>>).

<sup>6</sup> Written testimony of Luisa Levi D'Ancona, cit.

the family who had American citizenship at that time was Vivaldo; he was serving as an American soldier in Japan. Their mother moved to Sweet Briar, where she had found a teaching position, taking Viviano with her, but Mirella stayed in New York. She did various jobs and then took the position of assistant to Richard Offner, one of the founders of the New York University Institute of Fine Arts, who was working on the acclaimed *Critical History Corpus of Florentine Painting*. Mirella subsequently registered as a student at the institute, and gained her PhD there. In the 50s and 60s she worked on the cataloguing and attribution of the private miniature collection of George Wildenstein, now held in the Musée Marmottan in Paris<sup>7</sup>. In 1959 she took up a post as professor of History of Modern Art at Hunter College, City University of New York and remained there, as a full professor, from 1972 to 1986, after which she was awarded the title professor emeritus.

### Return to Italy

When she retired, she returned to Florence, where she spent the last years of her life. Levi D'Ancona, student of Erwin Panofsky, would become one of the most important international scholars of iconology and the history of miniature painting<sup>8</sup>. Author of numerous academic publications, she did critical research on animal and vegetable symbolism in Italian art from the late medieval period to the Renaissance. She contributed to the interpretation of Primavera (Spring) by Sandro Botticelli, settling the dating of the painting as well as recognising the allegory therein of the wedding between Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici and Semiramide Appiani. In accordance with her wishes, her library was donated to the Universities of Jerusalem and Florence<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Interview by Martí Domínguez, *Mirella Levi d'Ancona*, «Mètode», 47, 2005, <<https://metode.es>> (accessed 31 March 2019).

<sup>9</sup> Written testimony of Luisa Levi D'Ancona, cit.

### Major publications

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- *Iconography of the Immaculate Conception in the Middle Ages and the Early Renaissance*, New York, College Art Association, 1957.
- *Miniatura e miniatori a Firenze dal XIV AL XVI secolo. Documenti per la storia della miniatura*, Florence, Olschki, 1962.
- *The Doni Madonna by Michelangelo: An Iconographic Study*, «Art Bulletin», 50, 1, 1968, pp. 43-50, reprinted in William E. Wallace (ed.), *Michelangelo. Selected Scholarship in English*, New York-London, Garland Publishing, 1995.
- *The Wildenstein Collection of Illuminations. The Lombard School*, Florence, Olschki, 1971.
- *The Garden of the Renaissance. Botanical Symbolism in Italian Painting*, Florence, Olschki, 1977.
- *Botticelli's Primavera, a botanical interpretation including astrology, alchemy and the Medici*, Florence, Olschki, 1983.
- *Due quadri del Botticelli eseguiti per nascite in casa Medici. Nuova interpretazione della «Primavera» e della «Nascita di Venere»*, Florence, Olschki, 1992.
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