

ELIZABETH BARTLETT
AND
PAUL ALEXANDER BARTLETT
—
TWO PORTRAITS

by

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ABSTRACT

Reflections with accompanying photographs on the personalities, individual values, and creative approaches of poet Elizabeth Bartlett and writer-artist Paul Alexander Bartlett, by their son, philosopher and psychologist Steven James Bartlett.

Keywords: Elizabeth Bartlett, Paul Alexander Bartlett, Elizabeth Bartlett biography, Paul Alexander Bartlett biography

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ELIZABETH BARTLETT

*A PORTRAIT IN WORDS*¹

It is not easily communicated — where words have become doors to a world of images, moods, symbols and referents, to sounds that form a music for the ear tuned to word patterns, shapes, shadow, and metaphor — words that become prisms to split the light of the mind into its many possible hues. This is a variety of human experience known to few, alien to almost all. To sit for hours at a time to discern the value of a single word, to sense the weight and worth of the word as a palpable reality, to struggle against the defects of concentration, the interruptions of everyday life, to develop an intellectual persistence and aesthetic constancy that provide a focus for the self and an axis around which one's daily cares are centered.... — These are qualities and habits of mind decidedly hard to convey. But when they form the innermost structure of a lifetime, communication in any genuine sense to another must fail. It is here where living the life of a true poet takes place, and where words for the non-poet can only point mutely, and perhaps beckon.



Elizabeth Bartlett, circa 1960

Her life was poetry lived. The poetry that she wrote was the outer reflection of inner experience, distilled and released from the particularities of situation and moment. With a discipline and care born from a deep love and respect for words, their many-leveled meanings and music, individual poems became for her a means to compose life's direction and sense.

Elizabeth Bartlett, my mother, was a complex and not easily understood person. More than anything else, those who met her for the first time were struck by her intensity and by her fiery spirit. The continuity of the long thread of her life, her unity of outlook, her unrelenting energy and dedication all expressed a deliberately chosen set of values that in her earliest years in New York City she made the basis for her later life's work.

These values were sensed clearly by anyone who knew her well. They were values dominated by a decisive preference for what is beautiful in this world, and by a steadfast refusal, and even indignation, that one should ever accept its baseness and ugliness. Her perspective on life and her commitments in living formed, in other words, a strongly moral rejection of the dark side of human nature, on the one hand, and, on the other, a stubborn, unyielding, and undoubting

¹ First published with the same title in Dasha Nisula (Ed.), *Leading Contemporary Poets: An International Anthology*. Kalamazoo, MI: Poetry International, 1997, pp. 341-346. Reprinted here thanks to the kind permission of Dasha Nisula, with minor changes and added photographs.



*Elizabeth Bartlett at the Huntington
Hartford Foundation, 1959*

embrace of the beauty of nature and the beauty of the human spirit and its creative force. She felt, and was driven by, a vital respect for the mind's capacity to apprehend, and perhaps at times to invent, the meanings that allow individual men and women to understand and yet never to succumb.

She was a person marked by suffering — in her own life, and in her awareness of the hardships of others. Yet in all that she did, there was a generosity that reflected more than her means, a capacity to love found time and again in sacrifice of self and of professional and personal needs.

Her husband, Paul Alexander Bartlett, was an artist and writer, whose life-long study of the haciendas of Mexico required a gypsy existence of the family. I was

their only child. Family life was, to a great extent, held together and cultivated by my mother, who shared and supported her husband's creative work, transmitted intellectual hunger and joy to her son, and made us a family through often nightly readings aloud from great literature of the past, from her husband's writing, and from her own poetry. The burdens of earning a living and making ends meet, in the context of happiness in small things, were most often on her shoulders. For recreation, she loved to play games, especially those involving words. She excelled in Scrabble.

Poetry for her was a way of living. Single poems were artifacts of a life lived by a person whose perceptions were highly sensitive to meaningful connections, to the interplay of symbolism, concept, and emotion. It was no accident that following an automobile accident in which she was badly injured, she began to read aloud to her husband and son Hermann Hesse's long novel, *Magister Ludi*. Castalia and the glass bead game were, after all, external realizations of the inherent form of a private life-world devoted to the creation of connections. Evenings over weeks and then months brought the ideals of Castalia into our living room, and also onto tape. It appealed to her lively humor to have recorded what may be the longest reading of a single work.



