

By Lisa Gray

Life in the Abstract

Some painters care only about color, form and technique. Dorothy Hood was emphatically not one of them; such bloodless art, she wrote, "is hardly a thing the soul can bear." Her gigantic paintings existed to transmit emotion: joy, discomfort, mourning or anger. Dorothy Hood called the paintings "landscapes of my psyche," and said that behind each one lay an event. "I have no objections to events coming through in art," she told a critic. "In fact, I would consider it a failure if they didn't."

It's only natural to wonder what those events were. Hood offered few clues; she believed that a work of art should speak for itself. And like most people, she revealed her life story only in bits and pieces, offering different fragments to different friends: the Neruda poem; the ashram trip; her stint as a model; her husband's mental decline; her impressive successes; her fear of being alone.

Hood died in October. This story is an attempt to gather those fragments, to describe in words the life she described in her art.

Dorothy Hood's childhood started happy. She was born in 1919, the first (and only) child of Frank Hood and his pretty wife, Georgiana. Frank became vice president of Houston's City Bank and Trust Co., and in her early years, Dorothy lived the safe, Episcopalian life you'd expect of a banker's daughter.

But in Hood's early adolescence, her family suddenly cracked in a way that she was reluctant to explain precisely, even to friends. "Sad times came along," she said obliquely, when pressed by a film biographer. "Great difficulty. My mother had great troubles mentally, and things took a bad turn."

If you were drawing Hood's childhood, a sharp, distinct line would divide the light period from the darkness. To friends, Dorothy dropped hints about that darkness, but different hints to different friends. One says that Hood's mother suffered bouts of depression; another inferred that Georgiana was a lesbian; yet another says that Frank was a womanizer.

Whatever the parents' dark secrets, their effects are clear. Hood's beloved, dull-seeming parents spun out of control. Somehow, Frank and Georgiana lost their money, ripped apart their marriage and began spending little time with their child. Hood was left deeply, terribly lonely.

In 1937 a story headlined "Miss Dorothy Rose Hood Leaves for Art School" appeared in *The Houston Post*. The story described Miss Hood as "a young woman who doesn't care who writes children's stories if she may illustrate them," and said that she "left Houston this week with a four-year scholarship to the Rhode Island School of Design tucked away in her handbag and a very clear idea of what she means to do in her pretty head."

In the late '30s the Rhode Island School of Design was a conservative place, one that taught students to paint in the Sargent/ Velázquez manner -- that is, with gentle shadings, one color slipping realistically into another. But Hood already knew herself to be another kind of painter, the Gauguin/ Tamayo sort, whose colors massed in big solid blocks with razor-sharp outlines. Her red stood separate from orange; pieces of a thing retained their distinct identities rather than coalescing gently into a whole. Light did not fade gently into shadows; light was light, and dark was dark, and between the two Hood drew a clear, sharp line. That was how she saw the world. And once again, it seems, she was alone.

After graduation, she moved to Manhattan, supported herself by modeling and enrolled in the famous Art Students' League of New York. But she didn't study there long, for reasons that are personal and murky. She was engaged to someone (perhaps the handsome surrealist painter Roberto Matta), but the engagement was broken off.

A painter friend and his wife invited Hood to drive with them to Mexico, where they planned to spend two weeks. They piled sleeping bags and cans of food into Hood's blue roadster, a gift from her father; it took them three weeks simply to reach Mexico. To Hood, the trip seemed dangerous and exotic, like a passage from Hemingway.

The destination proved more intoxicating than the journey. Hood loved Mexico's vivid colors and fast movements and the feeling that she was a world away from both Episcopalian Houston and conservative Rhode Island. For the first time, she said, she forgot "the repressions of home." At last, she thought, she'd arrived in a place she'd been waiting for all her life. She saw no reason to return to the United States.

Mexico City in 1940 was like Paris in 1920: a place where intellectuals gathered and traded ideas, a place where young Americans encountered the Other. The painter Hood had traveled with introduced her to a heady circle, a mix of writers and artists, Mexicans and Europeans. "Hope is what they saw in me," Hood once told an interviewer. But it seems likely that they also noticed her Manhattan-model looks. Whatever she lacked in Spanish fluency or education, she compensated for with creamy skin, reddish hair and dramatic cheekbones.

