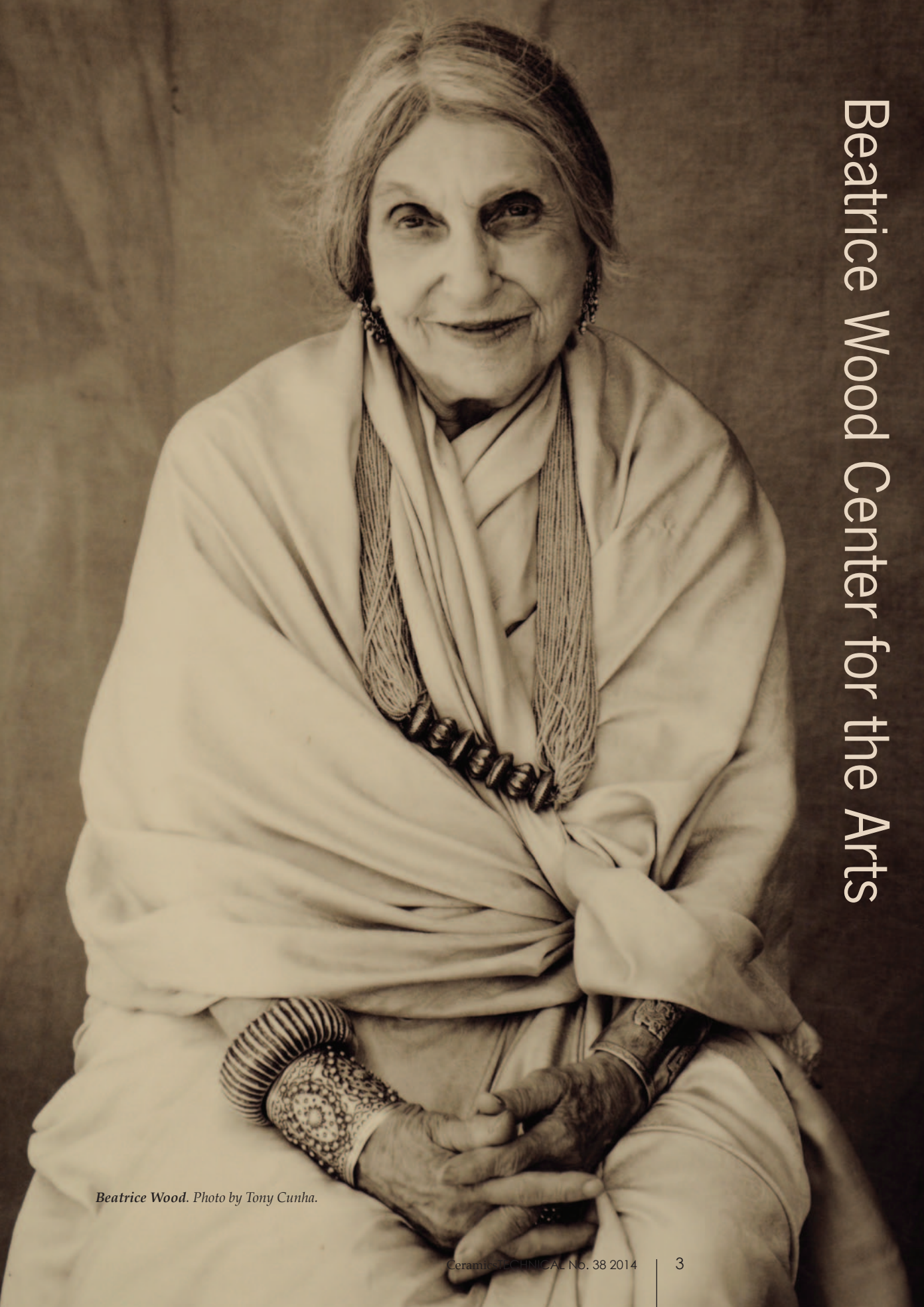


Beatrice Wood Center for the Arts



Beatrice Wood. Photo by Tony Cunha.

Judith Tannenbaum honours a 20-century icon



Above: Beatrice Wood Center for the Arts. Ojai, California.
Below: Beatrice Wood studio.