*Elizabeth Bartlett in the patio,
Huntington Hartford Foundation, 1959*

It is difficult to put the basic ingredients of a richly creative individual's life into a few words. The titles of a few of her 17 published books, in addition to more than 1,000 individually published poems, short stories, and essays, reveal a few lines of a sketch of poetic purpose:

- | | |
|--|--|
| <i>Poems of Yes and No</i> | — since at the deepest level the persons we are result from what the individual accepts, and what he or she rejects; |
| <i>Threads</i> | — a celebration of the intrinsic, manifold continuity of all things; |
| <i>Behold This Dreamer</i>
and
<i>The House of Sleep</i> | — because dream life and waking life are for this poet not so obviously distinct, nor would she wish them to be; |
| <i>It Takes Practice Not to Die</i> | — for suffering means at least this; |
| <i>Twelve-Tone Poems</i> | — from a composer's love for the music of words, this new form of poetry; |
| <i>Address in Time</i>
<i>Memory Is No Stranger</i>
and
<i>Around the Clock</i> | — expressing an overpowering personal awareness of that least-understood dimension of human experience, time. |

Elizabeth Bartlett's poetry has received wide commendation. She is, in a certain sense, "the poet's poet": Her elegant precision in the use of language, her word-crafting skill in meter, structure, and symbolism, and her classical dedication to the universal together place her work on a level that is frequently demanding of the reader, whom she respected, and to whom she would not speak down.

Many of the leaders of this century have praised her work, among them Wallace Stevens, Alfred Kreybord, John Ciardi, Mark Van Doren, Marianne Moore, Louis Untermeyer, Richard Eberhart, Robert M. Hutchins, William Stafford, Richard Wilbur, Josephine Jacobsen, Robert Hillyer, Allen Tate, Kenneth Rexroth, Conrad Aiken, Gustav Davidson, and many others. A few of their comments have been brought together here:

Her poems give one a sense of intelligence and sensibility.

– Wallace Stevens

I like her poems; they think, and they mean what they say.

– Conrad Aiken

A fresh, swift, lyrical impulse.... Her poems are mature, they have a bite to them.

– Richard Eberhart

Any poet might envy the courage and the artistry of what she says, or rather sings.

– Alfred Kreyborg

The new form is most interesting, the poems quite beautiful and distinguished.

– Allen Tate, writing about Elizabeth Bartlett's
new form, twelve-tone poetry

Clear, swift and strong; and witty, too, in the best sense of that word...

– Mark Van Doren

The poems assuredly justify the writer, and should console the right reader (if anything can).

– Marianne Moore

I am much impressed. The poems seem to me what is called an important contribution, and a beautiful one.

– Robert M. Hutchins



Elizabeth Bartlett, Dorland Mt. Colony, 1980

There is a trancelike progression in these poems, in which all unfolds quietly, with a steady holding of a certain pervasive tone... You have accomplished what I keep hoping to do, attaining to continuity between poems and at the same time varying the way of going forward.

– William Stafford

The poems have force, economy, genuineness, and distinctness of tone.

– Richard Wilbur

Elizabeth Bartlett understands that the very large and the very small are siblings. Perceptive and inquiring, her poems ask all our own questions, poems in an original and lucid form.

– Josephine Jacobsen

Elizabeth Bartlett's poems are good examples of the change, or one of the changes in poetry since World War II. They are poems of direct statement, of personal communication, of life, of people, of value relations. Like those of Francis Jammes,

Verhaeren, Gertrude Stein, Laura Riding, Reverdy, her poetry is the kind I value, a poetry concerned with the relationships of the self to nature, of self to self, of selves to the world. She has said clearly, 'This is the way I handle life' – and does so superbly.

