A photographic study created by Sipprell in 1913.

Sipprell, Clara Estelle (1885-1975)

by Tee A. Corinne

A leading photographer of her day, Clara Sipprell was a short, stout woman who thought of herself as tall and thin. She smoked cigarettes, cigars, and pipes; liked bourbon and driving fast convertibles; and never cut her hair but often tucked it under a fedora, safari helmet, or cloche hat. She preferred capes because of their drama and freedom of movement, jewelry with large stones in heavy settings, and embroidered Slavic clothing.

Sipprell's father died before her birth on Halloween, 1885, in Tillsonburg, Ontario, Canada. In 1895, she and her mother moved from Canada to Buffalo, New York, where several of her five older brothers had established themselves. She was introduced to photography in the portrait studio of her brother Francis James Sipprell, where she later worked as an assistant and ultimately became a partner in the business (1905-1915).

In the early 1900s, Buffalo was a center of the aesthetics movement called pictorialism, which sought to create photographs that were as artful as paintings; often their images were characterized by a dreamy quality and soft focus.

Sipprell became one of the foremost practitioners of pictorial photography in the United States. She produced autochromes (color) and platinum, bromoil, gum, and carbon prints; won awards in exhibitions; and had her work published in magazines in the United States and Europe.

As a portrait photographer, Sipprell sought to convey a sense of the whole person and what made each unique. She also photographed landscapes, still lifes, female nudes, major individuals in the arts and government, and people in countries in which she traveled, including Yugoslavia, Italy, Russia, Mexico, and Sweden.

In 1915, Sipprell, then thirty, moved to New York City with Jessica E. Beers, with whom she lived until 1923. She opened a photographic studio in Greenwich Village and eventually became a contract photographer for the Ethical Culture School, where Beers was a principal.

A Russian immigrant, Irina Khrabroff, was first her student and later her traveling companion, close friend, and business manager. As a student, Khrabroff spent her winters living with Sipprell and Beers in New York City. In 1923, when Khrabroff married, Beers moved out of the apartment, but Sipprell continued living there with Khrabroff and her husband until 1933.

Around 1937, Phyllis Fenner (1899-1982)--a writer, librarian, and anthologist of children's books--became Sipprell's housemate and traveling companion. This relationship continued through the final thirty-eight years of Sipprell's life. In the mid-1960s, they had Harold Olmstead build them a house in Manchester, Vermont.

Clara Sipprell died in April 1975 at the age of eighty-nine. Her ashes are buried in a plot near an

outcropping of rock in Manchester. Attached to the rock is a small bronze tablet on which, in accordance with her wishes, are engraved her own name along with the names of Jessica Beers and Phyllis Fenner.

It is not clear whether or not Sipprell's relationships were sexual or even romantic, yet their length and stability, and the evidence of the memorial marker, indicate an extraordinary level of commitment.

Bibliography

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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.