



Cadmus, Paul (1904-1999)

by Ken Gonzales-Day

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American painter Paul Cadmus is best known for the satiric innocence of his frequently censored paintings of burly men in skin-tight clothes and curvaceous women in provocative poses, but he also created works that celebrate same-sex domesticity.

Born in New York City on December 17, 1904 into a family of commercial artists, Cadmus studied at the National Academy of Design and the Arts Students League. He lived in Europe from 1931 to 1933, where he traveled with artist Jared French and where he produced his first mature canvases.

In the 1930s, Cadmus became the center of a circle of gay men who were prominent within the arts in New York City. This circle included his brother-in-law, Lincoln Kirstein, who helped found the American School of Ballet, and the photographer George Platt Lynes, for whom Cadmus frequently modeled.

Along with fellow painters Bernard Perlin, Jared French, and George Tooker, Cadmus became known as a "Magical Realist," though none of the artists truly accepted the term.

In the early 1930s, Cadmus worked for the Public Works of Art Project, which was later incorporated into the WPA. This experience was to help shape his style for the rest of his long career. Nearly illustrative, his paintings remained linked to a realist style found in many WPA works of the 1930s.

In the 1930s, Cadmus used caricature, satire, and innuendo to veil the homoeroticism of his subjects, which radically pushed at the boundaries of acceptability. Cadmus's 1933 painting *The Fleet's In!* was selected by the WPA for inclusion in a show of the PWAP art at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, and in 1934 it placed him at the center of a public controversy.

Like many of his early works, the painting is ostensibly heterosexual in its depiction of sailors flirting with young women, who may be prostitutes, but it nevertheless manages to suggest a homosexual exchange between a well-dressed civilian, who sports a red tie, a widely recognized signal of homosexuality from the turn of the twentieth century, and a sailor to whom he offers a cigarette.

The painting's homoerotic subtext led to its removal after the opening of the exhibition. Frequently cited as one of the earliest incidents of government censorship, the removal of the painting was almost certainly motivated by homophobia.

The Navy maintains that based on public outcry the Secretary of the Navy, Claude A. Swanson, ordered Assistant Secretary of the Navy Henry Latrobe Roosevelt to exclude the painting from the show.

However, several Cadmus biographers maintain that the picture was removed by Roosevelt on his own



Like many paintings by Paul Cadmus (top), *Playground* features homoerotic imagery. Portrait Photograph by Carl van Vechten created December 7, 1937. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

behest. Given his relationship to President Roosevelt, the answer may never be known. In 1935 or 1936, after the controversy had subsided, Assistant Secretary Roosevelt sent the painting to the Alibi Club in Washington, D. C., where it remained until the early 1980s.

Cadmus's painting *Coney Island* (1935) also became the subject of controversy. Its portrayal of local residents engaged in provocative (heterosexual) antics enraged Brooklyn realtors, who threatened to file a civil suit against the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Similarly, his commission for the Port Washington post office was also scandalous and was cancelled: the mural he produced, *Pocahontas and John Smith* (1938), so emphasizes the buttocks and genitals of the Native Americans that it obscures the subject, which is the rescue of John Smith.

As a result of Cadmus's notoriety, his 1937 exhibition at Midtown Galleries in New York attracted more than 7,000 visitors.

Other early works of particular interest for their homoeroticism are *YMCA Locker Room* (1933), *Shore Leave* (1933), and *Greenwich Village Cafeteria* (1934). Like *The Fleet's In!*, these works also document homosexual cruising and seduction.

In Cadmus's paintings, significant exchanges of glances signal sexual longing and availability, often in the very midst of mundane activities. His work documents the surreptitious cruising rituals of an urban, gay male subculture in the 1930s.

Cadmus's painting *What I Believe* (1947-1948) was inspired by E.M. Forster's essay of the same name, in which the novelist expresses his faith in personal relations and his concept of a spiritual aristocracy "of the sensitive, the considerate, and the plucky. Its members are to be found in all nations and classes, and all through the ages, and there is a secret understanding between them when they meet. They represent the true human condition, the one permanent victory of our queer race over cruelty and chaos."

Cadmus's allegorical painting, which depicts such figures as Forster and Christopher Isherwood in Socratic poses, makes clear his intellectual allegiance to the humanism that Forster depicted as gravely threatened by fascism, as well as his own membership in the Forsterian aristocracy.

Cadmus's later works include a series of paintings inspired by Italian Renaissance masters. In these canvases, such as *The Shower* (1943) and *Night in Bologna* (1958), the artist illustrates the polymorphous nature of desire.

In still other later works, such as *The Bath* (1951) and *The Haircut* (1986), Cadmus explores the joys of his long-term relationship with his partner and model, Jon Andersson. These paintings are particularly touching in their illustration of an entirely ordinary but rarely depicted subject: the domesticity of a same-sex couple.

Although the "magic realism" with which Cadmus was identified fell out of favor in the 1950s and Cadmus's reputation went into decline, near the end of his life there was a renewed interest in his work, sparked at least in part by the success of the gay and lesbian liberation movement, as well as by a resurgence of interest in representational art.

The revival of interest in Cadmus was given impetus by the first edition of Lincoln Kirstein's illustrated biography of the artist in 1984. In 1985, Cadmus's life and career was the subject of a PBS documentary, *Paul Cadmus, Enfant Terrible at 80*.

In 1989, *The Drawings of Paul Cadmus*, with an introduction by Guy Davenport, was published. In 1996, Cadmus had two exhibitions in New York, one at the Whitney Museum of American Art and the other at D.C.

Moore Gallery.

Although he stopped painting towards the end of his life, Cadmus continued to draw at his home in Weston, Connecticut, particularly portraits and figure studies of Andersson, his favorite model and companion of 35 years.

Cadmus died on December 12, 1999, five days shy of his 95th birthday.

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Ken Gonzales-Day is a Professor of Art at Scripps College in Claremont, California. His art has been included in solo and group shows in Los Angeles, Guadalajara, Mexico City, and New York. He has published in *Art Journal*, *Art & Text*, *Artissues*, *Artpapers*, and *Poliester*.