



A photo mural by Berenice Abbott (circa 1932).
Northwestern University
Library Art Collection.

Abbott, Berenice (1898-1991)

by Tee A. Corinne

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Accomplished American photographer Berenice Abbott may be best known for her photographs of New York City's changing cityscape, but she also made memorable images of lesbians, bisexuals, and gay men in Paris in the 1920s and in New York from the 1930s through 1965.

Born in Springfield, Ohio in 1898, Abbott briefly attended Ohio State University before moving to New York City in 1918. In New York, she lived in a semi-communal Greenwich Village apartment shared by Djuna Barnes and others. Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp were part of her social circle.

In 1921, Abbott moved to Europe where she studied sculpture in Paris and Berlin. Among her lovers in Paris were artists' model Tylia Perlmutter and sculptress and silverpoint artist Thelma Wood. In Paris, between 1923 and 1925, she studied photography while working as Man Ray's assistant. In 1926, she opened her own portrait studio and had a successful one-person exhibition. Two years later, she showed photographs at the Salon des Indépendants.

During Abbott's Paris years, she photographed many figures from the worlds of literature and the arts, including James Joyce, Fougère, Coco Chanel, and Max Ernst. However, her most significant contribution to queer history and aesthetics are her vivid portraits of lesbians and bisexuals. Among these are the younger expatriate lesbian writers Margaret Anderson, Jane Heap, Sylvia Beach, Bryher, Janet Flanner and Flanner's lover Solita Solano, as well as the artist Gwen Le Gallienne, with whom she frequented gay bars.

Another of Abbott's most memorable images is that of a masculine-appearing Thelma Wood, made after she and Abbott were no longer lovers. Abbott also photographed Wood's new love, Djuna Barnes, whose affair with Wood was the inspiration for the novel *Nightwood* (1936). Unlike her image of Wood, Abbott's photograph of her lover, Tylia Perlmutter, is delicate and dreamy.

Abbott also photographed the French bookstore owner Adrienne Monnier, Sylvia Beach's lover; the wealthy Violette Murat (Princess Eugène Murat); and artist Marie Laurencin, a bisexual who may have had an affair with Murat. Abbott made images as well of such gay or bisexual men as André Gide, Robert McAlmon, and the flamboyant Jean Cocteau. Abbott's bisexual Paris clients also included painters Margaret Sargent and Betty Parsons (later of the Betty Parsons Gallery in Manhattan) and architect/designer Eileen Gray.

Returning to New York City in 1929, Abbott photographed the rapidly changing city. She also photographed U.S. Highway 1 from Maine to Florida and created images to illustrate the laws and processes of physics. But she also continued making images of lesbian and bisexual women. In particular, she photographed such subjects as poet Edna St. Vincent Millay, Harlem Renaissance art patron A'Lelia Walker, and actress/director Eva Le Gallienne, Gwen's step-sister.

In New York, Abbott formed an alliance with critic Elizabeth McCausland, which lasted from the early 1930s until McCausland's death in 1965. Abbott's portraits of McCausland confirm the aptness of the nickname she gave her lover, "Butchy." McCausland wrote early essays about Abbott's work.

Having almost flaunted her love of women early in her life, Abbott later obscured and even lied about her lesbianism, distancing and closeting herself as thoroughly as possible. In 1968, she moved permanently to Maine.

Had her lovers been male and her lesbian and bisexual subjects been heterosexual, Abbott's work--given its quality and the accomplishments of her subjects--would have achieved earlier and greater recognition. Still, her work brought her fame and financial security. Her images of blatantly lesbian-appearing women, such as Jane Heap, for example, have been exhibited in art galleries and museums for decades. As the story of her life and the lives of her subjects become better known, her role in creating memorable images of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people finds greater appreciation.

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About the Author

Tee A. Corinne was a photographer and writer. Her articles about lesbian art and artists appeared in numerous journals and encyclopedias. Her books include *The Cunt Coloring Book*, *Yantras of Womanlove*, *Dreams of the Woman Who Loved Sex*, *Courting Pleasure*, and *Intimacies*. She was the editor of *FABB: The Feminist Art Books Bulletin*, co-editor of the *Queer Caucus for Art Newsletter*, and member of the editorial advisory board of www.glbtc.com.