



Photography: Lesbian, Pre-Stonewall

by Tee A. Corinne

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Street Types of New York: Policeman by Alice Austen.
Courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

It is likely that lesbians began making photographs almost as soon as the medium was invented in 1839, but the record of those images has been obscured by time, disinterest, and overt hostility. However, the past thirty years of scholarship--primarily by lesbian and feminist researchers--have produced enough material to have a dialogue about photographs made by lesbian-identified or lesbian-identifiable women.

For some, the term "lesbian photography" presents a complicated reality. As used here, it means photographs made by women who participated in loving--often physical--relationships with other women. Within a lesbian context, the most significant of these early images are those that reflect lesbian iconography, convey relationships, or show the photographer looking at and recording her beloved.

How openly pre-Stonewall lesbian women might behave in public depended on a combination of factors, including economics, geographic location, race, ethnicity, and position in time. Paris, with its lack of inhibiting laws and long history of independent women, was a haven for lesbians decades before it became the expatriate destination of choice in the 1920s. Greenwich Village in the 1910s and Berlin in the 1920s and early 1930s also particularly drew women who loved women.

The Loving Eye

The vast majority of photographic images made by lesbians remain hidden in private photo albums and never reach public display. Representative of this group are pictures by Norma Jean Coleman (1924-1998) and Phyllis Ann Farley (1932-1984), whose scrapbooks are in the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn, New York. Made between 1941 and 1984, they visually affirm friendship groups and domestic relationships.

As is often true in pictures such as these, one member of a couple will take a photograph of the other, then switch places, producing images obviously made at the same time and against the same background.

The earliest lesbian-produced work currently known is by Emma Jane Gay (1830-1919). For many years, Gay maintained an unrequited love for anthropologist Alice Fletcher, with whom she lived in Washington, D.C. Gay photographed Fletcher at work in the West with the controversial U.S. land allocation program. She documented camp life, the landscape, Native American tribal women and children, as well as men. Later, Gay moved to England where she found her love returned by a woman doctor.

Edith Watson (1861-1943), thirty years younger than Emma Jane Gay, was a U.S.-born photojournalist who spent much of her adult life photographing in Canada, where she produced images for magazines, newspapers, and tourist brochures. Her intimate companion for thirty years was writer Victoria Hayward.

In loving portraits of Hayward--such as one taken in 1916 by the Atlantic in which Hayward stands at the water's edge with her skirt bunched around her thighs--the lesbianism of the image-maker is most apparent.

Southwestern U.S. photographer Laura Gilpin (1891-1979) studied in New York City before returning to Colorado to work. She is best known for her photographs of the Navajo, but she also frequently photographed Elizabeth W. Forster, her dearest love for more than fifty years. Like Emma Jane Gay, Gilpin sometimes photographed Forster in a group setting, as if she were just anyone, the anonymous "visiting nurse" in a scene with a sick Native elder or holding a lamb and a Navajo child.

Iconic Imagery

Iconic photographs have a symbolic or signaling effect, an import greater than their surface information. They make announcements or answer questions--for example, about the look of women as couples or as rebels. Such photographs have a quality of being "set apart" from the world and are often used as points of departure for study, communication, or worship.

U.S.-born Alice Austen (1866-1952), although she traveled to Europe and New England, lived almost her entire life on Staten Island, where she photographed her family, friends, and neighbors, often in iconic poses. There were other lesbians in her friendship group and hints of intimacy are frequent in her work: women embracing, touching another's leg possessively, smoking, hanging out in bed.

In a frequently reproduced image by Austen, three women wearing men's clothes and mustaches pose. An umbrella handle rises irreverently between the legs of one. Another lesbian iconic image shows two pairs of women embracing.

Frances Benjamin Johnston (1864-1952), an early photographer and photojournalist, appears to have had no male lovers and at least one long-term relationship with a woman, photographer Mattie Edwards Hewitt (d. 1956). The two women shared a studio and home in New York City from 1909 to 1917.

Queer-related photographs produced by Johnston include images of homosexual-appearing men, male sailors dancing together, and a portrait of Natalie Clifford Barney (1876-1972) as a young woman.

However, the image that most clearly reflects Johnston's life is not one of relationship but of independence. Taken in 1896, the self-portrait shows the photographer seated in profile, the ankle of one leg resting on the knee of the other in a position of masculine power. She holds a beer stein in one hand and a cigarette in the other.

Margarethe Mather (ca 1885-1952) was an art photographer who had a studio with Edward Weston in Southern California in 1914. She was part of an extended lesbian friendship network and left photographs of dykey-looking women and of her young, androgynous-appearing gay male roommate.

Images by French Jewish photographer Claude Cahun (Lucy Schwob) (1894-1954) are at home in a postmodernist discourse of fluid gender roles and constructed identities. She was active in the theater, and some of her self-presentations--male, Buddha, femme-doll--may have been produced in conjunction with plays in which she was acting.