ANYONE AT ALL FAMILIAR WITH BEATRICE WOOD (1893–1998) knows that she was an extraordinary individual. Wood – or Beato, as she came to be known – left an outsized artistic legacy when she died at 105. Her creative work encompassed acting, painting, drawing and ceramics, which she pursued in the 1930s at the age of forty to support herself; in her later years, she turned to writing. Her larger-than-life personality attracted such Dada artists as Marcel Duchamp and Henri-Pierre Roché. The three of them are said to be the inspiration for the romantic triangle at the heart of Francois Truffaut’s 1962 film *Jules and Jim* (based on Roché’s autobiographical novel).¹ Her influence represents more than her various and acclaimed skills; after death, she continues to survive as an artistic force in the eponymous California centre that attracts artists and enthusiasts.

Set in the idyllic Ojai Valley in Southern California, where Beato came to live in 1947, the Beatrice Wood Center for the Arts (BWCA) has the dual task of celebrating and preserving Wood’s lifework and, at the same time, enabling it to thrive as a vital enterprise in the 21st century. Her studio was left intact – containing a striking quantity of tools she used for



trimming pots; row upon row of jars filled with chemical powders for glazes (including the iridescent lustre for which she is best known); press moulds; shelves of minerals and crystal formations (sometimes used to display small sculptures); and unglazed bowls she had thrown on her wheel not long before she died. One would expect the studio to be off limits but, instead, workshop participants, student interns and artists-in-residence are free to work in Beato’s personal workplace and handle her things. Although examples of Wood’s ceramics from its permanent collection are displayed, the Center is not a museum but a vital environment that hosts a



*Above: Beatrice Wood Center for the Arts, installation view of Allison Newsome exhibition, November 2013. Photo by Roger Conrad.
Below: Beatrice Wood studio, workshop participant.*

variety of exhibitions, performances and other educational programs.

To understand Beato and the mission of the Center one has to know something about theosophy and the vision of Dr Annie Besant (1847–1933), the British social activist (dedicated to the causes of Indian and Irish independence, workers’ rights, women’s suffrage, birth control and secularism) who was president of the international Theosophical Society for more than 25 years. It was Besant who raised funds to buy 500 acres of land in the Upper Ojai Valley, where the Happy Valley Foundation was established in 1927 and under whose auspices the BWCA operates today.² The early group of foundation trustees and supporters included philosopher and inspirational speaker Jiddu Krishnamurti, who was groomed to be World Teacher by Charles Leadbeater and other Theosophical Society members (before he split with the theosophists in 1929); the British writer Aldous Huxley; educators Rosalind and D Rajagopal; Alan Watts, proponent and populariser of Eastern philosophy; architect Richard Neutra; composer Arnold Schoenberg; and writer Christopher Isherwood. The Happy Valley School, which was headed by Rosalind Rajagopal for many years, opened its doors in 1946 and Beato taught ceramics there. Just down the hill from the Center, the boarding school changed its name several years ago to Besant Hill School of Happy Valley.

Besant wished to build a utopian community at Happy Valley dedicated to creating positive change, starting with a belief in individual enlightenment. As a theosophist, the goal was to understand the mysteries of the universe and the bonds that unite the natural world, humanity and the divine through the direct observation of nature and human experience. Besant valued people without “distinction of race, creed, sex, caste, or colour” and envisioned “a non-sectarian educational centre that would nurture spiritual, artistic and intellectual growth as well as physical and mental well-being.”³ Beato, who had met Besant, Krishnamurti, the Rajagopals and others in the theosophical community years before, moved to Ojai from Los Angeles in 1947. By then, she had established herself as a potter, exhibiting at the Santa Barbara Museum, the de Young Museum in San Francisco, Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Phoenix Art Museum and selling work through major





Beatrice Wood. *Copper Lustre Teapot*. 1990. Ceramic. 14.5 x 12 x 3.5 in. Beatrice Wood Center for the Arts/ Happy Valley Foundation.

department stores, among them Neiman Marcus and Gumps, as well as at Crossroads of the World on Sunset Boulevard, where she had established a shop.

