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# Beatrice Wood: Sophisticated Primitive

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## The Ephemeral: Drawings

Since drawing is a medium usually solidly in the "fine art" camp, Wood's approach and attitude toward it recapitulated to some extent her changing attitude toward aesthetics and judgment. Drawing was a medium for Beatrice Wood that had stages and different purposes, and some might say, mixed results in terms of value: personal (a sentimental question), historical, aesthetic, or monetary. Her ceramic dealer, Garth Clark, for example, thought that her drawings got worse over time, that her early ones were the best (Personal interview, 19 Dec.1998). He has written, even about the early drawings that:

Wood's drawings from this period lack formal skill-the mechanics of perspective always eluded her-but they are spontaneous and magical, imaginatively composed arrangements of sketchy figures (often documenting gatherings of figures from the Dada circle) drawn in a spidery line swathed in mists of translucent watercolors, which give the figures an ethereal ghostlike appearance" (Gilded 75).

Francis Naumann has divided the drawings into periods or groups: student years, Dada years, the Pole and post-Pole years, utilitarian sketches for pots during years of ceramic planning, and the late years' drawings, inspired in part by Naumann's interest in her work. Naumann inspired the reconstruction of "Un Peau" for the Philadelphia show, but she hadn't done any "fine art" drawings for years, only sketches for proposed pots. The many years' lapse in drawing was the result of disappointment in lack of sales from her first Los Angeles show at the Stendhal Gallery in 1933. The show, curated by Merle Armitage, included mostly lithographs, derived from her drawings. (Walter Arensberg came the last day and bought the only one sold ("Other" 31).

In my discussion of the drawing and pottery that will follow, I will select a few representative pieces only. Some are chosen for availability of the image (and thus are more well-known) and some for their pivotal nature in my argument. Francis Naumann who knows her drawings best also has a key insight into how she worked:

There is something unique in what Beatrice Wood does. Whether she's sketching a figure, throwing a pot, or writing a story, she somehow manages to combine formal elements that are generally regarded as

mutually exclusive. In her sketches, for example, an elegantly rendered and highly controlled line can sometimes end up on its other end looking like a child's scrawl, yet the resultant drawing ingeniously fuses these opposite techniques into a compatible reading of the whole. Critics have recognized this same quality in her ceramic works, which often combine elements borrowed from primitive or naive sources with an elegant and highly sophisticated glaze that is many a potter's envy. (Angel, preface, np)

Naumann goes on to find the possible source for this contradiction in Dada and her friendship with Marcel Duchamp, yet "[w]hereas the Dadaists presented these opposing elements without excuse, Beatrice invariably masks her creative message in an aesthetically pleasing package" (Angel, np). He further finds no contrivance in her work or her personality: "Just ten minutes of conversation with this remarkable woman will reveal a penetrating intelligence presented in the guise of whimsy and innocence" (Angel, np). The work is often seen as an extension of her personality, inextricably bound.

Like her writing, much of her drawing was personal. As Francis Naumann has said in the film documentary, "The Mama of Dada," "From the very beginning, Beatrice Wood used her drawings really to record the events of her life, and not just casual events but important events, particularly her relationships" ("Mama of Dada" Videodisc). For example, "Lit de Marcel" ("Marcel's Bed"), watercolor and pencil on paper, drawn only two days after the fact, May 27, 1917, memorialized one of those moments, stumbled into, that one experiences as groundbreaking, exciting, sensual, emotional, becoming a large piece of personal history: the diary entry is characteristically bland:

May 25, 1917. Webster Hall Blindmans' [sic] Ball. I dance Russian dance. Also Misha Itow [sic]. To Arensbergs after. Five of us try to sleep on Marcells bed. (AAA, Reel #533).

