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IN PROFILE

Beatrice Wood

Still making art, and mischief, after all these years.

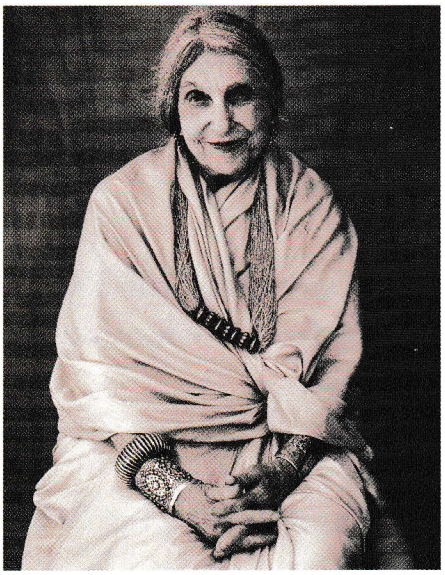
By Hunter Drohojowska Philp

Beatrice Wood has eyes as blue and untroubled as the sky above her home in Southern California's verdant Ojai Valley. Her long white hair is coiled in braids, and she looks regal in an ivory silk caftan, her chains of crystals and pearls twined with heavy turquoise. On the verge of turning 104, named a Living Treasure by the State of California, she is busy turning out golden-glazed pottery, erotic sculpture, and sprightly drawings for the exhibition "Beatrice Wood: A Centennial Tribute," opening on her birthday, March 3, and continuing through June 8 at the American Craft Museum in New York. (Smaller shows have been organized by the San Francisco Craft & Folk Art Museum until March 23 and at Frank Lloyd Gallery in Los Angeles March 15 through April 12.)

"All the time I was 60, 70, I was plunged in despair over old age," says Wood. "Now that I've reached my present age, I absolutely feel ageless. Any young man of 25 is as attractive to me as if I were 16." Of the talents contributing to her success Wood counts one humble skill as the most important: "A woman facing the world of men has to be organized to survive," she insists. "I would organize my days, but not my friendships—I let those be spontaneous." As a result, scarcely a day of Wood's long life seems to have been burdened by boredom. At 17, rebelling against her privileged East Coast upbringing, she went to Paris to study art and, later, theater.

The outbreak of World War I forced her to return to New York, where, in 1916, she fell in with Dadaist Marcel Duchamp and his friend Henri-Pierre Roché, a French diplomat and art collector. The middle-aged Roché became her lover; Duchamp introduced her to modern art. The threesome spent many a boisterous night at the famous salons hosted by the adventuresome art collectors Walter and Louise Arensberg.

During Wood's first visit to their townhouse—lined with paintings by Picasso, Matisse, and Duchamp (including his famous *Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2*)—she sneered, "Such scrawls."



Duchamp promptly challenged her to do better and invited her to his studio. When she'd finished a dozen or so drawings, Duchamp flipped through them, declaring "good, bad, bad, good, bad." Wood says, "He kind of broke my sentimentality. I would try to make women with flowers, then I would do something just out of annoyance. Of course, those were the ones from the unconscious, which were attractive to him."

Wood continued to create drawings based mostly on events from her life, using a spontaneous, unpolished style. In 1917, Wood helped Duchamp and Roché organize the Society of Independent Artists, exhibiting her drawing of a woman's nude torso with a bar of real soap placed over the genitals. The trio also arranged the famous Blindman's Ball, a benefit for the short-lived avant-garde publication *The Blindman*; the evening culminated in Wood dancing on the tabletops and Duchamp swinging from a chandelier.

After a loveless marriage to a man who spent her money, in the 1920s Wood lived off the kindness of friends, and her art career stalled. One night, Duchamp handed her an envelope with the caveat that she not open it until she got home. It contained a much-needed $50.

Wood jokes that she never slept with the men she wed and never wed the men she loved (her second husband, whom she married in the late '30s, died in 1960). Her painful romantic relationships led her to the study of Theosophy, to the Indian guru Jiddu Krishnamurti, and to California. "All the hardships in life teach us to overcome them," muses Wood. "If you have a happy marriage, you have no desire to paint." Though, she adds, "I might have preferred the happy marriage."

In 1933, at 40, Wood began to study pottery in Los Angeles, first at a local high school and later with the Austrian refugee ceramists Otto and Gertrud Natzler. She developed her signature lustrous glazes on strongly shaped vessels. During that period she also began making figurative ceramics in a consciously naive style—works she calls "sophisticated primitives," which have social and, of course, sexual themes.

Today, in Wood's magenta and sage sitting room, the shelves are full of her lusty ceramic couplings and tableaux of bordellos. "I had to have some emotional outlet because I've been a nun for so many years," she says, smiling. At the suggestion that her figures were influenced by the erotic sculpture of India, where she went frequently to collect folk art, Wood retorts, "I don't need inspiration for the erotic side to life."

Though she is a lifelong vegetarian who never smoked nor drank, Wood assigns less abstemious reasons for her longevity: "Chocolate and young men," she says with a mischievous smile. □