NATALIE BARNEY

b. October 31, 1876, Dayton, Ohio
d. February 3, 1972, Paris, France

AUTHOR

"Your life is your most beautiful poem; you are your own immortal masterpiece."

An American expatriate in Paris, Barney started a salon where leading artists and intellectuals gathered.

Natalie Clifford Barney, a leading pioneer of feminist literature, was a free spirit whose eccentricity and insatiable desire for life, love and art make her one of the most fascinating women of the 20th century.

Barney's life in Paris was a far cry from what her wealthy Midwestern parents expected. They assumed she would marry an aristocrat and generally "behave."

Barney had no interest in marriage or behaving. She studied for 18 months at a boarding school in Fontainebleau, France, that encouraged girls to think for themselves. Her time there began her passion for the French bohemian lifestyle.

Barney took up residency on the Left Bank, in Paris. France gave her the artistic and sexual freedom she craved. She started a famous salon that served as a gathering place for leading artists and intellectuals. In addition to her weekly salon, Barney founded the Académie des Femmes to mentor women writers.

Her expansive catalog of work, written from a lesbian perspective, includes poetry, novels, epigrams and plays.

Paris served as the epicenter of Barney's irrepressible love life, where her charisma earned her the reputation as a female Casanova. Her many romantic liaisons became the subject not only of her own literary work, but also of the work of other prominent French artists and intellectuals.

At age 24, Barney began an affair with Anglo-American writer Renee Vivien. From a new and feminist perspective, the two wrote prolifically about sex and gender. But Barney's most notable romance was her 50-year nonmonogamous partnership with painter Romaine Brooks. Barney was Brooks's muse for some of her famous works.

Natalie Barney vitalized the lesbian literary tradition and served as an inspiration for free spirits by being unapologetically herself.