The later autobiographical description of the event was expanded:

The Blindman's Ball was a riotous affair; the whole art world attended. Micho Ito, the famous Japanese dancer, gave an impressive performance and I repeated my Russian folk dance. Marcel climbed up on a chandelier while the Arensbergs, Roche and I applauded from a box. Joseph Stella had a duel over me, though I never found out why-something about protecting my honor, which no longer existed! It was three in the morning when we gathered at the Arensberg's apartment



Plate 7 Lit de Marcel [Marcel's Bed] (1917): watercolor

for scrambled eggs and wine. Since it was too late to go home, Mina Loy led several of us off to spend the night at Marcel's apartment. Sleepily, we threw ourselves onto his four-poster bed and closed our eyes like a collection of worn-out dolls. Mina took the bottom of the bed with Arlene Dresser against her, and Charles Demuth, the painter, lost no time in draping himself horizontally at right angles to the women, with one leg dangling to the floor, a trouser tugged up revealing a garter. Marcel, as host, took the least space and squeezed himself tight against the wall, while I tried to stretch out in the two inches left between him and the wall, an opportunity of discomfort that took me to heaven because I was so close to him. Lying practically on top of him, I could hear his beating heart, and feel the coolness of his chest. Divinely happy, I never closed my eyes to sleep (Shock 33).

We can see the drawing now, almost 100 years later, as a visual expression of an exuberant experience—an attempt to capture the image and feeling of that moment. The art historian Naumann has described it thus: "Rather than depicting the incident naturalistically, Wood captured its spirit in a jumble of freely intersecting lines and swatches of color" (Intimate 28). Her friend, the painter Lee Waisler, describes her method: "She draws the emotional contour of the form. Beatrice is involved with what the feeling of the form is, not with the idea of replicating the actual form—and all of her drawing becomes, as a consequence of that, autobiographical" ("Mama of Dada" Videodisc). As Wood has said of her own drawing: "The only time, evidently, I do a good drawing is when I'm not trying to represent the person but project the feeling that I get" ("Mama of Dada" Videodisc). Her ceramic dealer Garth Clark, a stern critic of her drawings, considers it her finest drawing. John Dewey, lecturing, a few years after the creation of this drawing, on "having an experience" with art said:

In an emphatic artistic-esthetic experience, the relation is so close that it controls simultaneously both the doing and the perception. Such vital intimacy of connection cannot be had if only hand and eye are engaged. When they do not, both of them, act as organs of the whole being, there is but a mechanical sequence of sense and movement, as in walking that is automatic. Hand and eye, when the experience is esthetic, are but instruments through which the entire live creature, moved and active throughout, operates. Hence the expression is emotional and guided by purpose (Art 50).

Another such drawing was the one requested by Marcel Duchamp for the poster

for the Blindman's Ball in May 1917. Wood's description of the making of it:

I sat on a stiff chair in the middle of the room and made sketch after sketch. When I was finished, he took them and threw them on the floor. To my astonishment, he chose an insolent stick figure thumbing his nose at the world, which I had tossed off. He took it to the printer, arranged for its size and color, and years later the poster became a highly treasured collector's item (Shock 33).

Naumann cites a "graphic freedom" in her drawings of this period "rare in the work of her contemporaries ("Other Side" 28). Yes, but looked at more closely the stick figure has certain gestural articulations, in the fanning of the raised hand, the hip-to-torso bend, and especially in the feet, flexed extended foot and the articulation of the supporting foot in *releve*: drawn by a woman who knows both bio-mechanics and how to dance. Indeed, the drawings are a doorway into understanding the kinesthetic nature of her "process of doing or making" and her "experience as appreciative, perceiving, and enjoying." (As Dewey has observed, "[w]e have no word in the English language that unambiguously includes what is signified by the two words 'artistic' and 'esthetic.' Since 'artistic' refers primarily to the act of production and 'esthetic' to that of perception and enjoyment, the absence of a term designating the two processes taken together is unfortunate" (46-47).)

Yoking artistic/esthetic and monetary value, especially in the "artworld," can highlight the rare, the rarefied and the elite. Speaking and writing early on as a true Bohemian, Dada, and Theosophist of the trap of materialism, Beatrice Wood said, "Money and art go in different directions." However, before she died Wood accumulated a small fortune generated by selling the work from her hands. Ironically, she told her dealer Garth Clark that she never expected a piece to sell, and that she even loathed selling them (Gilded 99). (Necessity ruled, of course.) Another view is reflected in Garth Wood's statement that Wood made hundreds of fine pieces, but thousands of pieces that should have been destroyed (Personal interview, 19 Dec. 1998).<sup>6</sup>