A list of her Mexico City acquaintances reads like an index to some intellectual history. Her circle included Spanish novelist Luis Buñuel, Mexican painters Miguel Covarrubias and Rufino Tamayo, American playwright Sophie Tredwell and German-born artist Mathias Goeritz. She adored the Spanish surrealist Remedios Varo and considered English-born surrealist Leonora Carrington a good friend. On occasion, Hood stayed at the house of Mexican muralist Diego Rivera and painter Frida Kahlo; she didn't much like Rivera, and cared even less for his wife.

She became particularly close to Pablo Neruda, the Chilean poet and the country's consul general to Mexico. Neruda, in his late thirties, was 15 years older than Hood and already famous. Just the year before, in 1939, he'd published *Canto General*, an epic poem that covered all of South America, its people and its destiny. But it's doubtful that Neruda and Hood first connected over poetry or politics. He wasn't fluent in English; she didn't yet speak Spanish. They communicated, Hood said, "on a subliminal level."

She survived on a tiny stipend from home and experimented with a surreal drawing style that owed nothing to Houston, Rhode Island or New York. In *The Seeming Beginning*, from 1943, a pale moon or distant sun hovers over three ghostly beings with large round heads; they look like overgrown fetuses who somehow failed to harden into children. The figure in back looks toward the one in the middle, who in turn extends an arm to the one in front. The face of that last figure dominates the drawing; its sad space-alien eyes are unfocused and inward-looking. ("Clearly autobiographical," says James Harithas, who later curated a show of Hood's drawings.)

In 1943 Neruda arranged for the Gama Gallery to show Hood's work. The exhibit's catalog opened not with the usual essay but with a prose poem Neruda wrote about one of Hood's works. It began (in translation), "There is a painting that not only caresses but unnerves," and gushed onward with hundreds more words of flowery praise. Who, he asked, was this artist, this "Amazon from Manhattan"?

At a party that same year -- perhaps at the Gama Gallery opening -- muralist José Clemente Orozco picked Hood out of a group. Orozco was 60 but looked even older. He was a compadre of Rivera's, and like Rivera, was famous for big, passionate, political murals. The Mexican Revolution had disappointed the muralists, but their artistic reputations remained intact. Orozco, who had lived in the States, spoke to Hood in English. He asked where she was staying.

Sometime later, during a rainstorm, he showed up at her door wearing an oil slicker but no hat. "You know my work?" he asked. In fact, Hood was in awe of it. In most ways, it was very different from her own: big where hers was small; political where hers was psychological. But Hood and Orozco had this in common: Light and the dark were always clearly separated; the lines were clearly drawn; colors did not slip one into the other.

Orozco stood in the doorway. He'd brought a catalog of his art. "I want you to see my work," he told Hood. "Then I want to see yours."

Neruda escorted her to Orozco's studio, a large austere room with white walls. Jars of paint sat atop a carpenter's table with wooden horses serving as legs. It was, Hood thought, a space built for large movements, a pure space.

Hood wrote that Orozco treated her as a "granddaughter like artist," and that she considered him "a lonely man of the intellect." He allowed her to work in his studio, and every day he supplied her with a sandwich for lunch, often her only food for the day. Once he chased her around a table; the sexual attention seems to have flattered her.

On an errand to buy art supplies, they encountered a fakir, nailed to a board. "You and I are both like this," Orozco solemnly told Hood, "but for different reasons." She didn't dare ask him to elaborate; he was not the explaining type. "One must know, and be at one, or nothing positive or delightful was in the friendship," she wrote. With Orozco, truths were best left unspoken. They were "at one," and Hood, who had once been so lonely, would do nothing to risk that blissful state.

In 1946 Hood married Velasco Maidana, a famous Bolivian conductor and composer who friends agree was the love of her life. The handsome, courtly Maidana was nearly 20 years older than Hood. They spoke to each other in his language, Spanish. She called him "maestro." She was later fond of quoting Freud and Jung, and perhaps she consciously identified Maidana as a father figure, someone who could fill the psychological void left by her real father's absence.

Maidana was a leftist, and his political credentials must have set well with Hood's Mexico City friends. He'd grown up in the tin-mining town of Sucre, where his brother directed the mine; their father, a doctor and politician, eventually became president of Bolivia. But Maidana identified not with the powerful but with the oppressed. In his teens, he organized a native group to play Andean music, a scandalous activity by the standards of the Bolivian gentry. He became estranged from his family; the general reasons seem easy to guess.

