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Clara Sipprell: American Photographer In Memoriam

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JOAN OF ARC

Bronze, 1¼ times life. 1915. Riverside Drive and 93rd Street, New York, New York.
Anna Hyatt Huntington, Sculptor

THE COURIER

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Clara Sipprell: American Photographer

In Memoriam

by Ruth Ann Appelhof

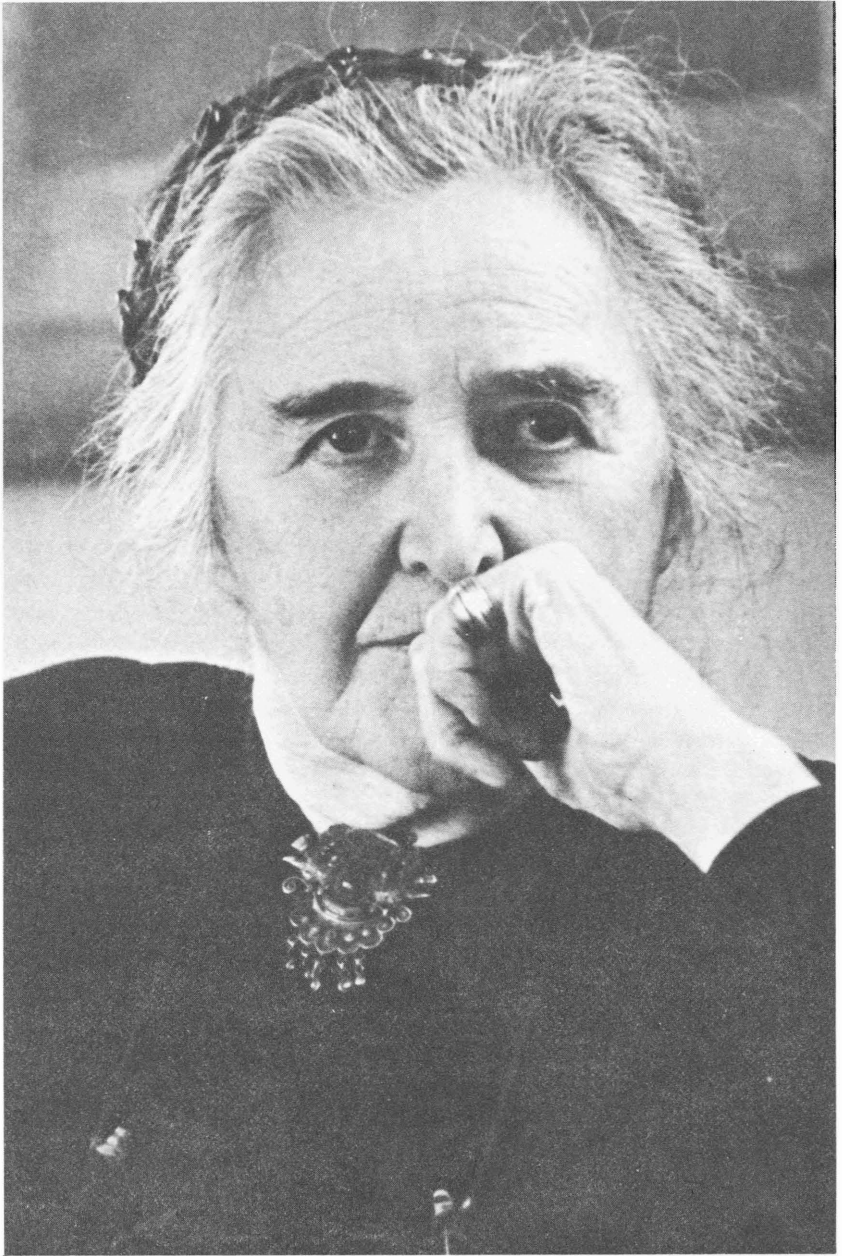
Clara Sipprell's photographic career spanned almost seven decades of artistic exploration in picture-making. In April 1975, she died at age 89, leaving behind a great many friends and a pictorial legacy of considerable achievement. Whether she was photographing the crown princes of Europe or Robert Frost in his back yard, Miss Sipprell's ability to capture her subject's innermost personality became the hallmark of her work.

Clara Estella Sipprell was born in 1885 in Tilsonburg, Ontario; in the early 1900s, her family settled in Buffalo, New York, where her brother Frank had already begun a successful career in photography. It wasn't long before Clara was spending more time in his studio than with her studies, and in her late teens, she became his partner. Always careful to encourage Clara, yet never imposing his own aesthetics, Frank gave her full reign to develop and grow over the next ten years. As a woman, she was not allowed to become a member of the Buffalo Photography Club; yet Frank made sure she attended the meetings as his guest, and her photographs were included in all the club's exhibitions, often winning prizes.

National acclaim came early in her career when, in a 1913 edition of *Photo Era*, the critic Sidney Allan wrote: "Her freely-handled little compositions are usually conceived in a single carefully sustained key, and seldom fail to reveal refinement of taste and true esthetic sensibility. About all her work there is a fine feeling for light."¹ Developing her own style under the influence of Gertrude Käsebier, Clarence White, and Alfred Steiglitz, Miss Sipprell rejected all technical aids. Although she used a soft-focus lens, she relied entirely on natural light, and never retouched or enlarged the original 8 x 10 format of her camera.

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¹Sidney Allan, "The Light-Interpretations of Clara Estella Sipprell," *Photo Era*, June 1913, p. 268.



CLARA E. SIPPRELL
Photograph by Chris Christensen, Jr., Bedford, Ohio.

