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William Rohrbach, 91, Grew Up in Darien; Artist, Art Professor Who Radically Simplified His Life

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William Rohrbach passed away on July 31, 2017. He was 91.

As a professor emeritus at the University of California, Santa Barbara, he was often referred to as "Professor Bill." However, he preferred to be called simply, "Bill."

Bill was born on Oct. 26, 1925 and was raised in Darien. His ancestors were descendants of the Mayflower and the family's Connecticut property was originally purchased directly from the Indians with gold coins (which was not the custom of the day).

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His father was a CPA who took the daily 6:58 train to New York; his mother, an art-school graduate, was his artistic influence.

Bill chose to attend college "out west" — at the University of Michigan. But the year was 1943 and World War II was in full force. At the completion of his first year of academics, he enlisted in the Navy.

As a sailor, he crossed the Pacific six times. In his downtime, he created an ongoing cartoon strip for the other shipmates. He piloted an amphibious landing craft onto the beach in the third wave of the first invasion of mainland Japan. With typical humility, he had always pointed out that Japan had already surrendered. And equally typical for Bill, he ended up the day having tea in the home of a Japanese family.

— [This obituary](#) was previously published by the Santa Barbara News-Press

With the war over, Bill returned to Ann Arbor and earned his bachelors degree in European history. He then went "way out west" and pursued his developing interest in art with a graduate degree from UC Berkeley.

Upon graduation, Bill set out on a spontaneous road-trip to Mexico that happened to stop in Santa Barbara. He discovered that UCSB (then Santa Barbara College, located on the Riviera) needed an art teacher. He accepted the job — and has been here ever since. He never made it to Mexico.

As an associate professor, Bill taught art appreciation, drawing, painting and photography. The campus at the time was growing intellectually as well as in size, and he was an integral part of that growth. His lectures on art, metaphysics and the three-way interaction between art, artist and observer were well known.

Always learning, he spent his summers honing photography skills with the likes of Minor White and Ansel Adams. Over the years, he influenced thousands of art students and made 28 trips abroad to study European art and culture with his students.

Bill was an artist in his own right. He had more than 40 exhibitions around the world. His paintings were praised as "neo-cubist reformulations" influenced by early cubist period of Braque, Picasso and Cezanne.

He lived in Hope Ranch for almost 30 years as the permanent guest on an estate and very much practiced what he preached. He steadfastly rejected technology, commercialism and the "nonsensical need to acquire clutter."

In 1984, Bill was awarded the title of professor emeritus and began phasing out of university life. He quit painting shortly thereafter. He claimed he just burned out; others will tell you that he moved on.

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It was at this time that Bill took a cottage adjacent to the Miramar Hotel and became a fixture at the Miramar Beach Club. He liked the simplicity, informality and lack of pretention at the Miramar Hotel. He had described the hotel as "kitschy, but consistent, aesthetic and surprisingly harmonious."

When not walking the beach, he often played ping pong, which he found to have a Zen-like appeal.

Over the years, his astute, conservative investing of every paycheck and non-materialistic lifestyle allowed him to purchase a beachfront condominium in Montecito. But he still renounced any need for clutter — like furniture. He often entertained while sitting lotus-style on the bare carpet. His only technology was a telephone (rotary).

When the Miramar closed, Bill moved his "headquarters" downtown, centered around the University Club of Santa Barbara. He eventually moved to various downtown retirement homes.

His conservative lifestyle afforded him to be comfortable in his last years. His time was filled with a constant influx of visitors from the many students, colleagues and friends he connected so deeply with throughout his truly metaphysical journey.