The Center consists of two houses atop a hillside just off the Ojai – Santa Paula Road, one that Beato built in 1974 at the invitation of her best friend Rosalind Rajagopal, whom she had known since about 1930 through the theosophical community in Beechwood Canyon; the other, called Logan House, belonged to Rajagopal.⁴ Both houses are low, modernist structures (designed by architect Paul Hoag) that seem perfectly in sync with the terrain of the mountaintop site. In addition to her studio, Beato had a showroom where she displayed and sold her ceramics and received guests. This space, which is the first that visitors enter, is now used for a rotating exhibition program as well as to display some of Wood's own ceramics that she bequeathed to the foundation. Her former living room, dining room and bedroom are devoted to an exhibition about her lifework and a shop that sells replicas of her lustre-glazed bowls and figures as well as a good selection of books by and about the artist herself. Most of her folk art collection and much of her pottery were sold after her death to support the work of

the Center, but a small, significant selection remains. The exhibition is informative, tracing Wood's trajectory from her privileged childhood in San Francisco and New York to art student in Paris and New York bohemian, to her return to California and discovery of ceramics, which would become the source of her livelihood and a creative commitment for the rest of her life. It extends as well to revelatory travels in India and the celebrity status she enjoyed in the later decades. Vintage photographs, lustrous chalices and bowls and examples of folk art accompany the instructive text, but the panels are starting to show signs of wear. The display was created in 2005 by Kevin Wallace, a curator and writer specialising in craft (known in particular for books and exhibitions about wood turning), who subsequently became full-time director of the Center in 2007.

Around the other side of the studio, facing east, is a terraced patio with a mesmerising view of Mount Topa Topa, which becomes pink at sunset. The terrace also possesses the *Throne of Beato 102*, a mosaic, mirrored throne or shrine that Gail Cottman, a Los Angeles movie producer, made when Beato was no longer able to travel to the theosophical centre in Beechwood Canyon, where there is a similar but much larger version of the throne, called *OZ*.⁵ Plantings are lush, with a variety of desert and tropical species in front of Logan House and around the property. Particularly striking is a bamboo hedge with an archway large enough to walk through and often inhabited by flocks of quail. Two large figural ceramic sculptures by Allison Newsome, the Center's first artist-in-residence in 2008, frame the archway. Logan House features another gallery for exhibitions, where Newsome recently had an exhibition of ceramic sculpture and wall reliefs that she made on site and an extensive library (which was originally in Beato's house), as well as living quarters (for the Center's director and his wife) and a guest room.

Wallace, who was hired by the foundation after he organised the exhibition *Beatrice Wood: The Art of a Life* for the Craft and Folk Art Museum in Los Angeles in 2005 and which he adapted for BWCA, believes that "life is an art". He strives to foster an environment where anyone and everyone can enjoy art. Paralleling Wood's great friend Duchamp – a drawing by whom Beato sold to finance the building of her new house⁶ – Wallace believes that art and life are inseparable. But his focus on craft, including his dedication to Beato's work, reflects a more populist view and commitment to making art accessible to a broad public. In conversation, Wallace points out that a pot can be both functional and ceremonial and he underscores that 'art' is a Western concept for which most

cultures do not have a word. His approach to unifying the art and life divide is exemplified by the amazing lunches he plans, cooks and serves for workshop participants (ably assisted by his wife, Sheryl). Platter after platter of delicious, beautiful vegetarian dishes are brought to the table and consumed with relish. When I was there, he prepared not just one fruit cobbler for dessert but three – pumpkin, berry and apple.

In keeping with Wood's wish to utilise her property as an art centre, Wallace has initiated a number of programs over the past seven years.

Richard Flores, who is on the faculty of the College of the Sequoias and was formerly an assistant to Beato, serves as director of educational programming and supervises an internship program for students from the University of California at Channel Islands, Ventura College and other schools. Assignments are based on using the Center's library to discover and absorb information about cultures around the world. Interns work in the ceramics studio to hone their skills and develop new techniques; some produce pieces for the *Homage* series (reproductions of Beato's forms made with moulds or handbuilt) that are sold to support the Center's educational programming and enable visitors to acquire work by skilled artists early in their professional lives. In addition, Wallace offers practical advice to help young artists launch their careers.

Children's workshops are offered one Saturday a month and hands-on workshops for adults are also held monthly. To augment these, a regular schedule of concerts and other live performances serves the greater Ojai community. Visiting artists who teach the adult workshops serve as a bridge between artists working in the region and artists who live elsewhere and exhibit nationally and internationally. Ranging from half-day sessions to four-day residencies, workshops are not limited to clay but may focus on basketry, glass, wood, plein air painting and other disciplines. One of the workshop leaders – Allison Newsome, a native Californian now based in Warren, Rhode Island – returns to Ojai regularly to teach and to exhibit her work. According to Wallace, Newsome's approach to sculpture mirrors and expands upon Beato's and she is an inspiring teacher.