– Kenneth Rexroth

During the last decade and a half of her life, Elizabeth Bartlett turned to devote her unlimited energy to the advancement of the creative work of other poets. This she did by founding an international project whose purpose is to reinstate the role of literature, and specifically the role of poetry, in the Olympic Games. When the first of the Olympic festivals took place 2,772 years ago in Olympia, Greece, the ancient Greek tradition began of honoring poets, as well as athletes: to award excellence of both Mind and Body.

The ancient Greek Olympiads continued in four-year intervals for nearly twelve hundred years until 393 A.D. when Emperor Theodosius of Rome banned the Olympics, which had deteriorated into barbaric carnivals and circuses. That was the 293rd, last Olympiad.

For some fifteen hundred years, the Olympic tradition disappeared from human history. Then, one hundred years ago, in 1896, a Frenchman, Baron de Coubertin, revived the Olympics — but only partially, for the focus was on athletic ability only. The ancient Greek balance, honoring outstanding literary achievements, as well as those of the body, was neglected.



Elizabeth Bartlett, circa 1985

The athletic emphasis in the Olympic Games remained the exclusive one until 1984. In that year, Elizabeth Bartlett published the first international collection of the work of leading contemporary poets, for the purpose of honoring their achievements in the ancient Greek context of the Olympics. Until her death in 1994, Elizabeth Bartlett devoted her time, long hours, and personal finances to the continuation of this project. With the help of a world-wide network of regional associate editors, translators, and an international panel of judges, she edited an international poetry anthology every four years in conjunction with the Olympic Games. A second international anthology was published in 1988, followed by a third in 1992. She was at work on the present anthology,² scheduled for publication in 1996, when she died. It was to be the fourth in this series of international poetry anthologies, and to commemorate the 100th year of the modern Olympics.

² See note 1.

As the Olympic Games in ancient Greece honored poets for excellence of mind and literary talent, these anthologies paid tribute to leading poets representing the community of world literature. In 1984, they represented nine nations; by 1988, over 30 nations; and in 1992, 132 poets from 65 countries. Elizabeth Bartlett believed that “poetry is the voice of the human spirit, wherever it happens to be.” Her effort was to restore the ancient Greek balance, to bring poetry back within the Olympic framework of international peace, good will, and celebration of common humanity.

Elizabeth Bartlett was an individual of unusual dedication, a poet with a strong sense of mission, a vision for the future, and the patience and perseverance to realize that vision. With the poetic imagination of Benjamin Franklin, the first to establish endowments to benefit man beyond the compass of a century, she left an inheritance to the future of poetry in the form of a one hundred year trust. When the trust matures, this international endowment for the benefit of poetry in the context of the Greek Olympic ideal will have grown significantly through the compounding effect of time. It will comprise a gift from time itself: time, which throughout her life was perhaps the mystery that called to her most deeply.