Beatrice Wood's sense of purpose for her drawings changed somewhat over time: ambition to be an artist and a desire to please artist friends were some early motivations. The drawing, *Marriage of a Friend*, one of the drawings that was sparked by those sessions in Duchamp's studio, comes under these categories. As stated previously, she

called the drawing, despite being published, a "tortured abstraction" and it is *abstracted*, but it is still figurative even though the figures are stick like. Adding the title, however, as she did makes it more personal and expressive of her feelings of the recent marriage of her friend Elizabeth Hapgood to a man much older. Naumann had also concluded that the disparity in size between the figures was a reference to the disparity in their ages. Yet his overall "reading" of the drawing takes it beyond the personal:

This published sketch-or "scrawl" as Wood insistently refers to her drawings-portrays a vertical, vegetable-like stalk, around which is twisted a red zig-zagging shape, all of which in turn is set against the background of vaguely indicated architectural forms. Though the precise meaning and subject may never be known (Wood says that the sketch was purely imaginative), the juxtaposition of abstract elements within a realistic spatial setting is remarkably prophetic of the ambiguous imagery common to much Surrealist painting, which of course would not develop for some years to come (Arts 1983,108).

This drawing, as well as others of the period, has been analyzed from a Freudian angle by Paul Franklin in "Beatrice Wood, Her Dada . . . And Her Mama." He justified his approach, despite its being "highly problematic" regarding "female sexual development" by "invok[ing] him . . . as a cultural marker and historical palimpsest" (137 n.52). Since Freud's theories were often discussed seriously at the Arensberg's parties, and Wood was often the center of those discussions, this approach was justified thus.

Franklin is asserting Wood's placement in Dada, the history of which has marginalized the women involved, as well as invoking Freud. Thus, the difference in the figures of *Mariage D'une Amie* is also "a gendered one: the diminutive, curvaceous, feminine figure of Reynolds is immobilized and entrapped by the hard-edged, towering, jagged, phallic figure of Hapgood" (110-111). He analyzes "Un Peut" as firmly dada for the appropriation of the actual soap as well as the scandal surrounding it in the Independents' Show. He ties Duchamp's encouragement to use soap with Duchamp's erotic investigations with it (132 n.19). Further, it "contains an autobiographical element that bridges the gap between art and life, a central tenet of Dada."(116). With that criterion many of drawings from this period qualify as dada (or at least documenting a dada moment). Drawings, such as *Soiree* (1917), an evocative visual diary of a specific

gathering at the Arensbergs, is dated with the labeled figures, Duchamp and Picabia playing chess, Gleize, and "Tango." (She would do a similar set-up in the drawing *Chez Scheyer* later, the impulse similar to Baudelaire's *Monsieur G.*)

But perhaps more intriguing are three other drawings done in 1917: *Dieu Protege Les Amants* (God Protects Lovers), *Journee* (Day), and *Beatrice et ses douzes en!ants!* (Beatrice and her Twelve Children). All three drawings, rather cryptic and/or whimsical, she created surrounding the "shock" from Roche. They are less journalistic and more therapeutic, in the sense of working out problems of emotional intensity. Again, as in *Un Peut* she has inscribed mostly French words, sometimes inadvertently misspelled, onto drawings with figures. Paul Franklin has analyzed these drawings as well in his article within the context of her life, Dada, and Freudian questions.

One of numerous drawings done with the encouragement of Roche and Duchamp, *Dieu Protege Les Amants*, most likely done before the break from Roche, ponders the loss of her virginity and her passion for Roche against the judgment of society and especially her mother. It enshrines the dilemma of unmarried sex and love belying the conflict she experienced as a would-be-if-she-could dutiful daughter. Franklin has described the drawing as:

portray[ing] a bearded male deity descending from the heavens with his arms outstretched as if to envelop the two lovers and either to shield them from the outside world or usher them into a new one. The figure of Roche, who was tall and lanky, displays a pole-like torso on top of which sits his egg-shaped head. He towers over the short, curvaceous figure of Wood who, with her eye wide open and a knowing smile on her face, occupies the center of the drawing (118).

