



American Art: Lesbian, 1900-1969

by Carla Williams

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American lesbian art in the earlier twentieth century was indelibly shaped by the expatriate experience, especially by the salons of Paris, and by the emergence of a more democratic art form, photography, which allowed marginalized communities to document their lives and experiences. After World War II, however, many lesbians felt enormous pressure to retreat into the closet.

Expatriates in Paris

Like the generation that preceded them, American women artists of the early twentieth century went to Europe to seek a less-restricted environment in which to develop their art and many went back and forth between the continents.

In Paris an international group of artists and intellectuals congregated around the literary salons of expatriate American lesbians Gertrude Stein (1874-1946) and her partner Alice Toklas (1877-1967), both writers and art patrons; and that of the publicly lesbian Natalie Clifford Barney (1876-1972), nicknamed "The Amazon" for her love of equestrianism. Barney, a wealthy poet and author from Washington, D.C., hosted her weekly salon for sixty years.

Djuna Barnes (1892-1982) was born in Cornwall-on-Hudson, New York, and later moved to New York City, where her first job was as a reporter and illustrator. A painter, she eventually also became a poet, playwright, and novelist, and illustrated her own books.

In 1921 Barnes went to Paris as a correspondent for *McCall's* magazine; she remained for twenty years. She became part of a circle of writers, including Stein and Barney, who became known as "the Academy of Women" or "the Literary Women of the Left Bank." Her *Ladies Almanack* (1928) is a satire about the group and is infused with lesbian eroticism. *Nightwood* (1932) is based on the breakup of Barnes's love affair in Paris with Thelma Wood (1901-1970), an American sculptor and graphic artist.

Photographer Berenice Abbott (1898-1981) originally moved to New York from Ohio to be a sculptor. There she met and fell in with an artistic crowd that included Barnes. She moved to Paris in 1921, where she changed the spelled of her name from "Bernice" to the more cosmopolitan "Berenice." Working as artist and photographer Man Ray's darkroom assistant, Abbott learned photography and opened her own studio. She also rediscovered and rescued the work of nearly-forgotten *vieux Paris* photographer Eugène Atget.

Abbott specialized in portraits of women, many of them lesbian expatriates, though her most famous image is her poignant portrait of author James Joyce (1928). Her study of flamboyantly cross-dressed lesbian author Janet Flanner (1927) is one of her more overtly Sapphic subjects; she also photographed lovers Barnes and Wood.

In 1929 Abbott returned to live in the United States; her *Changing New York* documentary project



A photograph of buildings in New York City by Berenice Abbott. Courtesy McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University.

(1935-1939) was her defining work and also defined that era in the city. Although she associated with lesbians throughout her career, Abbott never discussed her sexuality and was closeted throughout her life. In 1985 the artist Kaucyila Brooke wrote to Abbott regarding her lesbianism; Abbott vehemently responded: "I am a photographer, not a lesbian."

One of the most prominent lesbian artists among the expatriates was Romaine Brooks (1874-1970), born Beatrice Romaine Goddard in Rome. By her recollection she had a peripatetic, abusive childhood. Forced as a child to draw clandestinely because her mother forbade it, Brooks emancipated herself at twenty-one and moved to Europe, exploring her creative possibilities in Italy and England before settling in Paris in 1905. She was briefly married in 1902 to a gay musician, John Ellingham Brooks; that same year her mother's death left her independently wealthy.

Brooks was primarily a portraitist who painted mostly women--herself, her friends, and her lovers. Interested in androgyny and gender roles, she exalted a kind of heroic female or "woman warrior" in her depictions. Brooks's paintings have a dominant gray palette, an austerity that extended into her home décor as well.

In 1915 Brooks, then forty-one, met Barney; they would remain together for nearly fifty years. Her portrait of Barney, *The Amazon* (1920, Musée Carnavalet, Paris), is one of Brooks's best-known works. Cross-dressed subjects appear throughout her oeuvre, including her portrait of the British lesbian artist Gluck (Hannah Gluckstein, 1895-1978) entitled *Peter: A Young English Girl* (1923-1924, National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution), and her study of the lover of novelist Radclyffe Hall, *Una, Lady Troubridge* (1924, National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution).

But her most important work in this genre is her 1923 *Self Portrait* (National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution). This work boldly establishes a lesbian identity in the visual arts. In her later years Brooks wrote two unpublished memoirs of her life: "No Pleasant Memories" and "A War-Time Interlude."

Photography as Art Form and Document

On the other side of the cultural spectrum of visual production from that cultivated in the salons of Paris is a more democratic art form, photography. This new art form permanently transformed lesbian representation.

The introduction in 1888 of the Kodak box camera revolutionized photography. By having ready access to inexpensive cameras, marginalized communities and their members were able to validate their lives and existences by permanently putting a face to them. The box camera manufacturers began heavily marketing the medium to women, touting the new camera as so easy to operate that even a woman could use them.

Nowhere was amateur photography more embraced than in the United States, a country in love with picturing itself and in need of instant histories to validate its relative youth.

The significance of photography as a documentary tool emerged in the early twentieth century, especially for gay men and lesbians. Anonymous photographs of men and women in loving embraces occasionally appear in archives or antique shops as silent testimonies to lives lived largely in secret.