He continued to ignite similar scandals. In the early '20s he directed Bolivia's first feature film, *Profecia del Lago*, whose mundane-sounding plot concerned a servant who fell in love with his employer's daughter. The movie's couple met with tragedy, but even so, the hint of support for Bolivia's downtrodden Indians caused government authorities to ban the movie. Undeterred, Maidana made several more films.

He also studied music in Brazil, and in 1928 he returned to Bolivia as a professor of music history at the National Conservatory of La Paz. It's not clear why ten years later the Nazi Ministry of Information invited him to Berlin. But he conducted several concerts there and premiered his ballet, *Amerindia*, in which he once again deemed Andean Indians a worthy subject of high art. Either the Nazis were intentionally co-opting him, or they'd accidentally overlooked his praise of a clearly non-Aryan culture. Maidana, though, clearly understood the Third Reich. When he returned to Bolivia, he brought with him German concert musicians who feared for their lives. With them, he founded Bolivia's first symphony orchestra, and soon afterward, the country's first ballet group.

Hood loved Maidana's strength and protectiveness, but after six years of dizzying Mexican freedom, she sometimes chafed at the discipline and confinement he demanded of her. "It was a crisis, entering his world," she said.

But it was, at least, a world that encouraged her work. Maidana respected her art, and even seems to have been inspired by it; in the late '40s he named a symphonic poem *Forma y Color*. Perhaps more crucially, he did not begrudge her the time she needed to work. They chose not to have children, and though they weren't rich, they employed household help, people to balance the checkbooks, sweep the floors and fry eggs for breakfast. Hood was not Maidana's support staff.

In 1948, while visiting New York, Hood met Orozco at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. For 15 minutes she and her old mentor sat silent on a patio bench as he studied a statue of a Roman soldier. "Here," Orozco said at last, was "not a conqueror, nor an egoist, but seen through his features, a perfect man." Hood considered the comment touching, free of the modern art world's endless dissections. Orozco judged a work the same way he composed one: from the outside in. Emotion and character were indicated by the set of a mouth, the position of an arm.

Hood's art, though, was moving in an entirely different direction. Her drawings were growing more precise, energetic and textural, but most strikingly, they were growing abstract. Recognizable figures, like faces or bulls, commanded less and less of her paper; they began to appear almost as decorations to the larger abstract forms -- and through those forms, shaped nothing like a human face, Hood conveyed emotion. She showed Orozco some of her early experiments. "These things I do not understand," he said.

She began to avoid him, worried that her new passion would offend him. "Blind and wrapped up as I was in my own thoughts," she later wrote, "I did not anticipate his dying. This never occurred to me as really possible."

He died in 1949. Art historians have noted that Hood's work has changed only a little throughout her career, that she returns to the same themes over and over. But they do note a sharp difference between her early drawings and the mature ones. The mature ones, the self-assured abstractions, began that year.

The '50s passed in a blur of hotel rooms. Sometimes Hood and Maidana lived in Mexico City; sometimes they lived in New York; for a few months, they even lived in Houston. Maidana capped his conducting career with a victory lap around Central and South America, leading concerts in almost every major city. The critics swooned: "one of the greatest musicians of America," "the awaited miracle," "a true artist," "a man who profoundly loves his country and who has known how to sing it with sincerity and nobility."

Hood, too, scored professional triumphs, but hers had the sweeter taste of youth, of a career on the upswing, her whole life still ahead. The Museum of Modern Art, in New York, bought her drawing *The Seeming Beginning*. She landed a "one-man" show at the prestigious Willard Gallery in New York. (Sniffed the *New York Times*' Stuart Preston: "It strikes me that Miss Hood is so concerned with the spiritual forces underlying her work that she has not bothered to express them with sufficient coherence.") She exhibited with the young Proteo group of artists in Mexico City, and *Art in America* picked her as one of 1957's new talents.

Things went bad all at once. Hood would later say that it was Mexico that had changed, that in the late '50s, "technology had taken hold of the people." The complaint echoes some of Orozco's murals, in which horrific machines devour their human creators. But Orozco had painted those 30 years before. Perhaps Hood was only beginning to feel the effects of Mexico's modernization; but more likely, the societal explanation was a cover story, a semiplausible excuse that hid more personal troubles.

Hood's Mexico City friends were dying or had moved away, and she was suffering a mysterious illness (possibly depression) that caused her to lose weight. But the largest problem lay with Maidana, who in his early sixties had begun to show the early signs of Parkinson's disease. He could no longer conduct, which meant he could no longer earn a living, and the couple had little in the way of savings.

