



American Art: Gay Male, Nineteenth Century

by Richard G. Mann

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Although homosexuality would not be categorized as a distinct type of "deviant" personality until the beginning of the twentieth century, heterosexual values were effectively imposed throughout American society during the nineteenth century. Men whose love for other men violated those norms concealed their personal lives from others, and they often suffered from severe feelings of guilt. Nevertheless, Winslow Homer and Thomas Eakins, two of the most prominent American artists of the century, created numerous works celebrating same-sex camaraderie and affection.

Homer and Eakins both liked to depict archetypally "masculine" men, engaged in traditionally male activities, such as hunting and fighting. Near the end of the century, John Singer Sargent created definitive visual representations of the dandy, the androgynous figure who embodied the ideals of small, sophisticated urban circles, in which same-sex desire was accepted and even cultivated.

Photographs of friends also provide important visual documentation about same-sex relationships in the nineteenth century.

Guilt and Fear

The life and career of the leading Romantic painter, Washington Allston (1773-1843), reveal the guilt and fear often experienced by gay men in nineteenth-century America. Although his choice of profession disconcerted his aristocratic South Carolina family, Allston otherwise tried to "live up to" their deeply entrenched social and moral ideals. To appease his family, he married twice. However, he never had any children, and he organized his affairs so as to have only minimal contact with his wives.

Allston's disinterest in women is suggested by his remarkably "cool" and aloof treatment of female figures in his paintings of mythological subjects, such as *Dido and Anna* (1805-1808). His desire for other men probably constituted the "propensity to sin," about which he berated himself throughout his life. References in the personal papers of the artist and his acquaintances reveal that the "partiality" he felt for certain of his male friends caused him great anxiety.

While Allston was resident in England between 1811 and 1818, he received numerous threats from blackmailers, who ultimately caused him to leave the country suddenly, without giving any notice to his patrons or friends. Thus, he appears to have been an early victim of the laws, instituted in Britain in 1810, that made sodomy a capital offense. Feelings of guilt deeply affected his productivity and inhibited his completion of many important projects, including major commissions from the United States government.

It has been suggested that Allston's extensive series of paintings of unconventional subjects about the life of Saint Peter (including *The Denial of Saint Peter*, 1811-1818, and *The Angel Liberating Saint Peter from Prison*, 1816) served as a means for him to articulate the conflicts caused by his homosexuality. Earlier



Top: *The Flight of Florimell* (1819) by Washington Allston.

Center: *Max Schmidt in a Single Scull* by Thomas Eakins.

Above: *Gulf Storm* by Winslow Homer.

artists usually had depicted Peter as weak and bewildered in their representations of these subjects. However, Allston consistently depicted Peter as an uncharacteristically handsome and muscular figure, nobly enduring the torments inflicted upon him by others. Thus, Peter seems to embody the strength and courage that Allston undoubtedly aspired to, but which he sadly was not able to realize in his life.

Male Camaraderie: Homer and Eakins

A prolific artist, Winslow Homer (1836-1910) produced many paintings and prints that represented and celebrated the camaraderie and intimate friendships of soldiers, hunters, and other men engaged in typically "masculine" outdoor occupations. Very unusually for a male artist of the nineteenth century, he also depicted the affection and enjoyment experienced by women together.

A solitary individual, Homer consistently refused to reveal any details about his personal life to biographers and art critics. His contemporaries attributed his "failure" to marry to his "shyness" around women, and most scholars continue to endorse this opinion.

One of Homer's closest friends was Albert Kelsey, with whom he shared a studio in Paris for two years (1867-1868). A posed, studio photograph made in Paris commemorates their relationship; Kelsey stands, with his linked hands and arms resting on the shoulders and back of his friend, who is seated on a tall Greek column. Significantly, on the back of his copy of the photograph, which he preserved for the rest of his life, Kelsey wrote "Damon and Phythias," a reference to the mythological heroes, who were devoted to one another. Later in his life, Homer made a witty drawing of Kelsey, riding nude on the back of a turtle in the Bahamas.

An extensive series of paintings and watercolors of the 1870s (including, among many other pieces, *Waiting for an Answer*, 1872; *Reading*, 1875; and *Shall I Tell Your Fortune*, 1876) often has been interpreted as an expression of Homer's feelings of frustration about the failure of a romance. The mood of tension and restlessness of these works, which greatly disconcerted critics in the 1870s, suggests the intensity of Homer's complex feelings about the ambiguous theme of the series.