Some gay and lesbian photographers focused on the world outside, leaving their own lives shadowed in mystery and subject to speculation. Others, however, openly documented their worlds, leaving an important legacy of "proof" where little else survives.

Little known nineteenth-century lesbian pioneers such as photographer Emma Jane Gay (1830-1919), who photographed Native Americans in Idaho, and Edith S. Watson (1861-1943), who photographed primarily in Canada, paved the way for later, more celebrated practitioners, such as Frances Benjamin Johnston

(1864-1952) and Alice Austen (née Munn) (1866-1952).

Frances Benjamin Johnston, born in West Virginia and raised in a socially prominent family in Washington, D.C., had a privileged introduction to photography. She studied at the Académie Julian in Paris, and received her first camera as a gift from George Eastman, the inventor of the Kodak camera.

Johnston worked as a freelance photojournalist and opened a studio in Washington in 1895, where as official White House photographer she documented the administrations of Presidents Benjamin Harrison, Grover Cleveland, William McKinley (whom she photographed seconds before his assassination), Theodore Roosevelt, and William H. Taft.

Johnston also photographed Natalie Barney. Her famous self-portrait (ca 1896) seated with her skirt pulled up, crossed legs exposed, smoking a cigarette and grasping a beer stein was her radical take on the concept of the "New Woman" being touted in contemporary literature.

She became a vocal advocate for women in photography. In 1897 *The Ladies Home Journal* published Johnston's article "What a Woman Can Do With a Camera," and she served as curator at the Paris Exposition of 1900 of an exhibition of photographs by twenty-eight women photographers.

Johnston's one-time business partner and presumed lover, Mattie Edwards Hewitt (d. 1956), was a successful freelance home and garden photographer. In 1913 she and Johnston opened a studio together in New York, and in the 1920s they photographed New York architecture together. Johnston continued to photograph until her death in New Orleans at age eighty-eight. The details of Hewitt's later career are unknown.

Alice Austen, another daughter of privilege, had a very different but no less significant career as a photographer. A native of Staten Island, New York, Austen received her first camera at age ten. For more than fifty years Austen photographed primarily her family and circle of friends in and around Staten Island, amassing more than 9,000 negatives of her work. Austen met teacher Gertrude Amelia Tate in 1899 but Tate did not move in with Austen until 1917; theirs was a fifty-five-year relationship.

Austen was the first lesbian photographer honestly to depict lesbian lifestyles in her work. She photographed herself and her friends (called "the Darned Club" because they excluded men) smoking, bicycling, dressed as men, and in loving embraces. The stock market crash of 1929 wiped out Austen's fortune, but she and Tate were able to support themselves until 1945. Poverty then caused them to separate; Tate went to live with her sister and Austen ended up at the Staten Island Farm Colony (poorhouse), where she was rediscovered. Sales of her work allowed her to move to a nursing home.

Clear Comfort, the Alice Austen House and Museum, is now open to the public. It has been restored and maintains the photographer's archives. Although Austen and Tate lived their lives rather openly, there have been attempts to force them into the closet posthumously. Barbara Hammer's 1998 documentary, *The Female Closet* focuses in part on Austen's life and discusses the Austen House board's refusal to allow scholars to use the collection in order to study her sexuality.

Out of or Back to the Closet?

While lesbians were active in all aspects of the art world in the earlier twentieth century, their openness about their sexual orientation varied considerably. Some, such as Natalie Barney and Gertrude Stein, were publicly lesbian, while the lesbianism of others was frequently unknown to all but their intimates. The climate of acceptance in the art world, while perhaps never as full as one would wish, changed considerably after World War II, when enormous pressure was placed on gay men and lesbians to retreat into the closet.

Betty Parsons (1900-1982) was a painter and renowned art dealer in New York for four decades. She was open about her bisexual affairs in the 1920s and 1930s but she withdrew to the closet after World War II, just as she achieved particular prominence as a dealer.

Parsons ran the Wakefield Gallery and Bookshop in New York from 1940 until 1944 and in 1946 opened the Betty Parsons Gallery, which specialized in Abstract Expressionism, a genre predominantly associated with white heterosexual males. At one time her gallery represented the work of Ellsworth Kelly, Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, Clyfford Still, Mark Rothko, and others. Seven of these "Giants," however, left Parsons in 1951 when she would not focus exclusively on them, even though she had promoted their work more actively than that of her other artists.

Increasingly she began to show more of her "alternative" artists such as Swiss lesbian Abstract Expressionist Sonja Sekula (1918-1963), whom Parsons represented from 1948 until 1957. Years later, speaking to her biographer, Parsons explained the need to disavow her lesbianism: "You see, they hate you if you are different; everyone hates you and they will destroy you. I had seen enough of that. I didn't want to be destroyed."

It is no wonder, then, that with such opposition many serious bisexual and lesbian artists who emerged in the first half of the century remained closeted, or at least quiet, about their orientations. But theirs may have been the last generation to subvert their identities in order to further their careers. Increasingly, hand-in-hand with the burgeoning feminist movement, gays and lesbians were unwilling to settle for silence and second-best. By the 1960s, they had become increasingly vocal about demanding their equal rights in all aspects of their lives, and with those rights would come visibility.

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Francis Benjamin Johnston Collection, Library of Congress: <http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/coll/131.html>

Emma Jane Gay: <http://www.sla.purdue.edu/WAAW/Palmquist/Photographers/Gay.htm>

About the Author

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