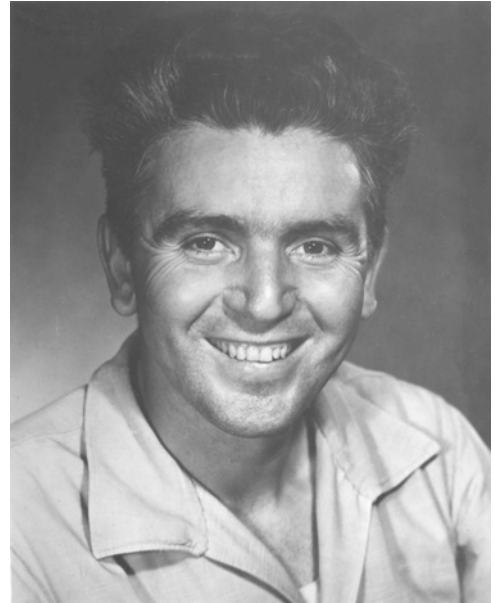
PAUL ALEXANDER BARTLETT

PORTRAYER OF INSCAPES

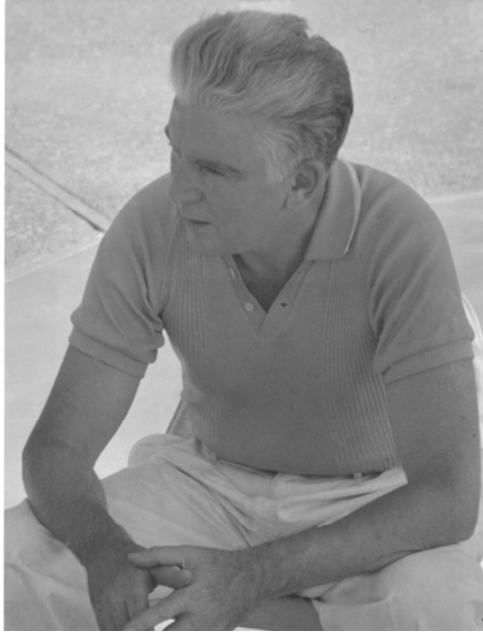
The distant tap-tapping of two typewriters and softly playing classical music were the sounds that put me to sleep each night. Both my father and mother were hard at work — my mother, typing her poetry and her always diligent literary correspondence, and my father, creating entrances into the minds of the characters described in his fiction and non-fiction. The sound of words as they were struck onto paper possessed a rhythm punctuated now and again by a faint bell as each typewriter's carriage reached the end of a line.

If art is the creation of other worlds of experience, my father was an artist both of words and of brush strokes. Through the written word and in sketches, illustrations, and paintings, he sought to bring to life the inner sense of realities which his probative perception and sensibility disclosed. Some of his illustrations he called 'inscapes', a name he coined that might be extended to all of his creative work. Whether in written, painted, penciled, or pen-and-ink expression, always his effort was to convey with craftsmanship and intimacy an atmosphere, impressions and associations, the heart of meaning of an imagined or real scene, character, or period of history.

A reversal of Will Rogers' line applied to him throughout his life: He never met anyone who didn't like him. He was lean, six feet tall, handsome by Hollywood standards, with an enduring shock of wavy hair that had already begun to show a streak of grey in his late teens. Rarely one meets a person whose company brings a feeling of peace and kindness; he was such a person. He was a romantic in the full spectrum of its meaning: He was idealistic and impractical, a brave and quietly stubborn Don Quixote who would quit his job, pack up our family of three, and with our meager savings head once again to Mexico to resume his lifelong study of the haciendas. He never looked back with regret in leaving behind the trappings of a secure and stable life so much sought by others. He made life-changing decisions without trepidation and with the romantic's vision that discounted and shrugged off the harsher realities of everyday living. If he was starry-eyed it was because he saw a certain star and let nothing stand in his way in reaching it.



Paul Alexander Bartlett, circa 1960



Paul Alexander Bartlett, circa 1958

He was not only a romantic, but an adventurer, searching alone, or often with me, his son and *compañero*, by car, horseback, motorcycle, by boat, or on foot, throughout the richly varied Mexican landscape of mountains, deserts, valleys, and tropical forests, for the haciendas he loved, the usually deserted remnants in ruins of an often splendid way of life that might be furnished with the finery of candelabras and lacework, brocaded sofas, divans, and armchairs, inlaid tables, tapestries, and paintings imported from Europe, a grand piano or organ. These estates of wide-ranging styles of architecture were always a surprise, built in some of the most remote and hard-to-reach locations in the country.

With an artist's eye and a poet's soul, he was entranced by the courage and independence of the owners of these often immense plantations, who were willing to turn from the established and cultivated society of Spain, and settle in physical, emotional, and cultural isolation in a far-away land that drew adventuresome romantics much like him.

He was not blind to the history of hardships and suffering which the iron hands of hacienda owners, the *hacendados*, frequently inflicted on their workers. His compassion for past lives was deep, yet he was able to focus on the magical beauty of these difficult-to-find remains of a quickly fading past, and then work to portray that beauty and mystery in his art and photographs.

In all, over a period of more than 40 years and during our family's many stays in Mexico, he visited more than 350 haciendas scattered throughout the country. At each hacienda, he would sit on the ground sketching, sometimes accompanied by a few peasant children, drawn by their curiosity to this novel sight.



