



## Wood, Thelma Ellen (1901-1970)

by Tee A. Corinne

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Thelma Wood might have remained an obscure artist practicing the obscure craft of silverpoint drawing if Djuna Barnes had not fictionalized their intense, eight-year affair into the classic lesbian novel *Nightwood*.

The second of four children, Thelma Wood was born in Kansas on July 3, 1901 and grew up in St. Louis. Wood loved animals, was a good cook, and drank rum and cola. She was almost six feet tall, boyish-looking, and sexually magnetic.

Around 1921, she moved from St. Louis to Paris in order to study sculpture. She had a brief affair with the bisexual poet Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950) and visited Berlin, a party city for those with foreign money.

In the fall of 1921, Berenice Abbott (1898-1991) became her lover for a brief time. Abbott--who later gained fame as a photographer--remained a friend for life. She introduced Wood to Djuna Barnes and later photographed them.

Barnes and Wood began a passionate relationship that lasted from 1921 to 1929. Fueled by sex, alcohol, and sometimes marijuana--and marred at times by infidelities, jealousy, and violence--the relationship was the "great love" of each of their lives. Although Barnes wanted their relationship to be monogamous (and for many years thought it was), Wood sought out casual sexual partners of both genders.

Barnes encouraged Wood to take up silverpoint, in which fine line images are created on paper from the residue of silver from a stylus. Wood crafted erotically charged drawings of animals, exotic plants, and fetishistic objects such as shoes.

Although very little of her work survives, Wood's drawings were exhibited at least once, at Milch Galleries in New York City in 1931, where they were favorably reviewed.

Wood's sketchbook from a trip to Berlin is in the Barnes papers at the University of Maryland-College Park.

In 1928--before the end of her relationship with Barnes--Wood began an affair with Henriette McCreia Metcalf (1888-1981). A small, loquacious bisexual who loved to rescue people and animals, Metcalf was born into a wealthy Chicago family, but spent much of her childhood in Paris.

When Wood moved to Greenwich Village in New York City in 1928, Metcalf followed. Wood continued to write and visit Barnes, to whom she still professed her love.

In 1932, Metcalf supported Wood's art studies in Florence. In 1934, they moved to Sandy Hook, Connecticut. In Westport, Connecticut, Wood tried (with Metcalf's financial assistance) to run a gourmet catering business that failed. Complicating their relationship, Wood continued to seek out drinking and sexual companions.

When *Nightwood*, Barnes' brilliant, vindictive novel, was published in 1936, Wood--called "Robin Vote" in the book--was outraged and stopped speaking to the novelist. Wood felt misrepresented and claimed that the publication of the book ruined her life.

Around 1942 or 1943, Metcalf offered Wood money to move out of their shared house and end their sixteen-year relationship. Once the separation was complete, Metcalf never spoke to Wood again, even when Wood, dying, requested to see her.

Around 1943, perhaps precipitating the break with Metcalf, Wood became involved with Margaret Behrens (1908-1986)--a realtor and antique dealer--and moved into Behrens' home in Monroe, Connecticut. She did odd jobs for Behrens in a relationship that lasted until Wood's death twenty-seven years later.

In the late 1960s, Wood developed breast cancer, which spread to her spine and lungs. She died on December 10, 1970, in Danbury Hospital. Her ashes were interred in the Behrens's plot in Bridgeport, Connecticut.

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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](http://www.glbtc.com).