



American Art: Gay Male, 1900-1969

by Richard G. Mann

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In the decades prior to Stonewall, homophobia was as prevalent in the art establishment as in other facets of American society. Most gay artists were closeted, and they seldom visualized gay subjects openly and directly. Because the idealized male nude had long been a venerable subject in western art, subtly erotic images of men could be displayed publicly; but for most of the period, sexually explicit gay works could be created only for a restricted audience. Thus, wealthy patrons played a major role in encouraging the production of gay works.

Gay artists showed inventiveness by developing visual codes understood only by those "in the know." After 1945, however, some adventurous artists abandoned the mainstream art world and developed independent networks for the distribution of gay works.

Pre-World War I

At the beginning of the century, "Pictorialism" in photography fostered pastoral images of languid youths, posed with props intended to evoke ancient classical and Christian stories. Among the practitioners of this style, F. Holland Day caused controversy through his intensely sensual photographs of ecstatic youths (such as *Saint Sebastian*, 1906). Day enjoyed the support of such wealthy connoisseurs as Edward Perry Warren, who also provided significant resources for the (later) study of gay history through his donations of ancient Greek and Roman male erotic works to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

In the years preceding World War I, young avant garde artists found inspiration for their lives as well as their art in socially tolerant European capitals, especially Berlin and Paris. Prominent among them was Marsden Hartley, who fell in love with a young German officer, Karl von Freyburg, an early casualty of the war. Returning to New York in 1914, Hartley mourned his loss in a series of geometric compositions, which evoked Freyburg's memory through German military insignia, initials, and other motifs.

When these works were exhibited during the early years of the war, the American press branded Hartley a traitor. It is indicative of the virulence of homophobia in this era that Hartley did not defend himself against this charge and that he never publicly explained the love inspiring these works.

More fortunate in his personal and professional life was Joseph Christian Leyendecker, a commercial artist, who developed one of the most successful advertising campaigns of the century: the Arrow Collar Man. This archetypal image of the clean-cut American male was modeled on his life partner, Charles Beach. Exemplifying ways that gay men could "infiltrate" American society, Leyendecker subtly subverted heterosexist conventions through his popular illustrations, depicting rugged men gazing ambiguously at one another.

Emergence of a Gay Subculture



Top: *Youth Leaning on a Stone* (1907), a photograph by F. Holland Day.

Above: *Three Sailors* (ca 1917), a watercolor by Charles Demuth.

Gay baths and other institutions that fostered the emergence of a gay subculture in New York and other large American cities between 1914 and 1929 were seldom represented in the visual arts. However, Charles Demuth, famous for his semi-abstract modernist still life compositions, frankly depicted the evolving "gay scene" in watercolors for his closest friends: sexual encounters in baths, sailors fondling one another while urinating, public sex at Coney Island. Historically, these works have great significance, for they visualize the emergence of a culture very differently organized than "straight" society.

During the 1920s, the culturally and socially dynamic Harlem Renaissance fostered acceptance for gay people of all races in New York's largest African-American neighborhood. Exemplifying the mood of tolerance are the elegant and dignified portraits of drag queens and kings made by James VanDerZee, a prominent Harlem photographer.

Richard Bruce Nugent, a visual artist as well as a writer, provoked controversy through his very frank depictions of gay sexuality; in his drawings for Wilde's *Salome* and other works, Nugent created powerfully erotic images that fused diverse cultural traditions.

Mainstream exposure of African-American artists was limited by white patrons, who fostered only work that both affirmed their social values and catered to their taste for the "primitive." Carl Van Vechten, a vocal white supporter of the Harlem Renaissance, lionized its leaders in dignified photographs and essays. However, in a series of erotic photographs made only for his personal consumption, he depicted white men "servicing" well-endowed black men, posed with theatrical "jungle" props. The racist stereotypes, evident in these works, would recur in images of men of color by gay white artists.

The 1930s and 1940s

During the 1930s and 1940s, American artists responded to the Great Depression and World War II with heroic images of ordinary people in the Social Realist style. Paul Cadmus was the only artist affiliated with this movement who devoted himself to recording the experiences of gay people. In monumental paintings at once satiric and celebratory, Cadmus depicted men cruising in gyms and parks. His *Fleet's In* (1934) provoked such outcry that it was removed from an exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery, Washington, D.C., in a process that foreshadowed the response to Robert Mapplethorpe's work in the 1990s.

Although Cadmus' commitment to gay subjects limited his public exposure, he benefited from the support of Lincoln Kirstein, one of the most important American patrons of art during the mid-twentieth century.