Paul Alexander Bartlett next to the casa principal of the Hacienda Kambul in Yucatan, 1959

When not scouting for haciendas, photographing them, and depicting them in pen-and-ink illustrations, he would likely be found either at his easel or his typewriter. At the easel, he made

use of a wide range of media: watercolor, casein, oils, acrylics, gouache, pastels, inks, collage, and encaustic. When standing next to him while he painted, one could feel the enjoyment and fun which much of his artwork gave him. In talks with him and in watching him at work, it was clear that, always, it was his intent to re-create and capture on paper, canvas, masonite, or wood the special mood of a place, the spirit of a people, the cares and personality of his subjects who were often the simple and hard-working *campesinos* he met on his many hacienda trips.

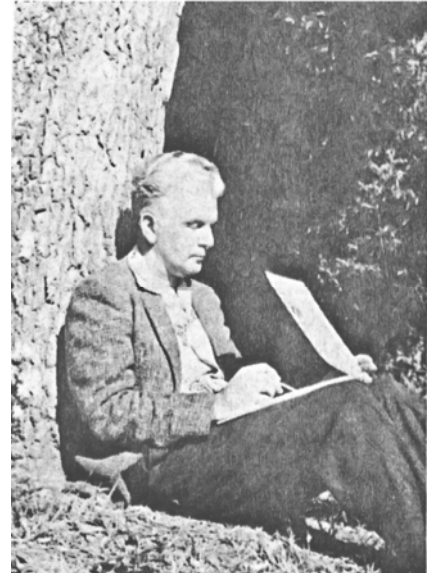
These were among the subjects he sought to portray in art; they were also among the subjects to which he devoted his fiction and non-fiction. When at his typewriter, I could see that his frame of mind was more serious, more intense, less playful than when he held a brush or pen in his hand. But here again his evident purpose was that of a portrayer of inscapes — to re-produce, and in this way to re-live, the innermost lives of his characters: to re-experience much of what an artist's intuition, coupled with carefully collected historical knowledge, can re-create.

His inscapes were of many worlds: In his quintet of novels, *Voices from the Past*, he brings the reader into the world of da Vinci's boundless curiosity and inventive interests, and in another of the novels, into the world of Sappho's poetic awareness. In yet another novel, he leads the reader to re-experience Lincoln's lived concerns and humane compassion; in a fourth of the novels, he brings the reader into intimate contact with Shakespeare's sharp wit and perception; and in a fifth, he re-creates the plausible experience of Jesus in the days knowingly leading to his death.

He brought the same deeply felt interest in others to bear in portraying their inner worlds in a multiplicity of ways: in his early novel, *Forward! Children*, which re-creates the hardship and trauma of soldiers in the tank corps of WWI; in his novel, *When the Owl Cries*, and his novelette, *Adiós, Mi México*, which offer the reader first-hand contact with hacienda life at the time of the Mexican Revolution of 1910; in his many short stories which provide inscapes across a spectrum of individual lives.

His pen-and-ink hacienda illustrations as well as his paintings were exhibited in many leading galleries in the U.S. and Mexico. Both his art as well as his writing were commended by leading critics, artists, and authors, among them Ford Madox Ford, Pearl Buck, Upton Sinclair, John Dos Passos, Upton Sinclair, Evelyn Eaton, James Purdy, James Michener, Ralph Roeder, David Weiss, Charles Poore, Paul Engle, Grace Flandrau, Frank Tannenbaum, Josephine Jacobsen, Russell Kirk, and others.

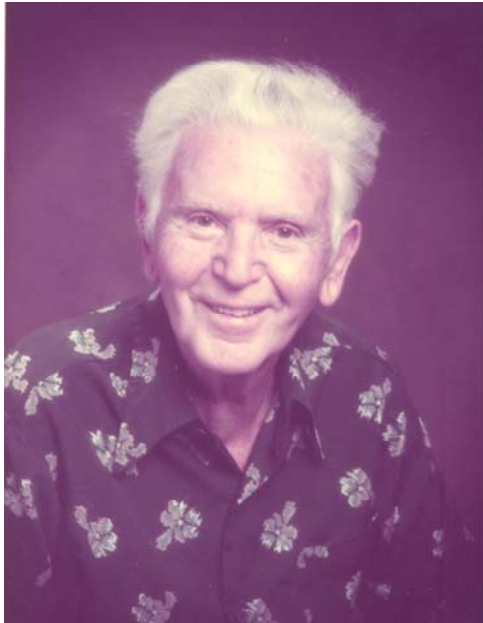
He was one of those who are blessed with an even and cheerful temperament. Despite the last decade and a half of his life when he was in daily and often severe pain from vasculitis, his gentle smile was always ready, as was his ability to continue to create new art and to carry on a