Houston made practical sense. The city's medical care was better than Mexico's, and both of Dorothy's parents, though divorced, still lived here and might be able to offer assistance. Too, in the United States, she might be better positioned to earn a living as an artist. Ann Holmes, the art critic for the *Houston Chronicle*, had been a faithful supporter of Hood's career, touting in print the hometown girl's triumphs in Mexico and New York and her occasional visits to Houston. During one of those visits, Holmes introduced Hood to new gallery owner Meredith Long, who was eager to build a "stable" of artists. Presumably Hood was equally eager to find a stable source of income.

Houston made good on its promise to support her financially. She landed a teaching job at the Museum of Fine Arts school, and Meredith Long agreed to buy a certain number of her works each year. Starting in 1962, his gallery gave her regular solo shows.

But in other ways the move was hard on Hood. Culturally, Houston seemed impoverished compared to Mexico City and New York. Hood used to joke that in the '60s only three serious artists lived in this city: Dick Wray, Jim Love and Richard Stout. When she settled here, she brought the number to four. At one point she lived next door to Wray, and in his driveway would conduct friendly ritual battles with him and Love. They considered her an upstart, the new kid in town.

For Hood's first years back in Houston, she felt a stifling need to "toe the mark" and behave "properly." She felt that other women generally disapproved of her, and specifically, that her mother wanted her to lead a more conventional life. Mostly, she avoided such problems by staying home and staying quiet. She later said that during her early years in Houston, she'd gone "incognito."

For companionship, she depended on her husband. Maidana, she said, was "a great asset, a thinker, a beautiful person, a poet, a fortress." You imagine her taking refuge inside that fortress, barricaded against the onslaughts of her uncivilized hometown.

In the late '60s Hood began to paint on gigantic canvases, some so large that they couldn't fit upright in the bedroom she used as a studio. She'd wake up and, still in her pajamas, would begin rendering half-dreamed forms, those landscapes of her psyche. She said she didn't *try* to fill her works with emotion: "You think of form, austere form, and then yourself comes out."

And indeed, Hood's self came out. Ann Holmes described *My Sweet Lion Pierced*, from 1969, like this: "A summery color suggesting a mood of happiness was then overlaid by secondary washes, creating a rain of darker hues. The sense of trauma is unmistakable." Hood didn't like to explain her work, but *My Sweet Lion* seems like an obvious reference to Maidana, whose health was steadily deteriorating.

The gigantic colorful paintings appear at first to have nothing in common with the smaller black-on-gray drawings. But Alison di Lima Greene, curator of modern art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, finds similarities, too. Other color-field abstractionists painted gauzy veils of color; Hood, never content to let one color slip into another, sharply contrasted the occasional veil with a hard-edged opaque passage; the soft collided with the hard. "Dorothy would fling elements of composition against each other," Greene explains. "You get a sense of rupture, of dynamic, of discomfort. There's a sense of space not being stable."

Greene sees that same discomfort in Hood's other work, in the way the drawings' lines cut up space. Oddly, rupture and instability were the most stable elements of her art -- and of her life.

The '70s were Hood's decade. Houston's Contemporary Arts Museum and the Everson Museum in Syracuse, New York, both awarded her retrospectives; the Everson then devoted another entire show to her drawings. She won large prizes; her work entered museum collection after museum collection; and for a while it seemed as though she might crack the invisible barrier that kept artists from succeeding in any place other than New York.

Houston seemed eager to support her. Meredith Long's gallery catered to the River Oaks crowd, which was awash in oil-boom money. The newly rich needed big art to adorn their big houses, and Hood's canvases seemed perfect. Perhaps on some level the collectors understood how Hood's paintings fit the zeitgeist of boomtown Houston, a dynamic, disruptive city if ever there was one; or perhaps they just liked the paintings' impressive size and the way that their complicated presence seemed to certify the owner's good taste. Socialite Carolyn Farb was a devoted patron, and she urged her friends to follow suit. Once, Farb brought attorney John O'Quinn to Hood's studio; he promptly bought two large paintings for his office.

People began to refer to Hood as the "grande dame of the Houston art scene," and for her openings at Meredith Long, she dressed the part. She wore hats and furs and cowboy boots, and she carried herself, as always, like the model she'd once been. People thought she was magnetic, formal and regal; they were surprised by her naughty laugh. If she found the conversation of Houston's nouveaux riches less sparkling than that of Neruda or Orozco, she kept that opinion to herself.

