

UC SANTA BARBARA

THE *Current*

January 17, 2017

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Heroes of Another Age

William Sanders Scarborough might be the most impressive man you've probably never heard of. Born a slave in Georgia in 1852, he defied the law by learning to read and write. He went on to become a scholar of Greek and Latin and served as president of Wilberforce University for a dozen years.

Scarborough was the first African American scholar of the classics. Others who were also classically educated during the 19th and early 20th centuries had stories no less impressive — even heroic. A new exhibition at UC Santa Barbara, "[14 Black Classicists](#)," highlights the achievements of men and women who shattered racialized assumptions of 19th-century academia to become respected and influential classicists.

The exhibition, split between the university's Art, Design and Architectural Museum (AD&AM) and the UCSB Library, features portraits and short biographies of the 14 scholars. A series of six lectures in conjunction with the exhibition will further explore education and the African American experience. The first is Thursday, Jan. 19, at 6 p.m. in the AD&AM, when the exhibition's organizer, Michele Valerie Ronnick, will speak on "Black Classicism in the United States."

Ronnick, a professor in the Department of Classical and Modern Languages, Literatures and Cultures at Wayne State University in Detroit, has been researching African American classicists for nearly 30 years, and staged her first exhibition, "12 Black Classicists," in 2003.

“The subjects of my photo installation represent the first flowering of African American intellectual work inside the academy,” Ronnick said. “With them begins all African American work in philology (the study of languages) — period. Learning classical languages (Greek and Latin) came first and this was followed by the study of other languages.”

The 12 men and two woman featured in the exhibition all overcame enormous obstacles to find a place in academia. Like Scarborough, some were born as slaves, and all had to persevere despite the common belief among whites that African Americans were fit only for vocational training. “These brave pioneers — amid great hardship and overwhelming prejudice — strove with dignity and determination to take their place as scholars and professional educators among other Americans,” Ronnick noted. “Through their learning they authenticated themselves as human beings in a period in which many people of African descent were considered not more than living tools. Their achievement, a liberation through learning, is of national significance to us.”

Among the featured scholars are Wiley Lane, who became the first black professor of classics at Howard University; Lewis Baxter Moore, the first African American to earn a Ph.D. at the University of Pennsylvania; and Helen Maria Chesnutt, a high school Latin teacher who inspired the poet Langston Hughes.

[Helen Morales](#), Argyropoulos Chair in Hellenic Studies and professor and chair of [classics](#) at UCSB, said the exhibition offers a compelling look into the scholars’ hard-earned journey of intellectual discovery. “I think it showcases some fascinating and largely forgotten life stories of people who often, from appalling beginnings in slavery, fought to learn ancient Greek and Latin, fought to learn ancient history, to read classical texts and then became important scholars in their own right,” she said. “And those life stories are inspirational.”

The exhibition is co-sponsored by the Argyropoulos endowment in Hellenic Studies and the Departments of Classics. The lectures are co-sponsored by the Argyropoulos endowment and the UCSB departments of [Black Studies](#) and of Classics.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community

of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.