*Paul Alexander Bartlett sketching
an hacienda, circa 1973*

many years' commitment to his last and ambitious work of historical fiction, *Voices from the Past — A Quintet of Novels: Sappho's Journal, Christ's Journal, Leonardo da Vinci's Journal, Shakespeare's Journal, Lincoln's Journal*, which he left in manuscript form with accompanying illustrations.³

When critically injured in a car accident and for five weeks in intensive care, his good humor remained untouched, as did his pleasure in seeing an advance copy of his book, *The Haciendas of Mexico: An Artist's Record*, the ink barely dry on the pages, sent to him by overnight express by the concerned publisher.



Paul Alexander Bartlett, circa 1980

Soft-spoken, always with the kindness and gentleness of a pure spirit who never uttered a word of profanity, he devoted his life to the creative feat of transposing his artist's perception into other worlds of experience. To those other worlds he gave renewed life through his art and his writing, always seeking to portray inscapes of beauty in its many forms.

Arthur C. Clarke — prophetic two-thirds imaginative writer, one-fourth physicist, and the remainder, a poet in disguise — once wrote: “[I]n the long run the only human activities really worth while are the search for knowledge, and the creation of beauty. This is beyond argument; the only point of debate is which comes first.”⁴

For my father, romantic adventurer and portrayer of inscapes, there was no debate: It is beauty alone which inspired his life, and which he sought to bring to others.

³ The quintet of novels was published by Autograph Editions in a single large volume 17 years after his death, in 2007, along with separately available volumes of *Sappho's Journal* and *Christ's Journal*. These books have now been made available to readers as free downloadable eBooks through Project Gutenberg.

⁴ Arthur C. Clarke, *Profiles of the Future*. New York: Warner Books, 1985, p. 101.

FURTHER INFORMATION AND SOURCES OF THEIR WORK

*Online information about Elizabeth Bartlett (1911–1994)
and Paul Alexander Bartlett (1909–1990)*

At the time of this writing, informative Wikipedia entries are available which describe their lives, list their creative work and summarize its recognition and importance, accompanied by links to additional online resources:

For Elizabeth Bartlett:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizabeth_Bartlett_%28American_poet%29

For Paul Alexander Bartlett:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Alexander_Bartlett



*Paul and Elizabeth Bartlett,
Atlanta, 1957*



*Paul and Elizabeth Bartlett,
Montalvo Foundation, 1961*

A number of their previously published books may now be freely downloaded in a variety of eBook formats from Project Gutenberg:

Books by Elizabeth Bartlett:

<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/author/49768>

Books by Paul Alexander Bartlett:

<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/author/40002>

*Permanent collections of their work and literary correspondence*⁵

Elizabeth Bartlett:

- **Elizabeth Bartlett Collection in the Archive of New Poetry at the University of California, San Diego.** This collection contains literary and publishing correspondence; personal records and notes; newspaper clippings; program and exhibit announcements; book reviews; original manuscripts; a complete collection of her published books, short stories, essays, and reviews; a collection of her poetry publications in literary reviews, journals, and newspapers; anthologies in which her work was published; and tape recordings of her poetry readings. Also included in the collection are copies of a wide variety of previously unpublished manuscripts (books, short stories, plays, scripts, and essays), including her long 550-page typescript of her autobiographical novel, *Portrait of Time: Sea Drift*, Literary Olympics materials (published Literary Olympics anthologies, literary, publishing, and legal correspondence, manuscripts, photographs, and related source material), and original poetry-related original art by her. Finding aid for the collection:
<http://libraries.ucsd.edu/speccoll/findingaids/mss0321.html>.
- **Elizabeth Bartlett Collection held by Archives and Special Collections at the University of Louisville.** This collection contains autographed copies of published books by Elizabeth Bartlett, copies of Literary Olympics volumes edited by her, selected literary quarterlies in which her work was published, issues of *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* for which she served as Poetry Editor, and a complete recording of her reading of Hermann Hesse's Nobel Prize winning novel, *Magister Ludi*. Finding aid for the collection:
<http://cdn.calisphere.org/data/13030/gx/ft596nb0gx/files/ft596nb0gx.pdf>.

