



Salons

by Robin Imhof

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No one has disputed the significant contribution of women in the cultural history of salons, but what is often overlooked in mainstream publications on the topic is that many of these salon hostesses and attendees were lesbian, bisexual, or gay.

Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Parisian Salons

The tradition of literary gatherings began in Renaissance France and Italy, but it was in eighteenth-century Paris that the salon gained prominence for lively intellectual conversation in the fields of arts and letters.

The hostesses of these events were typically women of some distinction, whether by title or personal wealth. The meetings were often referred to by the day of the week on which they were held. Topics of conversation ranged from (but were not limited to) matters of literary and social taste and, increasingly, political issues.

Salon conversation was characterized by a blend of wit and oral brilliance. A notable salon hostess of eighteenth-century Paris was Madeleine de Scudéry. Famous for her "Saturdays of Sappho," she recreated salon society in her novels. What is striking about these assemblies is that they were presided over by women, a rare example of female control in a literary realm.

During the nineteenth century, Paris salons became showcases for musicians such as Chopin and Liszt. Because salons encouraged exchanges of ideas and more often than not tolerated alternative lifestyles, they were a safe gathering place for individuals of varying sexual orientations.

Marcel Proust depicted his personal experience with salon life in *A la recherche du temps perdu* with the rival salons of the Duchesse de Guermantes and Madame Verdurin.

Americans in Paris: Natalie Barney, Gertrude Stein, and Sylvia Beach

Of the many American women who came to Paris in the early part of the twentieth century, three in particular made a tremendous impact in the world of arts and letters.

Natalie Barney, a lively, wealthy, unapologetic lesbian from Ohio, settled in Paris to escape the demands of her social class and to live in an atmosphere that was more tolerant of homosexuality. Her contribution to salon cultural history cannot be overstated. Her weekly gatherings were legendary and hosted such figures as Colette, André Gide, Marcel Proust, Djuna Barnes, and, later, Truman Capote and Greta Garbo.

Barney's "Fridays"--held at her home, 20, rue Jacob, on the left bank--continued for sixty years. As Solita Solano observed, "Natalie did not collect modern art, she collected people." Behind the house was a Greek temple dedicated to friendship. Here was the backdrop for the many *tableaux vivants* featuring Colette



Mabel Dodge Luhan (above) established a colorful salon in her Fifth Avenue Apartment in New York City. Photograph by Carl van Vechten, April 12, 1934. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

during her dancehall days and the infamous Mata Hari.

Barney considered herself a disciple of Sappho, not just for her sexual preferences, but also for her genuine desire to promote the creative talents of women. Before establishing her salon, Barney and her one of her early lovers, the poet Renée Vivien, expressed a desire to establish a women-only colony on the island of Lesbos, the birthplace of Sappho.

Barney's Académie des Femmes (a counterpart to the then all-male Académie-Française) fulfilled this dream of continuing a tradition to provide a venue where women could perform, create, engage in meaningful conversation, and safely express their desire for one another.

Not far from Barney's house, Gertrude Stein held Saturday evening gatherings at 27, rue du Fleurus, the home she shared with Alice B. Toklas. Her guest list was a who's who of artists and writers living in Paris during the early part of the twentieth century: Picasso, Matisse, Apollinaire, Hemingway, and Sherwood Anderson are only a few of the notables who came by to look at her famous art collection and to talk about the direction of Modernism.

In contrast to Barney's women-centered salons, Stein's visitors were predominantly male. If there were any wives in tow, they were entertained by Toklas in a separate room. Toklas also provided the all-important refreshments and food that were a part of salon gatherings.

In spite of Stein's adoption of such patriarchal attitudes, she and Toklas did circulate among and correspond with other members of the lesbian literati in Paris at the time, among whom were Natalie Barney and Sylvia Beach.

Although not a salon in the traditional sense, Sylvia Beach's Shakespeare & Company at 12, rue de l'Odéon fulfilled a similar purpose. It was more than just a bookstore and lending-library. It was also a meeting place for American writers living in Paris between the wars.

Beach's support for writers went so far as to publish James Joyce's *Ulysses* when no other publisher would touch it, this in spite of the fact that its publication nearly bankrupted her.

Beach and her lover Adrienne Monnier, owner of her own bookstore, *La Maison des Amis de Livres*, gave continued financial as well as moral support to the writers who frequented their bookstores.

As a testimony to the gratitude that her clientele felt for Beach's endeavors on their behalf, they rallied to offer their assistance when Beach herself fell upon hard financial times. Their aid allowed Shakespeare & Company to stay in operation until Nazi occupation forced the shop to close down for good in 1941.

"Movers and Shakers": Mabel Dodge Luhan's American Salon

Mabel Dodge Luhan, a wealthy arts patron who knew Natalie Barney from boarding school in Paris, returned to America and later established a salon in her 23 Fifth Avenue apartment, just on the edge of Greenwich Village in New York City. This salon attracted many avant-garde artists and other members of New York's radical Bohemian subculture.

Although only in existence from 1912 to 1914, Luhan's salon became one of the most famous in the United States. Present at her events were birth control advocate Margaret Sanger, critic and novelist Carl Van Vechten, and journalist John Reed, among many others. Although not a gifted conversationalist or artist herself, Luhan seemed to have a gift for accumulating the best and the brightest around her.

As one might expect, the evenings at Luhan's salon attracted a colorful crowd where, as Van Vechten described, "ladies with bobbed hair and mannish cut garments" sat alongside men in evening dress and

workmen's clothes.

Although primarily heterosexual, Luhan frankly details her passionate physical encounters with young women during her youth in her autobiography *Intimate Memories* (1933). It was in these memoirs that she dubbed her salon attendees "the movers and shakers" of history.

The Bloomsbury Group

After the death of their father in 1904 and before their marriages, sisters Virginia and Vanessa Stephen (later Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell) opened their home to a select circle of friends known as the Bloomsbury Group, named for the London district where they lived.

Because of its predominance of gay and bisexual members, the group was disparagingly referred to as "Bloomsbuggers." The Bloomsbury salon expanded after the marriages of the sisters and came to exert an important influence on British art and literature in the twentieth century.

Among the collection of friends who gathered at various times in Bloomsbury could be counted novelist E. M. Forster, biographer Lytton Strachey, economist John Maynard Keynes, and artists Duncan Grant and Dora Carrington.

Based on a mutual interest in the arts and a growing disdain for the social and sexual restrictions of the Victorian era, these meetings significantly affected the development of modernist literature and art in early twentieth-century England.

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