This is an apt description, but Franklin goes on to describe some French words in the drawing and calls attention to the "typically Dada gesture" of her inscription of "the non-word *pipan* on the abdominal region of her body" (118). He dismisses the word as "Dada gibberish" yet finds much etymological fruit as:

The two arm-like forms that emanate from Wood's body in the drawing just so happen to cross over and touch Roche precisely in the area of his



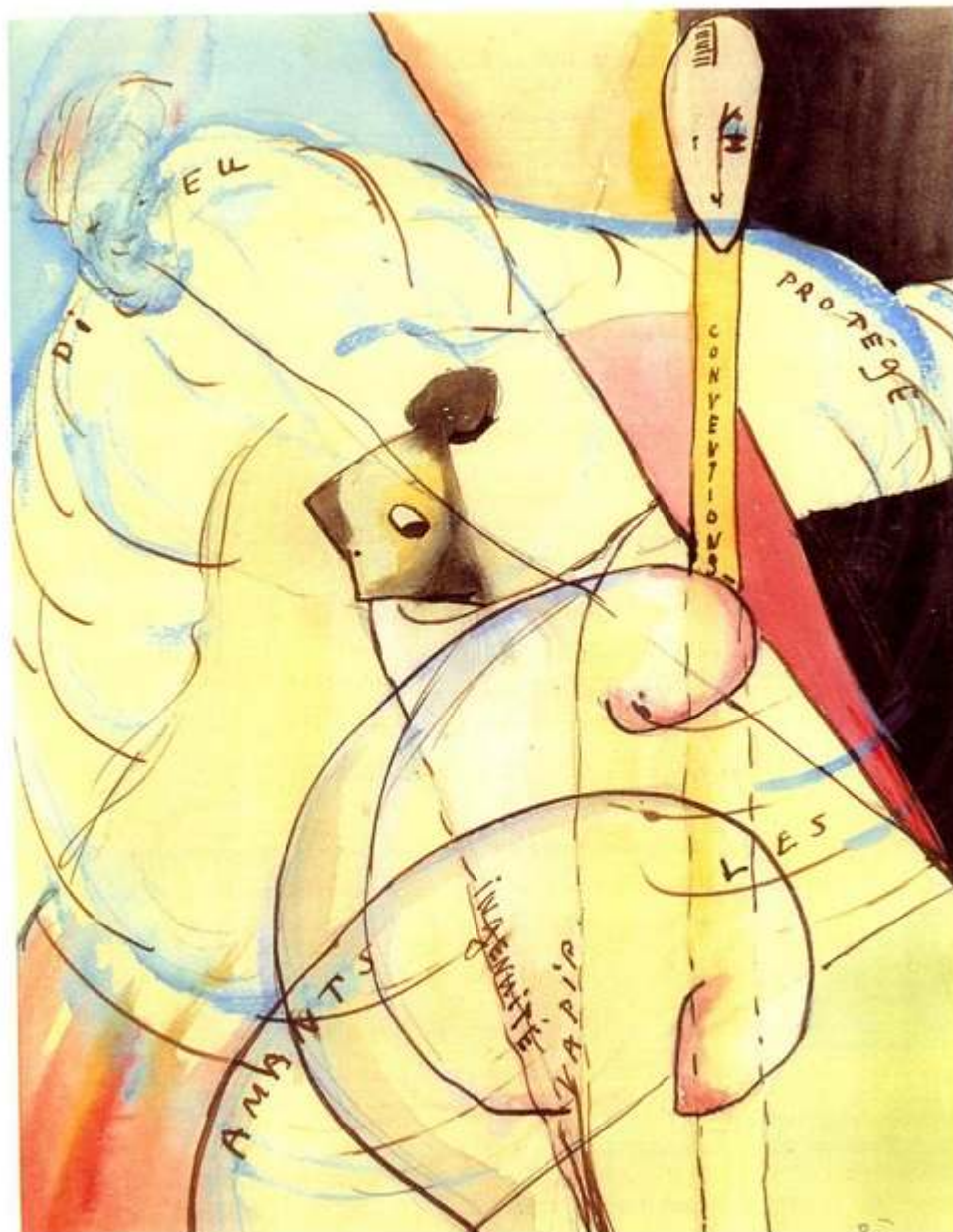


Plate 8 Dieu protège les amants [God Protects Lovers] (1917):  
watercolor and ink on paper

penis. Perhaps Wood is about to *pipe* her lover while God, shielding them from public exposure, looks on with a smile on his face and a twinkle in his eye (118-119).

