

Venture Out

Drawing power

■ Beatrice Wood's sketches, not her legendary ceramics, are star of S.B. exhibit

By Brett Johnson
bjohnson@vcstar.com
805-437-0242

Beatrice Wood was world famous for her vibrant and lustrous glazed ceramic sculptures, but a summerlong Santa Barbara Museum of Art exhibit takes a look at her lesser-known drawings that served as through-lines for her chameleonlike art journey that spanned almost the entire 20th century.

'LIVING IN THE TIMELESS'

The exhibit of drawings by Beatrice Wood continues through Aug. 31 at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1130 State St. Museum hours are 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Sundays, except Thursdays, when it's 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Admission is \$10 for adults; \$6 for seniors ages 65 and older, and kids ages 6 to 17; and free for kids under 6 years of age, Santa Barbara County students and teachers with current ID, and active U.S. military and their families with current ID. Call 963-4364 or visit <http://www.sbmuseart.org>.

The exhibit, titled "Living in the Timeless" and on view through Aug. 31, argues that drawing was the foundation of Wood's long career.

See WOOD, 14



SANTA BARBARA MUSEUM OF ART

Beatrice Wood called this 1932 pencil and watercolor on paper "You look like a goddess on a hairpin." It's part of a Wood drawings retrospective that runs through Aug. 31 at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art. The famous artist lived the last 50 years of her life in Ojai.

WOOD from 12

Before she was an actress, potter, sculptor and the "Mama of Dada" for her part in the avant-garde Dada movement, Wood first got attention for her drawings. She continued to draw — sometimes privately or as a side pursuit to her more renowned works — for the rest of her life, the exhibit notes.

Wood lived in Ojai the last 50 years of her life until her death, at age 105, in 1998. At age 103, she wrote to a friend that her drawings allowed her "to live in the timeless," the source of the exhibit's title.

The drawings — typically pencil or colored pencil on paper and occasionally employing watercolor — are autobiographical, at-times whimsical and frequently revisit past characters and forms, the exhibit notes. They span a wide swath of Wood's life, from 1910 to 1997.

Fans of Wood's other work won't be completely starved, as the 50-plus pieces in the exhibit include a select few figurative ceramic sculptures and tiles, along with some of her illustrated books.

Wood sketched quite a wide arc in the art world. She was born in San Francisco to wealthy socialites, relocated with the family to New York when she was 5 and convinced them, in her teens, to let her study in Paris — acting at Comédie Française and drawing at Académie Julian.

The earliest work in the exhibit is "Twenty Sketches of Me at Julian's" from 1910. When World War I broke out, she returned to New York, where she became prominent in the eclectic Dada movement.

She rubbed elbows with such names as artist Marcel Duchamp, diplomat Henri-Pierre Roché and writer-diarist Anais Nin.

Duchamp told Wood to move away from commercial illustrations to more tongue-in-cheek and abstract renderings, advising, "Never do the commonplace. Rules are fatal in the progress of art."

OJAI AND THE WORLD

She moved to Los Angeles in the 1930s, then relocated in 1948 to Ojai, in part to be closer to the East Indian philosopher-spiritualist J. Krishnamurti. (She was an ardent follower.)

There, she taught and lived on the same land as the Happy Valley School, now called Besant Hill School. Her former home and studio is now The Beatrice Wood Center for the Arts, which contributed some of the glazed earthenwares on exhibit, including a miniature of three

austere-looking men in bow ties behind desks titled "Bureaucracy," from around 1970.

Kevin Wallace, the center's director, noted that the museum was looking for something to complement the drawings. Wallace, who first met Wood in 1990 after making what he termed "the pilgrimage to Ojai" to see the legend (one that many took, he noted), said it's hard to place Wood in U.S. art circles.

"She's a tricky one because she reinvented herself constantly," he said, noting that she didn't become a ceramist until after age 40.

Even 16 years after her death, interest in Wood remains high. In addition to the Santa Barbara display, Wallace noted other Wood exhibits this year in such far-flung places as Utah and Wisconsin. Another Dada book is out; Wallace thinks all this is because Wood transcended being an artist.

"As a personality, which is how a lot of people view her, it just doesn't stop," he said of the interest in Wood. "Her worldwide fame continues to grow."

Wood, who also later became an author, was the subject of numerous books, magazine articles, TV interviews and films. She's said to have partly inspired the Rose character in James Cameron's 1997 blockbuster film "Titanic."

Asked for the secret to her longevity, she'd reply, "I owe it all to chocolates and young men."

OH TO BE SO HUMAN

Wood had her first Santa Barbara Museum of Art exhibit in 1950. The current drawings (and some of the glazed ceramics) come mostly from a recent gift from the collection of Francis M. Naumann, a close friend and Dada historian, and Marie T. Keller.

Naumann was "one of the dearest friends" in Wood's life and another reason the center wanted to support the Santa Barbara exhibit, Wallace said.

Wood, he observed, brought a certain expression to her art, including a "real embrace of absurdity" (a Dada hallmark) and a technical nonchalance that "horri-fied" some artists, especially potters.

"Beatrice Wood was a deep person philosophically," Wallace said, "but her answer to that, rather than becoming steeped in the theoretical, was that she became lighter and laughed more easily because of it."

Underlying her work, perhaps, was a keen interest and appreciation for the human form in all its foibles and flaws.

Wood might have hinted at this in her 1985 autobiography "I Shock Myself" when she wrote, "While the substance of ceramics is clay and chemicals, the stuff of life is most certainly people."