

Paris Was A Woman

reviewed by **Chris Chang**
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The Left Bank of Paris instantly evokes thoughts of avant-men: Ernest Hemingway, Henry Miller, Pablo Picasso, James Joyce, and, if we strain a bit, T.S. Eliot. *Paris Was A Woman*, a documentary by Greta Schiller and Andrea Weiss, reminds us that behind the men was a community of women who, aside from creating the environment for male success, were more concerned with their own relationships with each other: "Neither mistress nor muse, Paris became a haven for a new kind of woman."

Combining interviews with people who were actually there, scholars who specialize in various aspects of the era, period film footage, photography, and music, *Paris* paints a picture of a hot bed of art historical productivity. You should remember the salon of Gertrude Stein and its ever present Alice B. Toklas. You may recall that Djuna Barnes—author of the classic underground novel *Nightwood*—had, as her muse and tormentor, a sculptor named Thelma Wood. But you might not remember Sylvia Beach. Or Adrienne Monnier. Or Janet Flanner. Or Marie Larencin. If you don't, and if you have an interest in what could be called the "other side" of the Left Bank story, *Paris Was a Woman* is a good place to start. (When you're hooked, pick up a copy of Andrea Weiss's book of the same name.)

Monnier and Beach met in Paris in 1917. They established two bookstores across the street from each other creating, without exaggeration, "the avant-garde cultural capital of Europe." Not only did they help to usher in a new wave of literary history, they changed the basic nature of the bookstore itself: Windows were dressed with flashy modernist magazines that drew curious literati like moths to a flame. Readings sprouted spontaneously. Clientele's tastes were assessed and catered to. Books were as often loaned as they were sold. (Monnier, adopting a concept brought to her by the American Beach, can be credited with creating France's first lending library.) The two became locked in a 12-year struggle to bring the behemoth of modernist literature to light: James Joyce's *Ulysses*. The process bankrupted the women as surely as it secured Joyce's fame and fortune.

Paris Was A Woman is an antidote to the accepted history of the Left Bank's cafe culture. The romanticized notion of a female city—the one-dimensional goddess-on-high, breathing inspiration into a bunch of macho men—is given a slap in the face by the revelation of fully formed female personalities. These are women who will not conform to the role of either muse or mistress. (It also serves as a reminder of what modernism

was, now that we've been told—in the post-everything world—that we no longer possess it.) If the film can be faulted for anything, it is the breadth of information covered. Too many facets fly by too quickly; at times you want the director to settle in and stay on a subject, peel away more layers, bring us closer to her. It's a tricky thing when your analysis of mystery is trying to debunk the cliché of mystery. Undeniably, the film leaves one with a sense of nostalgia. And what is nostalgia but a longing for the mysterious?

Credits:

Director, editor: Greta Schiller

Writer: Andrea Weiss

Producers: Frances Berrigan, Greta Schiller, and Andrea Weiss

Executive producer: Frances Berrigan

Narrator: Juliet Stevenson

Composer: Janette Mason

75 minutes

Color and Black-and-White

Not Rated

UK

1995

A Zeitgeist Films release

Capsule: *Paris Was A Woman* is an antidote to the accepted history of the Left Bank's café culture. The romanticized notion of a female city—the one-dimensional goddess-on-high, breathing inspiration into a bunch of macho men—is given a slap in the face by the revelation of fully formed female personalities.

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