But she did join a highly intellectual reading group organized by artist Lynn Randolph, who regularly convened a group of artists, writers and professors. Officially the purpose was to discuss structuralism and post-structuralism; unofficially, Randolph had organized the gatherings to meet people who intimidated her. Hood fit the bill.

Randolph, a fiery feminist, was awed by Hood's paintings, and was eager to enlist her in overthrowing the patriarchy. Hood, of course, was busy courting that patriarchy. She didn't want Randolph to attend her Meredith Long openings; she thought the young radical might upset potential buyers.

Hood and Randolph found common ground, though, in their telephone conversations about art. Sometimes they'd exchange art-world gossip or giggle like little girls; but often Hood displayed the high seriousness that seemed so natural in '40s Mexico, and so exotic in '70s Houston. She commonly launched a conversation with some grand, sweeping question. "Where are the *splendid* things one looks for?" she asked Randolph one morning. "The magnificence of personalities? God? Coincidence?" Randolph, impressed by such large-scale ambition, wrote down the question.

Hood actively pursued answers to such large questions. She quoted the Tao, she threw the I-Ching, and she studied the yoga practices of Sri Aurobindo. She encouraged her friend Brad Martin, an art-loving businessman, to read Joseph Campbell and Vassily Kandinsky, who argued that great art should move the soul. Martin thought Hood's art had that power; he considered himself lucky to be her student. Out of her mouth, he says, came wisdom.

Other friends were less impressed by Hood's spiritual questing. Robert Hobbs, who later curated a show of Hood's work, considered it New Age mumbo jumbo. But even he admitted that the quest was important to Hood, and important to understanding her work. Later, in an essay about her collages, he ended with a dense, spiritual quote from some of Hood's own writings:

In times of the incredulous and the agnostic, the ultimate symbol for art is the symbol of the unmeasurable, the Void. The Void is the end place of all correspondence in the mind, wherein function multiple mirrors and switchboards, revealers of their own inviolable truth on a level usually made inaccessible by dogma and delusion. In the end, within the Void, is true memory. The Psyche, that mute measuring relative of the Void, is forever acting and creating. It is reducing itself, refining itself; it is in itself saying the most by the simplest means. It crosses into the Void, into limits, and thus beginnings.

You can read that passage a hundred times without exactly understanding it. Your best bet is to try forming a visual image. Picture the Void as a dark background, as empty as outer space; picture the Psyche as an interruption of that darkness, life or electricity or the surface of some strange planet. Your mental image will look something like a Dorothy Hood painting.

During the '70s Maidana receded far into Parkinson's. But even on days when he refused to speak, or was obviously addled, Hood behaved tenderly toward him. She frequently claimed that he was psychic, that he knew what she was thinking.

She obviously loved him, but he was hardly the fortress he'd once been, and Hood told friends that she'd taken a lover, a cultured European man she referred to only as K. He may or may not have been the "Dr. Krister Kuystenstierna" whose name appears in the acknowledgments of a 1974 show of her drawings. The name, not recognized by her Houston friends, appears at the top of Hood's list, alongside that of her husband; the artist thanked the two men for their "inspiration." More familiar names -- Meredith Long, Ann Holmes, Clemente Orozco and Pablo Neruda -- appear lower in the list, not as inspirations but as supporters and friends.

Whoever K. was, she loved him deeply and looked forward to their meetings, every month or so, in Europe and New York. When the affair began, acquaintances commented on how well she suddenly looked. And when K. died in the late '70s, Hood mourned him deeply; that mourning showed, friends say, in her paintings. Mortality and the Void were bearing down on her.

Young Houston artists viewed her the way that she'd once viewed Orozco: as a wise elder, a possessor of secrets, a mentor -- but chiefly as a role model, someone whose life they could aspire to. Sometimes the parallels seem almost too neat. In Mexico City, Orozco had spoken to her in English, a language that placed them outside the city's everyday life. In Houston, she spoke to Ibsen Espada, a young Puerto Rican painter, in Spanish.

Espada was in the same critique class as Terrell James and Sharon Kopriva; all three are now professional artists. James adopted not so much Hood's painting techniques as her approach to life, and especially life in this particular place. "Dorothy was a doorway," James says, "an expression of art, of living with depth in Houston. She was an exemplar of making a life here."