In 1915, she decided to open her own studio in New York City: “When I left Buffalo I was a big frog in a little puddle. In New York! Well, I kept very quiet for five years. I didn’t hurry. . . . Then I began to exhibit in New York and Paris and London.”² Her reputation grew steadily. Soon, she was having one-woman shows all over the country and receiving critical acclaim for her portraiture. Carrying her big camera around the world, she visited Yugoslavia in 1924 and 1925, and went to Sweden in 1938, where she photographed the countryside, the people, and finally – the royal family. Her book, which includes many of the 240 original prints now owned by Syracuse University³ (among them her famous portrait series of the Moscow Art Theater), was published in 1966. Entitled *Moment of Light*, with an appreciation by Elizabeth Gray Vining and an afterword by Boris Bogoslovsky, it represents fifty years of Miss Sipprell’s finest efforts.

For more than sixty years Clara Sipprell maintained a winter studio in New York and a summer studio in Vermont – first in Thetford, and later in the beautiful town of Manchester. There she finally made her permanent home with her companion of almost thirty years, Miss Phyllis Fenner. A small wooden sign announced the occupant of the little white clapboard house almost obscured by huge trees: Clara Sipprell, Photographer.

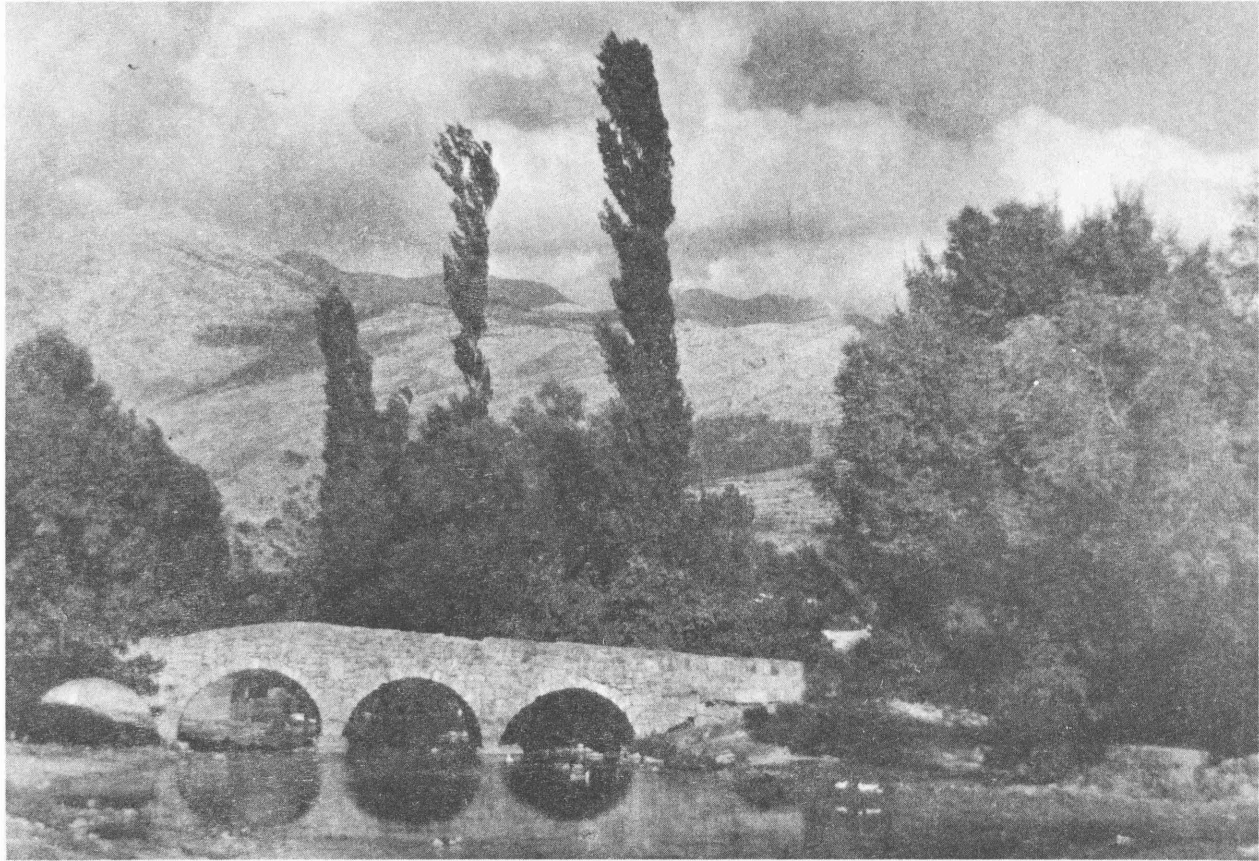
Miss Sipprell was “one of the great pictorialists among American photographers.”⁴ She had a gift for utilizing the effects of natural light. No matter what the subject, her sensitive personal style seems to evoke a moment of infinite stillness.

It still remains for photography and art historians to examine the contribution Clara Sipprell has made to American photography of this century. The state of Vermont has been the first in recent years to recognize the importance of her work. In 1974 she received the highest award given by the state for excellence in the arts – the “Governor’s Award,” which was presented to her at the State House in Montpelier.

²Virginia Moore, “The True Story of a Girl who Liked to Take Pictures,” *The American Girl*, June 1926, p. 17.

³Syracuse University will be the repository of the Clara E. Sipprell prints and negatives, some of which have been received already.

⁴Antje Lemke, “Introduction,” in Clara E. Sipprell, “The Moscow Art Theater in 1925,” *The Courier*, VIII, 2., January 1971, p. 19.



LANDSCAPE
Photographed by Clara Sipprell.