Yet, looking at the illustration, we can see that the word is *LAPIP* or *VAPIP* or *ZAPIP* or perhaps even *2APIP*. Even mirrored writing would not yield *PIPAN* unless the p's were reversed and the n was pivoted. Why not believe Wood that it was dada? Even as a nonsense word, given its placement in the drawing, next to *Ingenuite*, it could certainly suggest its opposite, or knowledge of the sensual and sexual.

Further, rather than seeing the curved lines as her arms, why not see the whole form as two curled spooning lovers in the swoon of bliss? In that case, the word *AMANTS* is rendered on the curving back of the front figure and on the arm of the rear figure, at their clear point of juncture. The unbroken lines suggest they are the outer figures in front of figures with broken lines, behind them, as if to see through layers. We see the pole-like figure of Roche, with the prominent inscription of *CONVENTIONS* down his torso and clearly in God's hot pink armpit, and the figure of Wood, who shorter, is all head and broken line and directly behind the lovers. The word on this figure, *INGENUITE*, clearly refers to her naivete and her virginity, and forms a narrow V with the mystery word. The head of the Wood figure that Franklin describes as "her eye wide open . . . [with] a knowing smile on her face" could just as easily be described as timidly and anxiously looking away with a furtive, yearning glance toward the lovers. This figure, however, is clearly separated from the "Conventions" figure and clearly in the lap of God. While Franklin sees the drawing as a veiled sexual fantasy (perhaps from the male's perspective), I prefer to see it as an attempt to come to terms with the conflict between stultifying public opinion and the pleasures of sex, especially *with* love, as "heavenly." The following year she appeared to resolve the conflict, at least in addressing Roche, in her illustrated love letters/journal to him, *Pour Toi*, in which she wrote, like a true Bohemian, next to an illustration of her being embraced by Roche in bed: "Now I am convinced virginity is stupid! One goes through life with the idea of virginity, instead of sleeping with men when they have the desire. The more we exist outside the system, the more creative we are" (Shock 35)

