



Alice Pike Barney. Photograph by [Frances Benjamin Johnston](#).
Courtesy of the Library of Congress (LC-USZ62-101726).

Barney, Alice Pike (14 Jan. 1857-12 Oct. 1931), artist and arts patron, was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, the daughter of Samuel Naphthali Pike, an arts patron and successful businessman, and Ursula Muellion "Ellen" Miller. She grew up and was educated at various schools in Cincinnati and New York City, her family having moved there in 1866. Although Barney courted the famous British explorer [Henry Morton Stanley](#), in 1876 she married Albert Clifford Barney, who became the administrator of the extensive Pike estate. They had two daughters, Natalie Clifford, born in 1876, who was openly lesbian and known for her literary efforts and Parisian salon, and Laura Alice (Dreyfus), born in 1879, who was a social activist and follower of the **Bahai** faith. Albert died in 1902, and Alice surprised friends and family by marrying 24-year-old Christian Dominique Hemmick in 1911. She divorced Hemmick in 1920.

Barney's artistic fame rests on her portraits in oils and pastels and on her other figurative works. Training that prepared her for her endeavors included formal study in Paris with Charles-Émile-Auguste Carolus-Duran in 1887, 1896, and 1900 and with [James McNeill Whistler](#) from 1898 to 1899. Barney created a pastel sketch of Whistler in 1898 (*James McNeill Whistler*, National Museum of American Art) that stood out in its time for its unique assessment of the artist's personality. Although unfinished, it captures Whistler as a benevolent older gentleman at a time when many considered him to be overbearing.

The waning symbolist movement also influenced Barney's style, especially the work of [John White Alexander](#), Edmund-François Aman-Jean, and Lucien Levy-Dhurmer. Barney appreciated the imagination and theatricality of symbolism and incorporated these traits into works such as *Woman Clothed with the Sun* and *Babylon* (both 1901, National Museum of American Art). These works were companion pieces Barney based on verses from the book of Revelation. *Woman Clothed with the Sun* portrays a draped figure holding the sun to her chest, which glows like an incandescent bulb. The light casts an ethereal light on her face and illuminates the curve of her body through her robe. The figure stands hunched over, as if protecting her burden from snakelike creatures who bear down on her from a night sky. She wears a crown of twelve stars in her hair, and the moon shines in a puddle at her feet. *Babylon* portrays an Egyptian woman seated on a throne surrounded by demons. A nude female slave lies at her feet. The woman wears a menacing expression heightened by dark swirling forms behind her head. Barney executed both pieces in softly blended pastels, a medium that adds to the pieces' otherworldly effects.

Barney's striking pastel portraits of her daughter Laura as *Medusa* and *Lucifer* (both 1902, National Museum of American Art) also reveal symbolist influence. Companion pieces as well, both works, which portray Laura's head and shoulders, capture powerful emotional states. In *Medusa*, Laura's expression is horror, and in *Lucifer*, fury. In *Medusa*, Laura's hair billows around her face as snakes stream from her head. The primary colors are icy blues and blacks. In *Lucifer*, Barney portrays Laura's hair as fire. Oranges and browns dominate the composition.

Barney also created portraits in a traditional mode. A good example of this style is her oil painting of her husband Albert called *The Fur Coat* (1900, National Museum of American Art). Here Barney portrays her first husband in profile against a dark background. The piece reveals Albert's advanced age and captures his fatigue while recuperating from a debilitating heart attack. In contrast to her symbolist work, the composition is strictly realistic and does not include imaginative elements.

Although the artist exhibited often in her early and middle years, including solo shows at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (1901, 1909); Gallery Durand-Ruel, New York (1903); and M. Knoedler and Company, New York (1909), she turned her attention to other matters in the 1910s. Barney became a patron of the arts. She focused most of her attention on the cultural growth of Washington, D.C., the city she and Albert adopted as their home in 1889. In addition to writing and sponsoring ballets and theatricals for charity causes, Barney supported Neighborhood House, an industrial arts center for blue-collar workers. She also entertained at Studio House, the architecturally eclectic residence she and architect Waddy Wood designed with public rooms for exhibitions, plays, and musical events. Offices Barney held included president of the Amateur Authors' and Players' Group of Washington, D.C., and vice president of the Society of Washington Artists. While studying in Paris during 1898-1899, she hosted an arts salon in her home. In 1916, inspired by her father's gift of opera houses to the cities of Cincinnati and New York, Barney funded the building of the National Sylvan Theater, the amphitheater located on the mall near the Washington Monument. When she retired to southern California in 1923, Barney founded and directed Theater Mart, an innovative playhouse that showcased the efforts of fledgling playwrights who otherwise would not have the opportunity to see their work performed.

Barney was a member of a new breed of eccentric upper-class woman that emerged with the rise of the "New Woman" around the turn of the century. A dramatically colorful character, she consistently challenged the boundaries of conventional female behavior. In 1909, two years before her marriage to a man thirty years her junior, she shocked Washington society with her surprise appearance in her operetta *About Thebes*. Advertising that the play contained a guest performance by a mysterious Mme. Geraldine Clifford, Barney herself was the surprise guest star and performed a sensuous dance in a revealing costume. In 1910 she drew crowds in front of her house and garnered the criticism of the Washington Watch and Ward Society by installing a nude statue of her daughter Natalie on the lawn.

Barney was one of the foremost artists and cultural leaders of Washington, D.C., during her time. Her efforts in transforming the national capital into a major center for the arts match those of patrons James Corcoran and [Duncan Phillips](#). On a national level, her enthusiasm for the arts matches that of women such as [Mabel Dodge Luhan](#) in New York City and Taos, New Mexico; [Isabella Stewart Gardner](#) in Boston; and [Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney](#) in New York. Barney died in Hollywood, California. To honor their mother's name, Natalie and Laura donated Alice's artwork to the National Collection of Fine Arts (now the National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution) in 1951 and set up a fund to promote the valuation of American art. They donated Studio House to the Smithsonian in 1960, and its contents in 1968. From 1960 to 1980 the house served as offices for various organizations, including the American Association of Museums and the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Services. It also served as a guest house for scholars and other visitors. Studio House was renovated and opened to the public in 1980, an event that spurred new interest in Barney's art and accomplishments. In 1995 the Smithsonian approved the sale of Barney's home. The Friends of Alice Pike Barney Studio House formed in 1993 to prevent this action, but when their efforts failed, they rededicated themselves to finding an organization related to Barney's interests to buy the property.

Bibliography

The National Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C., has 265 drawings and paintings by Alice Pike Barney, and scripts for her plays, manuscripts of her literary works, and other papers are in the Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C. Major biographical sources include Barney's

unpublished manuscript, "Stanley's 'Lady' Alice by One Who Knew" (1927), in the Smithsonian Institution Archives, and Jean L. Kling, *Alice Pike Barney: Her Life and Art* (1994).

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