Newsome arrived two weeks before her November 2013 workshop (entitled "Post-Neolithic Figurines & the Anthropomorphic Vessel") began in order to create sculpture on site for her related exhibition in the Logan House gallery. Opening on the last day of the workshop, participants could see the final stages of preparation for the show and understand the relationship between Newsome's process and what they learnt from her during the workshop. Ojai's sunny, temperate climate and striking landscape allow artists with all levels of experience to work outdoors as well as in the studio. During Newsome's last workshop, participants spent a morning sculpting from a model who posed outside under a huge California oak tree. Another morning, they drove to a rushing creek where they flattened slabs of clay on the rocks, infusing them with colour and impressions of natural elements.

Like many nonprofit arts organisations, the BWCA struggles to support its activities and realise its goals and ambitions for the future. Besant believed that "things would take care of themselves" but that type of idealism does not ensure security and growth today. Fees earned from the Center's educational program help to support the Center, but resources are limited. Kevin Wallace is the only full-time employee – a professional jack-of-all-trades. Sheryl Wallace takes care of bookkeeping, sales and miscellaneous odd jobs, but there is no registrar, security guard, or housekeeper. Before the economic recession that began in fall 2008, income from the sale of Beato's pottery provided a somewhat dependable source of revenue. But secondary market sales are now considerably reduced.



Allison Newsome sculpture, bamboo archway. Beatrice Wood Center for the Arts.



View of Beatrice Wood Center for the Arts from one of the hiking trails. Located in Happy Valley (Ojai, California), which consists of 500 acres purchased in 1926, much of it left untouched to serve as a wildlife corridor.

Recently, the BWCA was awarded its first grant – a \$25,000 challenge grant from the Windgate Charitable Foundation (which will match every dollar raised by June 2014). Previously, funds outside of earned income were generated largely by individual gifts to the Happy Valley Foundation from those who had personal connections to Wood and the Center. The Windgate grant bodes well for gaining new sources of support and greater public outreach in the future.

There is no question that preserving Beato's legacy for future generations is a worthy pursuit. Although she started to study ceramics relatively late in life, her pottery (the term Wood preferred to use rather than ceramics) gained an important

place in the history of American craft from the 1940s onward. It is in the collections of the Centre Pompidou, Paris; Victoria and Albert Museum, London; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Philadelphia Museum of Art and many others. In 1984, she was named a Living Treasure of California and received the state's Governor's Award for the Arts in 1994. It is fitting that her papers now belong to the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art, in Washington, DC, where they are readily available to artists and scholars.

Wood recognised the limitations of her ability with clay, particularly when she was starting out. Although she did not take to ceramics naturally, her determination and discipline in the studio more than compensated for her not being a born craftsman. She learned to throw on the wheel by trial and error and experimented continuously with glaze chemistry. She was not an innovator of forms but, nevertheless, developed her own distinctive style – adapting the chalice and other vessels from various ancient cultures and sometimes embellishing them with figures she described as “sophisticated primitives”. Reflecting both her love of folk art and her lack of traditional training, Wood could not make anything in an academic style. Her most distinctive contribution is the miraculous lustre-glazed surfaces she achieved. Her friend the writer Anais Nin said of Beato's pottery, “Beatrice Wood combines colours like a painter, makes them vibrate like a musician. They have strength even while iridescent and transparent. They have the rhythm and lustre both of jewels and human eyes. Water poured from one of her jars will taste like wine.”⁷

Wood credited the skill of those who helped her achieve and exceed a level of professional competence: her teacher Glen Lukens, who started the ceramics program at the University of Southern California and was known for his experimentations with raw surfaces and new glaze techniques; Gertrud and Otto Natzler, the husband and wife team based in Los Angeles, renowned for their collaborative pottery featuring highly refined vessels thrown by Gertrud and variegated glazed surfaces developed by Otto; and potters Vivika and Otto Heino, lifelong friends who, like Beato, settled in Ojai. Gertrud Natzler helped Beato to refine her throwing technique while Otto Natzler shared glaze secrets and firing techniques with her. Unfortunately, they had a rift, which was never resolved, caused perhaps by Beato's increasing fame. The loss of the relationship remained painful for Wood. Her pots were looser than the Natzlers, as she embraced *naïveté* and welcomed unexpected effects that occur in kiln firings.