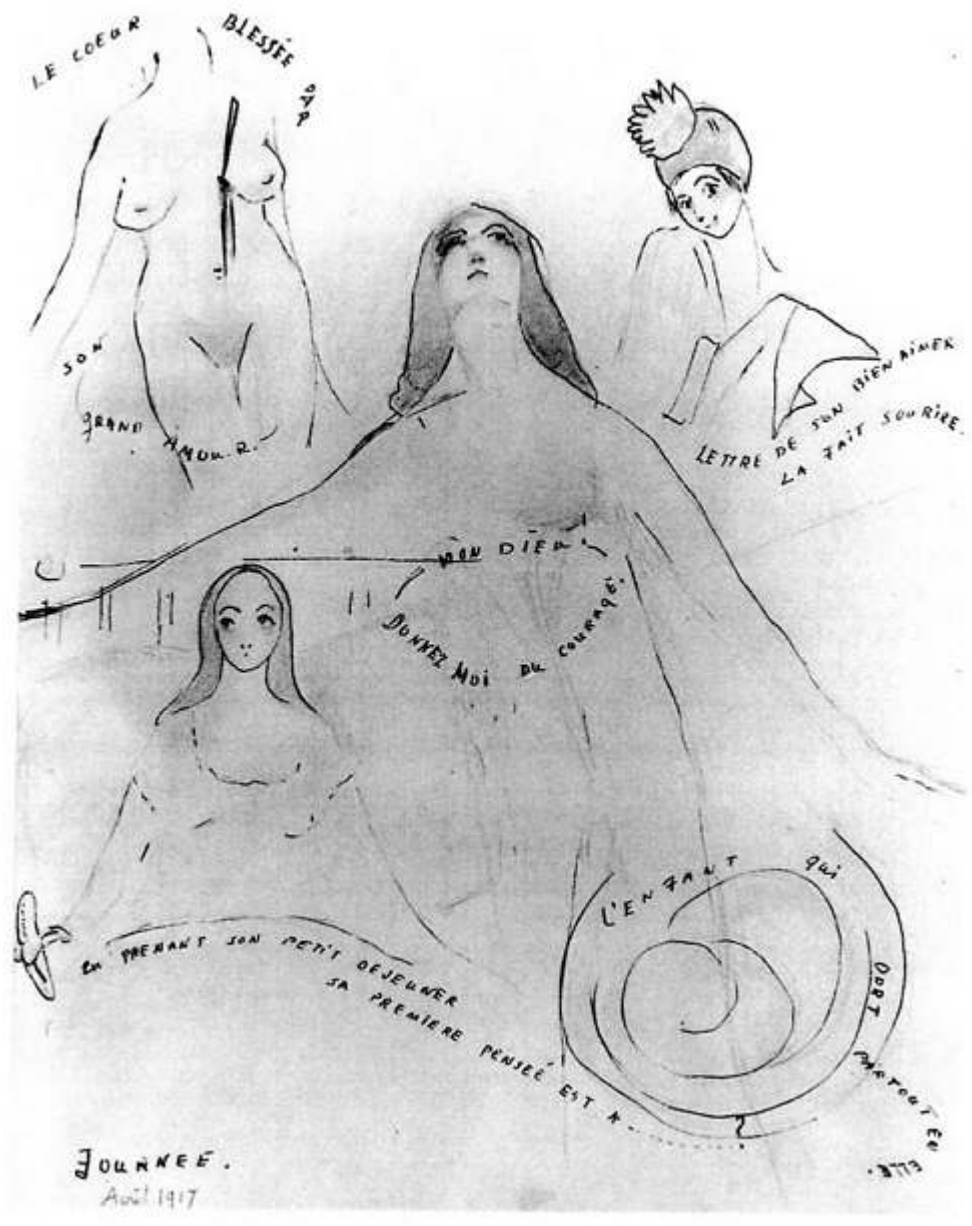


Plate 9 Journée (1917): watercolor and ink on paper

The two drawings, *Journee* and *Beatrice et ses douze en!ants!*, Franklin rightfully yokes as meditations on motherhood. However, again, some of his conclusions I would argue with. In *Journee*, presumably the course of one day in August 1917, once again a large figure with arms outstretched holds the center of the picture. It is similar to the figure of God in *Dieu Protege Des Amants*; however, there God seems to be looking down in beneficence and pleasure. This figure in *Journee* is a woman with head facing skyward with *Mon Dieu!* (My God!) written across her breasts and the second part of the exclamation written beneath forming an oval over her heart region, *Donnez-moi du courage* (Give me courage). Four figures surround her. If the drawing is a recounting of one day's events, the question is how to "read" it. Franklin begins with the upper left image of the headless nude torso of a woman, similar to *Un Peut D'Eau Savon*, but in this case with blood spurting from her heart in two directions, to shoulder and navel. Franklin sees an implied downward displacement of the blood, to indicate menstruation. Given that idea it could also be childbirth or miscarriage. *Le coeur blesse par son grand amour* (Her heart is wounded by her great love) is written around the figure in a reversed S movement. He then moves to the bottom left figure of the woman eating a banana in bed. The writing from this drawing moves the eye inexorably to the right, to the figure of a fetus in utero. The text reads: *En prenant son petit de}euner sa premiere pensee est à . . . ?* (Having her breakfast, her first thought is of . . .?). The text around the womb is *L'en!ant qui dort* (the baby who is sleeping), then coming out of the womb in a J (or hook) shape are the words *partout en elle* (everywhere in her). Perhaps she meant to write *peut-etre* (perhaps) and this was a malaprop, yet both meanings suggest a questioning that she might be pregnant or is. The figure on the upper right corner is of a hatted, smiling woman holding a piece of paper with the inscription *Lettre du son bien aimer la !ait sourire. . .* (A letter from her lover which makes her smile).

Reading as he does from the upper left corner counterclockwise, Franklin sees the first image as "[o]verwrought with despair too grave to bear alone, the figure has stabbed herself with a dagger in an attempted suicide" (122) He uses evidence from Wood's knowledge of an untitled poem about the "bloody reality of female suicide" by Frances Simpson Stevens, the American futurist painter, in the second number of *The Blind Man*

that Wood had edited. (136n44). Starting there, the final illustration and text for Franklin "suggest the possibility of a reprieve for the young, abandoned, pregnant woman who is smiling after having received a letter from her lover" (122). The final central figure of a "kind of *miser cordia*, makes it abundantly clear that the only dependable and trustworthy father is God the Father" (122)