Hood was established as a "regional artist" -- perhaps the best painter in Texas, but still, classified as "a Texas painter," or sometimes "a woman painter." She chafed at the belittling distinctions, and on the phone with Lynn Randolph, she complained that living in Houston had denied her the wider recognition she deserved.

But usually, by the end of those conversations, both Randolph and Hood would claim Houston as their home. Hood said she felt a freedom to make art here without anyone looking over her shoulder -- a freedom that seems crucial, since she continued painting color-field abstracts long after the genre fell out of fashion.

Hood also loved the specific character of Houston, and it appeared in her art. The size of her paintings, she sometimes said, had to do with the wide-open Texas sky. From an aunt, she'd inherited a house in the Heights, and her backyard was a lush jungly garden, full of subtropical plants; perhaps those inspired the plantlike forms that she painted, veils of color that look like abstracted flowers.

She also was inspired by the presence of NASA, even after NASA's moonshot glory days had passed. Space fascinated her, perhaps as an embodiment of the Void. She met astronaut Alan Bean; she adored the movie *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Satellite photos seemed to confirm things she already knew. "I was sketching outer space before NASA started," she told Ann Holmes. And the *Voyager* photos revealed planetary surfaces not unlike those Hood had already painted.

"Through her art, Dorothy helped define the character of Houston to the rest of the world," Randolph said at Hood's memorial. Most of the world didn't notice, of course -- but if it had, it would have absorbed an interesting, cosmopolitan view of Houston, one that had little to do with Remington cowboys, and much to do with rupture, loss and beauty. Houston, like a Hood painting, is a place of sharp contrasts.

The oil boom collapsed into a bust, and by the mid-'80s everyone could recite the litany of Houston's losses. Gone were the flashy nouveaux riches, the big new houses, and the big new art their walls demanded. The art world, too, had changed. To her assistant, Alec Soto, Hood would complain that artists were now required not only to create but to publicize, position themselves and do accounting. She hated the change, and longed for the old days of patronage. She wanted a paternal figure to care for her; she did not want to face the world alone.

She continued to paint large canvases, refusing to bend to the whims of the market. But in the early '80s she also had begun to make collages, smaller works that turned out to be better suited to a constricted art market. She made the collages quickly, stacking one atop the other until she had a pile a couple of feet high. She considered them a self-indulgence, not serious work, like painting.

But many critics liked them; they saw in them the same dynamic, sharp-edged power they'd seen in her paintings and drawings. In '83 Rice art historian William Camfield was organizing "New Work from a New City," a show that would travel through Europe. He visited Hood's studio several times and looked through hundreds of her collages, trying to decide which to exhibit. He asked her about *Spiritual Hazards, Mexico*, a dark painted background overlaid with, among other things, an image of a Mayan stela, a picture of Cortez's ship sailing to Mexico, a newspaper stock page painted with velvety ink and a Bolivian postage stamp that showed Christ's crucifixion. For once Hood discussed her work's meaning: Yes, she confirmed, the somber piece was about the plunder of Mexico - - and also about death. The stamp was also a reference to her husband's suffering.

Maidana died in 1989. Despite his long impairment, Hood wasn't prepared for his death. Even addled, he'd provided her with company, and now she felt terribly alone. Brad Martin reminded her how many people admired her; he called them the Friends of Hood. At night, after her assistant and staff had gone home, she'd talk with some of those friends for hours on the phone. Confronting the Void first thing in the morning, while painting, was one thing. Confronting it late at night was another.

After Maidana's death, Hood met Dr. Krishna Dronamraju, an Indian geneticist who shared her spiritual leanings, but who also was interested in her in the way that men are interested in women. Hood had always appreciated that sort of attention, but especially now that she was over 70. Though she still remained striking, she often bemoaned the loss of her looks. Once, when the Museum of Fine Arts planned to exhibit one of her works, she asked Alison di Lima Greene whether she could leave her date of birth off the title plate; she didn't want anyone to do the math, to realize that she was an old lady.

"Dr. Krishna," as Dronamraju introduces himself, repelled most of Hood's friends, who found him abrasive and controlling. Hood's decision was clear: She saw less of those friends. "Our connection," says Dronamraju, "was on a higher plane."