The pensive red-haired woman, featured in all these works, usually is considered to be a portrait of a woman whom Homer hoped to marry. However, it has been demonstrated that Homer based this notably "masculine looking" woman upon a young boy, whom he occasionally employed as a model during this period. Rather than referring to a specific relationship, these images may constitute an extended contemplation upon the repression of same-sex love by a homophobic society.

Concern about this issue might have helped to provoke Homer's personal and professional crisis of 1881, when he withdrew permanently from the New York art world. After spending two years in a tiny English fishing village on the harsh North Sea coast, he settled in Prout's Neck, Maine, where he largely lived in isolation from others.

Trained as a graphic artist, Homer established his reputation through the illustrations that he produced for the popular magazine, *Harper's Weekly*. Commissioned by *Harper's* to record the events of the Civil War, Homer did not produce the heroic, propagandistic images desired by the editors.

Such prints as *War for the Union, A Bayonet Charge* (1862) revealed the chaos and confusion of the battlefield and prominently featured wounded and dead men. Numerous drawings and paintings (for example, *Surgeon's Call*, 1863, and *Soldier Being Given a Drink from a Canteen*, 1864) depict ordinary soldiers, trying to help one another deal with the devastating effects of war.

In addition, Homer produced many paintings and drawings of camp life, including *The Briarwood Pipe* (1864) and *Pitching Quoits* (1865). In these quiet scenes of soldiers resting behind the battle lines, Homer subtly revealed the intimate friendships that men developed in the difficult experiences of war.

Many of the images of men hunting and fishing that Homer produced in the post-Civil War era (for example, *Camping out in the Adirondack Mountains*, 1874, and *Two Guides*, 1875) also evoke the spiritual rapport of men engaged in outdoor occupations. However, during this period, he increasingly created contemplative pictures of solitary figures in natural settings (*Playing a Fish*, 1874, among other pieces).

In contrast to most other male American artists active in the nineteenth century, Homer produced dignified images of women that lack any hint of sentimentality or condescension (see, for example, *Noon Recess*, 1873, and *Milking Time*, 1875). Such images as *Promenade on the Beach* (1880) show women enjoying one another's company.

After his personal crisis of 1881, Homer tended to infuse his works with a dark and somber mood. In his late paintings, he often depicted monumental figures engaged in powerful struggles with the forces of nature, as he did most forcefully in *The Life Line* (1884), which was based upon a rescue that he witnessed off the coast of Maine.

Homer's late paintings of fishermen (such as *The Herring Net*, 1885, and *Eight Bells*, 1886) reveal the heroism involved in their daily activities. An unusually romantic painting, *Buffalo Girls* (1890), depicts two women, passionately embracing, as they dance on a moonlit beach.

Utilizing drawings and watercolors that he made during travels in the American South and the Caribbean, Homer also created powerful images of persons of African descent. These works were virtually unique in the era, when white artists routinely depicted black people with demeaning stereotypes. *The Gulf Stream* (1899) celebrates both the courage and sensual beauty of an African American fisherman, who has survived a devastating tropical storm.

As did Homer, Thomas Eakins (1844-1916) created an intensely realistic, distinctly American classicism. Believing that he could not attain an adequate understanding of anatomy through the training conventionally available in art schools, he studied for four years at Jefferson Medical College in his native Philadelphia. His direct, intensely honest depictions of the human figure attest to the impact of this education upon his art.

Eakins refused to incorporate in his works any of the elegant decorative and historical details that greatly appealed to American viewers of the late nineteenth century. As a result, he never attained the degree of success that he merited. Eakins' dedication to studying the world around him is evident even in his occasional treatments of traditional religious and historical themes, such as *The Crucifixion* (1880), which is a remarkably direct and straightforward (albeit dignified) depiction of a naked man strapped to a cross.

Eakins was profoundly influenced by the ideas of Walt Whitman, with whom he became close friends, after painting his portrait in 1887-1888. Eakins' carefully composed images of naked youths in Arcadian landscape settings (such as *The Swimming Hole*, 1893-1895) constitute visual equivalents of Whitman's poems, celebrating male beauty and comradeship. Eakins often painted scenes of all-male athletic activities, such as rowing (for example, *The Biglin Brothers Turning the Stake*, 1873) and boxing (for example, *Counting Out*, 1888).

As a teacher at the Pennsylvania Academy of Art, Eakins emphasized to his students the importance of the study of the naked male figure. His insistence that women students draw from unclothed male models caused him to be dismissed from his position at the Academy in 1886. His attempt to establish an independent Art Students League ended in financial disaster. Out of fashion for the rest of his life, he struggled to make a living by painting commissioned portraits.

