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'It was a lark, really,' says Ninalee Allen Craig of her day with Orkin. PAUL FRENCH FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

A Toronto woman's stroll to fame

BY PAUL FRENCH

Here is the face that launched a thousand trips. A young woman on tour in Italy passes a group of ogling men and walks into photographic history. That moment captured by Ruth Orkin more than 50 years ago is now an iconic image that represents – depending on how you read the photograph – either stoic independence or sheer vulnerability. The picture's subject would like to set the record straight.

"I was aware that I was a curiosity but I had my integrity, my dignity to maintain. I never felt bothered or threatened; I knew I was being appreciated," said Ninalee Allen Craig, now 80, of the scene in Florence in 1951. With eyes downcast and clutching her shawl, notebook and bag about her, the young American known then as Jinx Allen projects the radiance of a Piero della Francesca beauty as she navigates her way past the stares and gestures of 15 attentive men in the street.

The photograph is now the second-best selling poster and will be part of a small Orkin exhibit that opens today at Stephen Bulger Gallery in Toronto with Craig, who has called the Toronto area home for the last three decades, attending the event.

No one expected the picture to attain the cult status it has achieved or to act as a source of inspiration to single women travellers who at the time were a rarity compared with today. "It was a lark, really. I met Ruth in our hotel only that morning," said Craig, who carries an air of elegance and sparkle in her eyes. "Ruth wanted to document the experience of a solo woman traveller, so we set off on the town, which was not the Florence of today. The city was still recovering from the war."

The famous photograph, which first appeared in the magazine *Women's Home Companion*, stirred controversy on two fronts. The man closest to Jinx Allen gropes his crotch as she passes, which many people took to be a vul-



The iconic image is part of an Orkin exhibit opening today. RUTH ORKIN

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Ninalee Allen Craig on her part in Ruth Orkin's famous 1951 photo

gar public display and which brought censure to the image, considered extremely bold for its time. In subsequent reprints, this part of the picture was cropped. But Craig defends the man's act even though the photograph embarrassed the noble Italian family she married into shortly after the picture was taken. "In reality, it's to bless themselves. The Italian touches the family jewels, this is propitious, it's not considered a vulgar act."

Claims have also been levelled that the scene was staged. The world's most popular poster, Robert Doisneau's *Kiss at the Hotel de Ville* taken in 1950, caused a scandal in 1993 when the intimate embrace was revealed to be choreographed despite the photographer's protests to the contrary.

"Ruth saw the moment and yelled at the two on the scooter to not look at the camera," Craig recalled. "She then asked me to back up and took a second shot. It was all over in 35 seconds. I was not coached at all or told what to do."

Whether purists dismiss the image for that intervention or not, its popularity is secure in the pantheon of 20th-century photography. How it is interpreted now will reflect changing attitudes and mores. "I hope this picture inspires young women to travel. They should, only now you have to be street smart. Our world is much, much uglier today," she said.

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