The couple traveled every year to India, which Hood had longed to visit, and they once stayed at the ashram of Sri Aurobindo. Dronamraju had studied with geneticist H.B.S. Haldane, and he delighted in introducing Hood to other famous people of his acquaintance. They visited the Sri Lanka home of Sir Arthur Clarke, who'd written *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Another time, they spent a weekend with James Watson, the geneticist famous as half of Watson and Crick, the discoverers of DNA. Hood gave Watson a collage.

But not all moments in the relationship proved so delightful. Dronamraju, the possessive type, once called Hood's former assistant, Alec Soto, and angrily demanded that Soto discontinue his platonic friendship with Hood; Soto declined, and continued to talk with Hood by phone. Hood told Soto that she found it strange that after all the time she'd known Dronamraju, he'd never allowed her to see his house. She worried Dronamraju might leave her for another woman; she was, after all, nearly 20 years older than he was. She worried that, at her age, she might never find another man.

In 1995 the Museum of Modern Art included one of Hood's works in a show called "Artists and Modern Women." The irony was obvious: Hood was definitely an artist, but just as definitely, not a modern woman.

In August '96 Dronamraju was charged with attempting to sexually assault an employee. According to the *Houston Chronicle*, the woman had worked for his genetics research institute for less than three hours when he tried to force her to touch his genitals. The court set his bond at \$75,000; Hood bailed him out. Dronamraju eventually pleaded guilty to the charge. And still, Hood stood by him.

It's widely held that Dronamraju tried to sell Hood's works directly to collectors -- basically cutting out the gallery middleman. That aggressive approach seems to have backfired, and it apparently cost Hood her longtime relationship with Meredith Long. In 1997 the gallery dropped her.

Around that time, Hood was diagnosed with breast cancer.

"I believe I gave up ambition a long time ago," Hood said in the 1986 documentary *Dorothy Hood: The Color of Life*. "I believe there's no such thing as ambition. I believe there's accomplishment."

It's a lovely sentiment, but it doesn't ring true. What good is a great painting if no one sees it? What good is a lifetime's achievement if it's forgotten? If Hood's work represented her Psyche, could she have been content to see it dissolve into the Void?

Even near the end of her life, Hood never lacked ambition. In the late '90s she and her supporters urged the Museum of Fine Arts to mount a full-blown retrospective. Everyone understood that such an exhibit would almost certainly be Hood's last hurrah, the capstone of her career.

Curator Greene, the main recipient of Hood's lobbying, admired Hood's work enough that she included two examples of it in her recent book on Texas artists, and she is one of the few people who have read Hood's unfinished autobiography. But the museum was busy constructing its new building, and a one-person show would have required a large segment of its already cramped exhibit space. Greene had to tell Hood no.

As a fallback, Hood's friends organized a retrospective at three smaller, less prestigious spaces: the nonprofit Lawndale Art and Performance Center; MD Modern, Hood's new gallery; and the Transco Tower lobby. The installations were good, but not the grand, unified send-off that many thought Hood deserved. At the opening party, several of Hood's friends ended the evening in tears, but Hood tried to keep the mood light. When her oncologist asked to photograph her in front of a painting, she grinned devilishly. She recognized the camera, the same one the oncologist used to record outward changes in a patient's breast. "You don't want the usual pose?" she asked.

As the cancer continued its march, Hood dropped further out of sight. She had always preferred not to talk about certain matters, and her health was high on that list. She refused friends' offers to drive her to chemotherapy appointments; either Dronamraju or her household help would handle it. Dronamraju called regularly to check on her and remind her to take her pills. She gave him her power of attorney, and she made him the executor of her will.

She also named him to the board of the Dorothy Hood Foundation. For years, she'd talked about creating a nonprofit entity to handle the delicate matter of her posthumous reputation. She'd always saved the pieces she liked best for herself, and she wanted the foundation to find good museum homes for those works.

Too, the foundation would prepare a catalogue raisonné, an authoritative list of her paintings, their dates and their owners -- a crucial matter for art historians and museum curators, who use such lists to ferret out fakes and locate originals for exhibitions. With Hood, compiling that catalog forms an especially tall order. Even she wasn't sure how many works she'd produced in her long career, much less where they'd all ended up. And only weeks before her death, on October 28, she was still painting.

Dronamraju says that he is the Dorothy Hood Foundation's sole remaining board member, that the board's other members have died or resigned. But in the same breath, he also says that he can't show her paintings now, that his lawyers advise against it, that the foundation is somehow hamstrung by probate court. For the moment at least, Hood's work is lost to the Void.