Lesbian Erotics

Unless sexual desire is encoded into images of them, lesbians are frequently interpreted as spinsters, old maids, or merely women friends who live together without any special category of relationship. Historically, the physical manifestations of love have been visually portrayed in nude images of the beloved. Lesbians, no less than gay males and heterosexuals of both sexes, have participated in and contributed to this genre of image making.

In 1900, in an early exploration of lesbian eros, Natalie Clifford Barney collaborated with her former lover Evaline Palmer (born about 1876) and her then current lover poet Renée Vivien (Pauline Mary Tarn)

(1877-1909), in making nude studies of each other in Bar Harbor, Maine. Barney took the negatives to Paris to be developed and printed.

One of Natalie Barney's later loves was painter Romaine Brooks (1874-1970). A U.S. citizen, Brooks was born in Rome and spent most of her adult life in France. Outrageously wealthy, she created photographic self-portraits, nude images of Ida Rubinstein (a relationship that predated Brooks' with Barney), and images of herself and Barney paired as if documenting their relationship for posterity.

Canadian Clara Sipprell (1885-1975) did not have the luxury of wealth. She supported herself through soft-focus images of people, still lifes, and landscapes. She produced a few lovely female nude studies in 1915 and 1925. Sipprell lived with three women sequentially, although the relationships may have been chaste. The names of two are recorded along with hers on the small bronze memorial tablet affixed to an outcropping of granite, her choice in lieu of a gravestone.

A bisexual, Ruth Bernhard (b. 1905) is one of the primary definers of the nude female in twentieth-century photography. She created luminous, sometimes surreal images of bodies and of shells, among other subjects. One of her images--of an interracial pair of women lovers--has a memorable quality of distilled passion.

Definitive Portraits

Portraits are the staple of lesbian-themed imagery. They answer questions about lesbian self-presentation and lesbians as spectators. Lesbians and bisexuals are likely to appear frequently as subjects in the work of lesbian photographers, in part because they share intimate friendship circles.

In addition, however, lesbian and bisexual subjects may be more likely to commission images from photographers whom they suspect or know to be lesbian because they may assume that they and their relationships will be portrayed sympathetically.

American Midwesterner Berenice Abbott (1898-1991) moved to Paris in 1921, where she became the favorite portrait photographer of the younger generation of expatriate lesbian writers and artists including Janet Flanner, Solita Solano, Sylvia Beach, Djuna Barnes, Jane Heap, and Margaret Anderson.

Abbott returned to New York City in 1929 and photographed the city at a time of rapid change. She also made photographic images illustrating principles of science for educational texts, but continued photographing lesbians. She moved to Maine in 1966 and remained there for the rest of her life.

Best known for her portraits, the German Jewish photographer Gisèle Freund (1912-2000) arrived in Paris almost a decade after Berenice Abbott. She became friends with Sylvia Beach and Adrienne Monnier, who introduced her to the major English and French literary figures. Freund photographed Virginia Woolf, Vita Sackville-West, James Joyce, and Marguerite Yourcenar, as well as Beach and, especially, Monnier, who became her lover.

Freund fled the Nazis to South America, then lived in the U.S., and later returned to France. A lesbian sensibility is most visible in her portrait of Sackville-West at her writing table with a photograph of Virginia Woolf visible behind her.

Times Change

Perhaps because of advances made by the gay and lesbian liberation movements, Rollie McKenna (b. 1918)--best known for her photographic studies of Dylan Thomas--could write in 1991 of involvements with both men and women.

Likewise, at the end of the twentieth century, Ruth Bernhard (b. 1905) felt free to write of her relationships with women and with an African-American man; and the biographer of Germaine Krull (1897-1985) could write in an unapologetic way of Krull's one affair with a married woman (amid many with male lovers).

The transition to the increased openness of the late twentieth century is most apparent in the images of Kay Tobin Lahusen (b. 1930), which were published in the lesbian publication *The Ladder* between 1964 and 1966. Tobin Lahusen's lover, Barbara Gittings, was the magazine's editor and often appeared in her photographs.

Tobin Lahusen's work was the first by an openly lesbian photographer to be published in the United States. At first, lesbians would only pose back-to-camera, in silhouette, or with sunglasses.

Although much has changed in the availability of images of openly lesbian women, in the early twenty-first century most lesbian photographers who have gained mainstream success remain closeted.

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About the Author

Tee A. Corinne was a photographer and writer. Her articles about lesbian art and artists appeared in numerous journals and encyclopedias. Her books include *The Cunt Coloring Book*, *Yantras of Womanlove*, *Dreams of the Woman Who Loved Sex*, *Courting Pleasure*, and *Intimacies*. She was the editor of *FABB: The Feminist Art Books Bulletin*, co-editor of the *Queer Caucus for Art Newsletter*, and member of the editorial advisory board of www.glbtq.com.