

# GAY PEOPLE'S CHRONICLE

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## A beautiful memory of the women of the Left Bank

### Paris Was a Woman

Directed by Greta Schiller  
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Zeitgeist Films

Reviewed by Bob Boone

"For a lost generation, we certainly knew where we were heading. We were headed straight for France," American writer Janet Flanner commented on the generation of authors and artists who flocked to Paris in the years between the world wars.

*Paris Was a Woman* is a fascinating chronicle of the women artists and literary figures of that generation who settled for a

time on the "left" bank of the Seine River in Paris. Director Greta Schiller, who also produced and directed the Emmy-winning *Before Stonewall*, smoothly blends black and white films and photos of Paris with past and present interviews with people near to the circle of artists, scholars, and with the women artists themselves.

The film captures the excitement that these women helped to create by bucking traditional roles and establishing themselves as independent and experimental figures in art and literature. In their own words and voices, close friends and lovers Sylvia Beach and Adrienne Monnier relate their establishment of their neighboring bookstores, which were

an epicenter of the Paris culture of the day.

Friends and housekeepers remember for us the weekly literary salons, who would attend, and how everyone would act. It is a reminiscence beautifully captured by the breadth of those included in the film.

Among the history lesson of the women's talents and accomplishments, one is treated to the voices of lovers Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas sharing tender observations of one another's laughter or personality. There are also frequent excerpts of the columns of Janet Flanner, who wrote the weekly column "Letter from Paris" in *The New Yorker* for 40 years, reporting on the Paris enclave. Her comments are warm and unguarded, such as her description of how Stein's hearty laughter would erupt through the salon as "a contagion of good spirit."

It is pleasing that the intimate relationships among these women are always acknowledged. That many of these women artists were clearly lesbians flows through the documentary from Stein's simple remarks on the beauty of American journalist Djuna Barnes's legs, to the mention that American poet Natalie Barney "fantasized recreating the golden age of Lesbos."

The documentary ends as the artists flee



Alice B. Toklas and Gertrude Stein walk their dog through Paris' Left Bank.

the advancing Nazi onslaught of World War II. One of the last to leave, Janet Flanner summarizes the fragile preciousness of the world these artists had created: "We were all voluntary exiles temporarily."

*Paris Was a Woman* shows at the Cleveland Cinematheque, 11141 East Blvd., Friday, January 31 at 7:30 pm and Saturday, February 1, at 7 pm.

ZEITGEIST FILMS

CLEVELAND, OHIO