Paul Alexander Bartlett:

- **The Paul Alexander Bartlett Collection at the American Heritage Center of the University of Wyoming.** This collection contains 78 of Paul Alexander Bartlett's original Mexican hacienda pen-and-ink illustrations, as well as 1,271 prints and 799 negatives of photographs taken by him of the Mexican haciendas (in addition to those included in the collection of these at the University of Texas, see below); works of fine art by him, consisting of his original paintings in multiple media, drawings, and sketches; literary and publishing correspondence; personal records; notes; newspaper clippings; program and exhibit announcements; reviews of his published work; his original manuscripts; collected publications by him, including short stories, essays, poetry, and reviews; and literary reviews, journals, newspapers, and anthologies in which his work was published. The collection includes his annual personal/literary journals for the years 1941, 1971, 1974-76, 1984-89. Also forming part of the collection are original manuscripts of a wide variety of as yet unpublished books, short stories, and poetry. Finding aid for the collection:
<http://rmoa.unm.edu/docviewer.php?docId=wyu-ah06775.xml>.

⁵ Information excerpted from the above-mentioned Wikipedia entries and covered under the CC Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license.

- **Paul Alexander Bartlett Collection held by the Benson Latin American Collection of the University of Texas.** The collection includes 294 original pen-and-ink illustrations by Paul Alexander Bartlett of the haciendas of Mexico, 903 hacienda photographs, 279 negatives, and 69 slides. Online inventory of the collection:
http://www.lib.utexas.edu/benson/Mex_Archives/Bartlett.html.
- **The Paul Alexander Bartlett Collection held by the Department of Special Collections of the Charles E. Young Research Library of the University of California in Los Angeles.** This collection includes a variety of published and unpublished manuscripts of works by him, literary correspondence, short story publications, and the majority of his annual personal and literary journals spanning the years from 1919 to the end of his life. Finding aid for the collection:
<http://cdn.calisphere.org/data/13030/gx/ft596nb0gx/files/ft596nb0gx.pdf>
- **Paul Bartlett Photograph Collection of Mexican Haciendas held by the Latin American Library of Tulane University.** This collection consists of 198 Mexican hacienda photographs, spanning 18 states in Mexico, taken by him. Finding aid for the collection:
<http://archivolal.tulane.edu/index.php?p=collections/controlcard&id=45&q=Bartlett>
- **Paul Alexander Bartlett Archival Materials, Toledo Museum of Art Reference Library,** a limited group of materials that “may include announcements, clippings, press releases, brochures, reviews, invitations, small exhibition catalogs, resumes, slides, and other ephemeral material.” Catalog link to the collection: http://toledo.spydus.com/cgi-bin/spydus.exe/ENQ/OPAC/BIBENQ?ENTRY_NAME=BS&ENTRY=Paul+Alexander+Bartlett&ENTRY_TYPE=K&NR ECS=30&SORTS=HBT.SOVR&SEARCH_FORM=%2Fcgi-bin%2Fspydus.exe%2FMSGTRN%2FOPAC%2FBSEARCH&CF=GEN&ISGLB=0&GQ=Paul+Alexander+Bartlett
- **The Paul Alexander Bartlett Collection of Submissions to the Literary Annual, Workshop, 1940-45, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.** Finding aid for the collection:
<http://www.oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/ft2j49n57b/>



Paul and Elizabeth Bartlett, Switzerland, 1974