Wood went to the studio every day, demonstrating a dedication to her work that contrasts with her flirtatious, rebellious persona. Perhaps it is the coexistence of these two strands – the Beato who said she attributed her longevity to chocolates and young men and remained a romantic into old age (she married two men she did not love or have sex with and was in love with seven men whom she did not marry) versus the highly disciplined artist who promoted human rights, anti-war efforts and Eastern philosophy – that continues to fascinate. Her love of folk art, appreciation for Eastern cultures and commitment to supporting herself as an artist all seem more and more relevant today. Several visits to India – in 1961 (at the invitation of the US State Department), 1965 and 1972 – had a profound effect on her later years. There, she acquired a large number of *saris* that became

her signature clothing for the rest of her life and her experiences in India reinforced her preference for textured surfaces, colour, ornamentation and erotic imagery.

Never afraid to take risks and follow her own path, Wood was a youthful rebel and freethinker who developed into a highly disciplined and original potter and writer. In addition to her successful autobiography, *I Shock Myself*, published in 1985 (which Anais Nin encouraged her to write), other books include *The Angel Who Wore Black Tights Pinching Spaniards*; *33rd Wife of a Maharajah: A Love Affair in India*; plus a witty book of drawings, *Screwed Again: Part of the Bargain*, published under the pseudonym Countess Lola Screwvinsky. For her 100th birthday, Tom Neff directed the film portrait *Beatrice Wood: The Mama of Dada*. Here one witnesses her keen sense of humour and intelligence, the satisfaction she took in making pottery, her appreciation for nature and the balance she struck between idealism and practicality. She spans the 20th century's artistic, philosophical and political movements from theosophy's utopian ties to such early European modernists as Kandinsky and Mondrian, to the wit and absurdity of New York Dada, through which she developed important relationships with Duchamp, Roché, the collectors Louise and Walter Arensberg,⁸ to the modern craft movement and campaigns for political freedoms, women's rights, civil rights and cultural equality. Like the pottery she made, Beato's life was distinguished by lustre, passion and generosity. Imbued with these same values, the Beatrice Wood Center for the Arts is poised to assure that her legacy continues to play a significant role in the 21st century.



Above: Permanent Collection, Beatrice Wood Center for the Arts.
Below: Allison Newsome in Beatrice Wood's studio.

ENDNOTES

1. See Mary Blume, "The Secret Lives of Jules and Jim" *The New York Times*, 25 April, 2003. Here and elsewhere, the real-life characters are identified as a German couple, Franz Hessel (a friend of Roché's from childhood) and his wife, Helen. But Wood keeps the question open in her own writings, including "Oral History Interview with Beatrice Wood", 6 August 1976, *Archives of American Art*, Smithsonian Institution, where she describes her relationship with Duchamp and Roché. Wood was also said to have inspired the character Rose in James Cameron's *Titanic* many years later.

2. At her death, Wood's house and property were deeded to the Happy Valley Foundation and she left a letter stating that the place be utilised as an art centre.

3. See happyvalleyfdn.org/history.html.

4. Radha Rajagopal (Rosalind's daughter) and her husband, James Sloss, are still closely involved with the Happy Valley Foundation, with Sloss serving as president of the board. Their daughter, Tinka Sloss, came on the board more recently in 2009.

5. L Frank Baum, author of *The Wizard of Oz*, had a home in the area and was associated with the theosophists.

6. Beato originally owned a house in Lower Ojai across the street from Krishnamurti and Rosalind Rajagopal. She sold it when she and Rosalind decided to move to Happy Valley land in Upper Ojai. The sale of the first house together with the Duchamp drawing financed the new house.

7. See beatricewood.com/biography_3.html. The quote was originally written by Nin as part of an introduction to one of Beato's exhibitions.

8. With Duchamp, Roché and Mina Loy, Wood organised and contributed to the Dada journal *The Blind Man*. She also exhibited at the *Independents* exhibition in 1917, where Duchamp showed his infamous ready-made sculpture, *Fountain*, signed *R Mutt*. In 1925, Beato moved to Los Angeles to be near the Arensbergs and Krishnamurti, who had settled there.



Judith Tannenbaum retired in 2013 after nearly 13 years as Richard Brown Baker Curator of Contemporary Art at the Museum of Art Rhode Island School of Design. She is continuing her involvement with the RISD Museum as adjunct curator. Tannenbaum was previously curator, associate director and interim director at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia. She has recently relocated back to Philadelphia where she is curating, teaching and writing (as well as making pots on the side). She is currently teaching a course at the Philadelphia Museum about the intersection between art and design.