

City of lesbian light

Paris Was a Woman, directed by Greta Schiller (Zeitgeist)

Reviewed by Mark J. Huisman

Paris is often the setting for films about male artists, as demonstrated by Merchant-Ivory's swaggering *Surviving Picasso*. But in *Paris Was a Woman*, the female artists and authors who made Paris their creative home at the turn of the century steal the spotlight. The newest documentary from director Greta Schiller (*Before Stonewall*), *Paris Was a Woman* masterfully examines the group of women, mostly American and all lesbian, who congregated on the Left



Les girls: A snapshot from Schiller's *Paris*

Bank of Paris at the turn of the century. Some of these artists and writers are familiar, such as Gertrude Stein, Collette, and *The New Yorker's* Janet Flanner. Some aren't as well-known, like booksellers and lovers Adrienne Monnier and Sylvia Beach.

But together they fashioned a creative community perhaps unparalleled to this day.

Based on coproducer Andrea Weiss's remarkably refreshing book of the same title, *Paris Was a Woman* is a lively, engrossing group biography that celebrates the often-understated contribution of women to the artistic and literary output of the early 20th century.

The women are introduced, usually in pairs, according to the addresses at which they lived or worked via maps that cleverly co-opt the famous *vous êtes ici* ("you are here") arrows of Paris Metro signs. And you *do* feel like you're there. Schiller weaves a luminous narrative from photographs, interviews with friends and acquaintances still living, archival TV interviews, and rarely heard audio recordings of the women themselves.

It's thrilling, for instance, to see Stein and Alice B. Toklas walking in a park with their poodle, Basket, while Stein reads a love poem to Toklas on the sound track. In another scene, hearing the emotion in Janet Flanner's voice as she speaks of her adopted home—"It seemed the very *stones* had a literary style and substance of their own!"—you'll fairly smell the café au lait. Schiller's skill at juxtaposing images with sounds and text is marvelous: It would be perfectly enjoyable to turn off the volume and watch the picture or, conversely, to black out the screen and listen to the film's voices and sounds.

There are tales of romance (Flanner and writer Solita Solano both left behind husbands in the United States), gemlike details (Stein and Toklas traded fresh eggs with Picasso for canvases, thus amassing one of the world's first great collections of modern art), and dreamy visuals of Paris cityscapes drenched in crisp snow. There are the literary salons of both Stein and Natalie Barney, a debutante who fled Washington, D.C., and staged the works of Sappho in her garden, with the guests clad in togas.

But good as these stories are, Schiller avoids romanticizing her subjects. She shows us the battles they fought and the tragedies they endured. Beach's reward for bravely publishing Joyce's banned *Ulysses*, for example, was that he resold rights he'd already sold her, bankrupting her shop, the famous Shakespeare and Company. Photographer Gisèle Freund, also interviewed for the film, narrowly escaped the Nazis on two occasions. Novelist Djuna Barnes, whose classic book *Nightwood* was a fictional retelling of her rocky relationship with sculptor Thelma Wood, battled alcohol and drugs and eventually suffered a nervous collapse.

But despite such glimpses of hard times, there is throughout *Paris Was a Woman* an overriding sense of joie de vivre about these women and their lives. Schiller's film sparkles as it draws us into a world where "women flocked for freedom and created a community in which they could follow their passions into a life full of art and literature."

After seeing this remarkable film, you'll be amazed at everything these indomitable women created and grateful to Schiller for calling it so deftly to our attention. And like Djuna Barnes, you may find yourself crying, "There's a longing in me to be in Paris!"