An alternate reading of the drawing might be, though less outwardly dramatic, to begin the story in the morning with the figure in bed, eating and musing perhaps about the possibility of being pregnant by her love, later in the day receiving a letter which makes her smile, but after the contents, some rejection, is read, her heart is wounded, but not literally to the point of attempted suicide. [As she said, much later, "When the bowl that was my heart broke, laughter came out" ("Mama of Dada" Videodisc).] The strength she might have needed from God was to survive the shock and emotional wounds. Wood certainly felt concern for unmarried pregnant women (Shock 44), but since we have no record of miscarriage or birth of a child, the drawing most likely was a momentary pondering of the possibility which was reversed shortly, being created at the time of the breakup between her and Roche. Franklin's presumption is that she might have wished to be pregnant to "catch" Roche, quoting Linda Gordon, "Pregnancy is woman's burden and her revenge" (123n43). However, Wood's compassion for the "lower class" woman in Paris that Roche "couldn't marry" probably precludes that kind of thinking on her part. She was more likely to be worried about being "outed" that she was sexually active to her mother; losing the man was more crucial than losing a potential baby, despite the societal push for motherhood as noted by Franklin (120n40-41).

The other motherhood drawing, *Beatrice et ses douze en!ants!*, whimsical as it is, is probably a more accurate rendering of her attitudes toward mothering. Franklin has spawned two different readings of the drawing which once again show Beatrice Wood as the central figure. In this drawing all the children, labeled there, surround her. They are of different ages and doing different activities, but one of the surreal aspects of the work is that "Pierre" (Roche) appears four times: as an infant in arms; as a boy in a sailor suit