During his later years, Eakins certainly derived a great deal of emotional support from his wife, Susan Macdowell, a former student, whom he married in 1884, shortly before his fortieth birthday. Susan

Macdowell shared many of her husband's interests, and, like him, she was an ardent admirer of Whitman's poetry. His austere portrait of her (1899) reveals both her strong personality and her warm affection for the artist.

Eakins also developed a very close relationship with Samuel Murray (1869-1941), a working-class Irishman whom he trained as a sculptor. The two shared a studio for eleven years, and they took extended wilderness trips together. Like Whitman's romantic associations with younger men, this relationship of an older and younger man corresponds with Platonic ideals of male relationships.

There has been much scholarly speculation about the extent to which Eakins was fully aware of the homoerotic implications of his treatment of the male figure. Even though the modern concept of homosexuality had not yet been formulated, it seems very unlikely to the present writer that this forthright and honest supporter of Whitman's ideals would be entirely naive about this aspect of his work.

In particular, his numerous photographs of his students at the site of the *Swimming Hole* (1883) evoke the erotic appeal of the youths. In these photographic studies, he consistently posed the figures so as to emphasize their genitals and to suggest various physical and emotional interactions among them. In his final painting of this scene, Eakins modestly concealed their genitals, but he subtly revealed his voyeuristic fascination with the youths by portraying himself as a swimming figure (in the lower right foreground), gazing longingly up at them.

The Dandy: Sargent

In contrast to Homer and Eakins, many American artists active in the late nineteenth century disdained images of their own country and sought inspiration in Europe. Among them was John Singer Sargent (1856-1925), who settled permanently in London in 1884.

Developing a fashionable style, ultimately influenced by such "Old Masters" as Velázquez and Frans Hals, Sargent quickly established an international reputation as the leading portraitist of the wealthy elite. Many of his clients included Americans, whom he sketched during their overseas trips or on his occasional visits to the United States.

Most scholars have asserted that Sargent was essentially an asexual individual, devoted only to his career. Eager to be accepted as a member of "high society," the bachelor Sargent maintained an impeccable and restrained public persona. Yet, despite his evident concern with his reputation, Sargent moved freely in the emerging "gay circles" in London and Boston. In his portraits of writers and artists from these groups (for example, *W. Graham Robertson*, 1894), he created archetypal images of the elegant, androgynous figure of the dandy.

Sargent's sensitivity to the beauties of the nude male figure is most evident in an extensive series of studies and watercolors, which he never exhibited and which he kept in his personal possession until his death. One group of sketches depict a mature, notably athletic figure in bold stances; the sketches literally thrust the model's genitals toward the viewer.

Many pieces depict a youthful model, reclining casually and languidly on a bed, with legs spread wide apart, as if to emphasize his genitals. A mood of voyeuristic intimacy is created through such features as the close "cropping" of the bed and the unconventional perspective from immediately above the figure.

Sargent's "finished" watercolors of the clothed figure of his friend Peter Harrison, who is shown reclining on a bed (approximately 1905), are infused with the same intimate and sensual mood as are his studies of the similarly posed nude model. Subtle indications of Sargent's appreciation of the beauties of the male body can be noted in some of his popular exhibited paintings. For example, *On His Holidays* (1901) features an attractive youthful hiker, resting in a sensual pose alongside a mountain stream.

Photographic Portraits of Male Friends

Extensive visual evidence of intimate homosocial, potentially homosexual, relationships are provided by the affectionate portraits of male friends, made by both amateur and professional photographers, from mid-1840s onwards. In the era before sexual behavior had been rigorously codified into binary categories, young men were allowed to express their friendship through embraces and other gestures and actions that now would be interpreted as exclusively gay.

Most of the photographs of pairs and groups of male friends probably were intended to commemorate friendships without any sexual overtones. Nevertheless, in some instances, explicit gestures, passionate embraces, and even revealing inscriptions forcefully evoke relationships that were celebrated sexually.

By the middle of the second decade of the twentieth century, the conception of homosexuality as a distinct identity category, with implications of mental and physical illness, caused the genre of male friendship photographs to disappear. The twentieth century conception of homosexuality can not adequately explain the fluid relationships eloquently revealed in countless nineteenth century images of male friends.

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About the Author

Richard G. Mann is Professor of Art at San Francisco State University, where he regularly offers a two-semester multicultural course in Queer Art History. His publications include *El Greco and His Patrons* and *Spanish Paintings of the Fifteenth through Nineteenth Centuries*.