Kirstein also encouraged the homoerotic work of George Platt Lynes, a successful fashion photographer. For a limited circle of wealthy clients, Lynes created elegant, titillating photographs of nude men, usually posed and lit so as to conceal their genitals. In official photographs of the New York City Ballet, produced under Kirstein's patronage, Lynes captured romantic and sensual interactions among male dancers.

Ballet also stimulated the imagination of Hubert Julian Stowitts, whose bold, colorful tempera paintings received international acclaim. However, both poor health and increasing social conservatism contributed to the rapid decline of his career in the postwar period.

The 1950s

In the 1950s, gender and sexual "normalcy" were enforced throughout American society. Jackson Pollock and other leading proponents of Abstract Expressionism, the prevailing avant garde art movement, asserted that their paintings embodied the heroic emotions of the emphatically heterosexual male.

During the 1950s, Betty Parsons was the only leading New York dealer who deliberately fostered the work of gay men, lesbians, and others who refused to conform to the restrictive conventions of the era. Among the artists promoted by Parsons were Alphonso Ossorio, whose kitschy and opulent abstractions challenged the

prevailing style; Forrest Bess, who dealt with gay and transsexual issues in provocatively titled works (e.g., *Two Dicks* [1956]); and Walter Murch, who created shimmering, realistic depictions of objects with phallic connotations.

Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, who lived together from 1954 to 1960, cleverly subverted Abstract Expressionism by utilizing its "hallmark" bold strokes within their assemblages of found and made objects. Although Johns has denied that the work has any gay content, his *Target with Plaster Casts* (1955) seems to articulate the situation of the closeted male homosexual.

Emerging Gay Communities

The repressive mood of postwar America inspired "Beat" writers and artists to reject the mainstream and to advocate sexual and other personal freedoms. Gay men seeking to escape middle-class conformity gravitated to the San Francisco Bay Area and a few other major urban centers.

Amateur photographers recorded many aspects of life in these gay meccas. Through donations to gay historical societies, some of these images have become publicly accessible. The work of Jess (Collins) is especially noteworthy. A nationally recognized Bay Area artist, he created paintings and photographs celebrating gay life in San Francisco and his relationship with poet Robert Duncan.

The emerging gay communities created a market for erotic male images. "Underground" artists, such as "Blade" (Neil Blate) produced stories and drawings that are at once tender and bluntly explicit. Blade's images were reproduced and distributed clandestinely through gay bars.

Pretending to fulfill the ideals of the physical culture movement, physique magazines also responded to the demand for gay erotica by publishing photographs of body builders, with the minimum of covering required by postal authorities. In 1951, Bob Mizer founded *Physique Pictorial* (published regularly until 1992), which was directed openly and consistently to gay men. In 1957, Tom of Finland's work was published for the first time in the United States in Mizer's magazine.

George Quaintance was among the artists who regularly created drawings for *Physique Pictorial*. Depicting individuals in fanciful costumes that evoked many different cultural contexts, Quaintance created an appealing gay version of history. The men shown in *Physique Pictorial* were exclusively athletic, "clean-cut," and white. Yet, despite this limitation, these images contributed positively to the formation of community identity by showing individuals happy about their sexuality.

The 1960s

In the comparatively open 1960s, a few leading artists brought gay concerns to the forefront of the art world and thus helped to provide a foundation for the flourishing of queer art after Stonewall.

Andy Warhol, the most famous of these artists, rejected the macho ideals of the Abstract Expressionists and projected a "sissy" public image. Warhol transgressed gender boundaries by producing countless repetitions of icons of American consumer culture, supposedly the domain of women. Although he largely avoided sexual themes in his paintings and sculptures, he incorporated them in offbeat, low budget films, beginning with *Blow Job* (1963).

David Hockney, who immigrated permanently to America in 1963, painted lyrical portraits of gay couples and individuals. Both in depictions of incidents from everyday life (such as *Domestic Scene, Los Angeles*, 1963), in portraits of friends such as Christopher Isherwood and Don Bachardy, and in commissioned portraits (such as *The Conversation*, showing Henry Geldzahler and Raymond Foy, 1980), Hockney subtly revealed the intimacies and complexities of committed relationships. In these works, the (homo)sexuality of the subjects is evident, but it is not emphasized.

Settling permanently in California, Hockney enjoyed painting scenes of beautiful youths lounging around and swimming in pools (for example, *Le Plongeur*, 1978, among many other pieces). Although ultimately inspired by homoerotic desire, Hockney managed to infuse these works with a generalized sensuality, which can be enjoyed by viewers of divergent sexual orientations. By creating homoerotic images that could appeal to mainstream audiences, Hockney initiated a new phase of gay art.

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