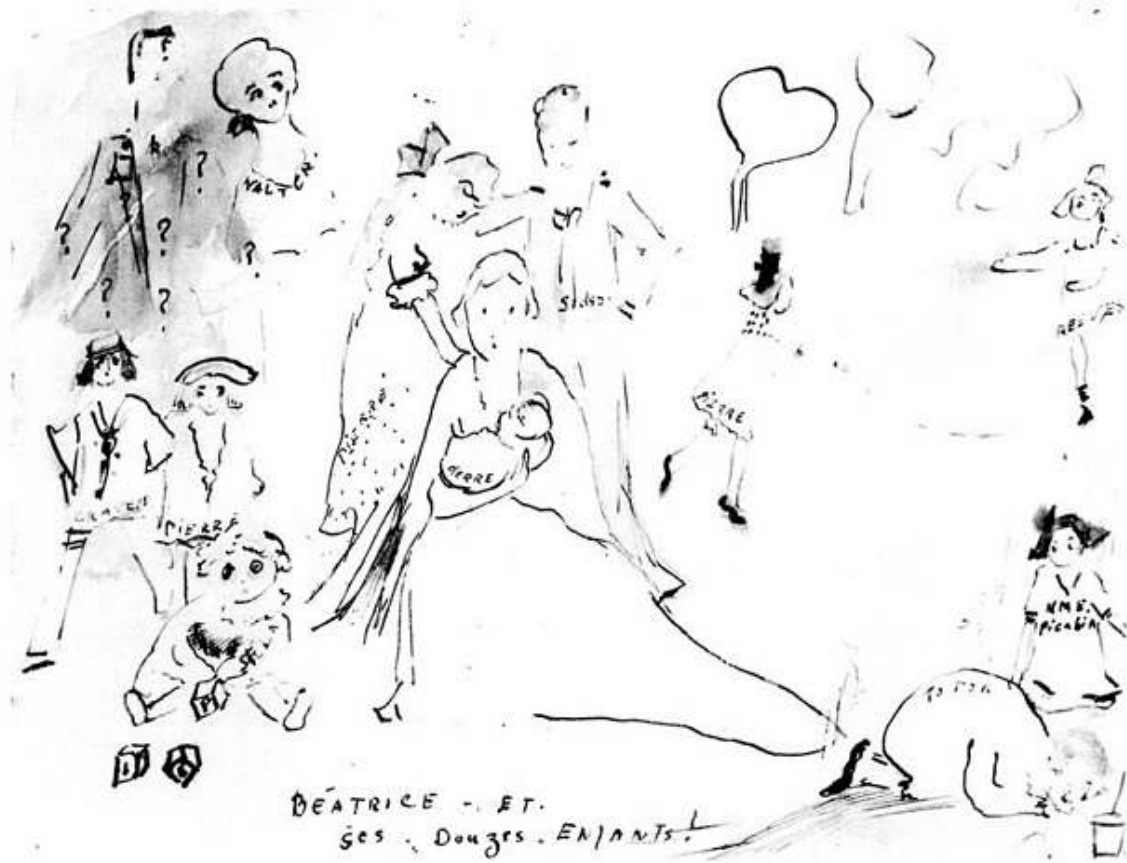


Plate 10 Béatrice et ses douze enfants (Beatrice and Her Twelve Children) (1917):  
watercolor, ink and pencil on paper

looking small by comparison, standing as he is next to "Cravan" (Arthur Cravan, the boxer); as a young girl with a bow in her hair holding one end of jump rope with "Reeves" (the actor from California), also a girl; and as a young woman standing behind the mother figure with perhaps her hand on the mother's shoulder, bow in hair with head down, demurely talking to "Sides" (the Lebanese rug merchant). Wood's obsession with Roche at this time is reflected in how many times he appears. But the question remains: Are they fantasy children from many fathers, including one by Mme. Picabia? Franklin explores this possibility from a lesbian perspective, including the figure in the upper left corner with no label but only question marks all over him, or her. Franklin identifies this figure as Louise Arensberg, since Clara Tice did a drawing in 1917 of Louise as a question mark (136 n. 49). Franklin then arrives at two possible conclusions: that these are her fantasy children "fathered" by these people (thus four by Roche) and at least one woman; or, taking a hint from his discussion of a link with the birth of Venus and the shell-shaped soap from *Un Peut*, that these are children that have sprung into life parthenogenetically. I would propose one more possibility: that these children *are* the people named in a transgendered, trans-aged essence. In other words, Beatrice has revealed their child-like essence. In that case, the four figures of Roche, all in close proximity to the "mother," would illustrate four different aspects of his childishness. If the figure with question marks is not Louise Arensberg, but perhaps some unknown future "child" that she will know, it is telling since Louise and Beatrice were the sober ones at the parties ministering to and mothering all the "children" at play. In this reading, the figure of "Totor" (Duchamp) is the most self-sufficient one, intent in his investigations. His feet almost touch the extended gown of the mother, suggesting a connection, but he is turned away engrossed in his sand pile. "Mme. Picabia," curious, looks on. Beatrice Wood, though an *ingenue*, already had some maturity. She had some understanding of the bliss of children truly at play (dada) and the power of "mothering" while not actually bearing children, being at the center of their play. [Roche's fictionalized version from Victor omits the figure of Mme. Picabia but highlights the figure of Alice [Louise Arensberg], interpreting all the figures, numbered on the drawing

and indexed with names on the reverse side, as literally "fathers" of the children. In Victor, however, the score is Roche 1 to Duchamp's 3 children; in the drawing it is clearly Roche 4 to Duchamp (as Totor) 1 (43-44).]

After the New York party days ended, after the disastrous marriage to Paul ended and she had taken up with Reginald Pole, she was inspired to do another series of watercolors, of tango dancers and more, but especially illustrating the vicissitudes of that relationship. When that bond ended and she had moved to California, the failed attempt to sell lithographs of those drawings and her move toward pottery both worked to move her away from drawing, except for preliminary drawings for pottery she planned to make. Only when she had met Francis Naumann in the 1970s did she direct her attention to drawing again. Many of those sketches continue the figurative, whimsical line of earlier drawings.

One single late drawing is particularly different. This was the first drawing she did after being released from intensive care for a lengthy serious illness in 1996. Mandala-like, done in muted pastel colors, the drawing was a rendition of what she claimed that she saw when she was in the coma. Naumann has made another distinction about Wood's work: the figurative art vs. the non-figurative. This drawing was the strikingly different one on that count. While she did make unadorned vessels (unadorned except for their glazes), this drawing was her most truly abstract one. After she returned home from the hospital, she reverted to her earlier Giverny pace of sketching several drawings a night, but these were recognizable figures-women, cats. It was as if a door had opened to the inevitable, and she wished to record that vision, but she returned, grateful to be on the planet still.