

Artist, feminist Patricia Hill Burnett dies at 94

By Emma Ockerman, Detroit Free Press Special Writer

Patricia Hill Burnett was gloriously social and seductive — a woman who knew what she wanted and often got it. She also was a renowned portrait painter.



The Brooklyn-born artist and advocate for women's rights died at her Bloomfield Hills home Monday at age 94 from a sudden illness, family members said. She continued painting up until six months ago and flirted with doctors and nurses until the end, said her daughter Terrill Hill Burnett.

Born in 1920, Patricia Hill Burnett moved to Detroit when her mother married a doctor at Henry Ford Hospital. She would go on to paint portraits of Betty Ford, Indira Gandhi, Joyce Carol Oates, Margaret Thatcher and Ruth Bader Ginsburg — featured in galleries internationally.

She also painted portraits of former Michigan Governors William Milliken and John Engler.

"A pioneering activist in addition to being a gifted artist, Ms. Burnett was committed to equality and breaking barriers at both the state and national levels," Dave Murray, spokesman for Gov. Rick Snyder, said in an e-mail. "Her work should be an inspiration to many Michiganders, and she leaves a rich legacy."



Ms. Burnett graduated with a bachelor's degree in fine arts from Goucher College in Baltimore, Maryland, and attended graduate school at the Instituto Allende in Mexico and Wayne State University.

She voiced the girlfriends of the Lone Ranger and the Green Hornet on their radio shows, which premiered on WXYZ. In 1942, she was crowned Miss Michigan and was the the first-runner up for Miss America.

"Men would be tongue-tied around her and so smitten with her, and women loved her as much as men did," said Treena Ericson, a friend and gallery director for the Scarab Club in Detroit. "She was so gracious and charming."

Ms. Burnett soon adopted her role as a feminist and began advocating for women's rights internationally.

She became one of the first women to have a full membership at the Scarab Club — once an all-male club for artists — in 1962. Her studio remained at the club for 25 years.

Initially, men occupying the other five studios at the club wanted her out. Many took to jiggling the door handle when she was in the bathroom to set her on edge. After she had been at the club for a few months, the same men put a lock on the bathroom door and presented her with a gold key for personal use out of respect.

In 1969, Ms. Burnett organized Michigan's National Organization for Women chapter and served as its president. Later, she chaired the organization's national and international boards and was appointed by Milliken to chair the Michigan Women's Commission. In 1973, she organized NOW's first international feminist conference, which John Lennon and Yoko Ono attended. A year later, the organization recognized her as its feminist of the year. She was inducted into the Michigan Women's Historical Center & Hall of Fame in 1987.

"She was amazingly joyous, full of adventure and loved parties and had a huge group of friends who were truly devoted to her," Terrill Hill Burnett said.

Patricia Hill Burnett also was known for her immaculate white house and studio, said her daughter Hillary Burnett.

Burnett said her mother's home was adorned with hot pink accents to match her sense of style, which consisted of fur coats and always-perfect makeup and hair.