



Canadian Art

by Eugenio Filice

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.
Entry Copyright © 2002, glbtq, Inc.
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Very few scholars have devoted their attention to the subject of homosexuality in historical Canadian art, but scholarship on the contemporary period is somewhat fuller. The term "Canadian Art" embraces a conglomeration of heterogeneous styles and subject matters, reflecting the foundation of Canada by First Nations people, French and English colonizers, and numerous immigrant populations. The majority of art produced from the early seventeenth to the twentieth century relies heavily upon imported and/or traditional means of representation.

Since the rise of the homosexual emancipation movement three decades ago, a handful of Canadian artists have confronted issues of gay and lesbian sexuality in their work. In matters of law--often considered to hold substantial authority over the representation of desire--Canada is liberal in its conception of what is permissible between two consenting adults.

The promulgation of the federal omnibus bill C-150, which passed into law in August 1969, effectively decriminalized most homosexual relations between consenting adults in private. Currently, many provincial statutes protect against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation; and, as a result of recent rulings by the Supreme Court of Canada, the rights of same-sex couples are also legally recognized.

Historical Canadian Art

The earliest artistic representations created by European settlers were either anthropological sketches, documenting existing populations and natural features of the land, as in cartography, or, especially in New France, religious art for the decoration of churches and related structures.

Until well into the nineteenth century, the two main patrons of the arts were the Church and the few wealthy and ruling families. Many artists, such as Cornelius Krieghoff (1815-1872), were itinerant, accepting commissions for portraits, but often relying upon the sale of scenic pictures for daily sustenance. The effect of sexual identity on the work of these early artists is almost impossible to assess.

It is not until the second half of the nineteenth century, with the founding of art leagues and schools and a National Gallery (1866), that a committed cultivation of the arts in Canada appeared.

An undeniably homoerotic body of work to emerge from this period is by the sculptor Robert Tait McKenzie (1867-1938), a doctor and early defender of physical education. McKenzie's bronze statue *The Sprinter* (1902) reveals the sculptor's accurate observations of the athletic male form and his fine handling of his medium, even as it also recalls the ancient classical world's love and admiration for the physically robust male figure.



Top: A painting of the Grand Canal in Venice, Italy by Canadian-born artist Maurice Prendergast.

Above: A photograph of Robert Tait McKenzie's *Ideal Scout* by Bruce Andersen. The sculpture is installed at Twenty-Second and Winter Streets in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The image of *Ideal Scout* is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution ShareAlike 2.5 License.

While artists such as McKenzie achieved refined works in the context of academic institutions located principally in North America, artists such as James Wilson Morrice (1865-1924) sought an artistic training based on worldly experience and travel. From 1890 until the beginning of the Great War, Morrice trained and worked in Paris.

While details regarding his sexuality remain sketchy, it may be significant that he was acquainted with such homosexual or bisexual figures as Oscar Wilde, Aubrey Beardsley, and Roger Fry. He maintained close friendships with Maurice Brazil Prendergast (1854-1928) and Charles Condor (1868-1909).

In the majority of his panel paintings, executed in a Post-Impressionist and Symbolist style, Morrice tends to distance himself from the various outdoor genre scenes he executes and he imbues his figures with a certain anonymity and melancholia. This sense of separation and detachment may be interpreted as a means of concealing certain sentiments from public knowledge, even as it also raises questions about why the artist is so detached and melancholy.

Morrice's delicately executed pictures contrast sharply with the monumental works of Florence Wyle (1881-1968) and Frances Loring (1887-1968). The two women met in 1905 at the Art Institute of Chicago. They later shared a studio in New York from 1909 to 1912. In the following year they reunited and settled in Toronto, living and working together for the next fifty-five years.

Honoring women workers of World War I in an unsentimental way, Loring's *Girls with a Rail* (1919) has been interpreted as an attack on conventional models of femininity. This particular sculpture may be contrasted with Wyle's delicate *Study of a Girl* (1931). Whereas Loring's statue represents women as unidealized, with pronounced musculature, Wyle's study of a nude female depicts femininity more traditionally.

Another artist to be mentioned during this period is the portraitist and genre painter, Florence Carlyle (1864-1923), who in 1890 traveled to Paris for artistic training. In the summer of 1911, she met Judith Hastings, and together they formed a "Romantic Friendship." Although Carlyle's painting is rather academic, she did not shy away from depicting the women close to her. Particularly interesting is *The Threshold* (1913), which depicts a woman standing in an interior dressed in a wedding gown and is thought to represent Hastings.

Post World War II Canada

The period after World War II is often demarcated in gay history by major campaigns of persecution against gays and lesbians. Research by Gary Kinsman shows that Canada was not immune to witchhunts by law enforcement agencies, which considered homosexuality and homosexuals in the civil service to be a threat to national security. During the 1950s and 1960s many Canadian public service and military personnel were systematically purged from their positions.

Nonetheless, the 1950s and 1960s saw the rise of a particularly "gay" representational mode in the form of physique and bodybuilding magazines. Of note is the Montreal-born, gay photographer, Alan B. Stone (1928-1992). Under the pseudonym "Marc Deauville," Stone created a variety of "beefcake" images, including depictions of rugged sportsmen and fine studies of the male torso.

While photography and the development of video would eventually have important reverberations for later art movements, non-referential painting during the 1950s and 1960s reigned supreme. The terms of that practice, however, considered the inclusion of personal subject matter, such as homosexuality, anathema.

The reaction against non-representational painting mounted slowly and came to fruition in the late 1960s and 1970s. Formed in 1968 by A. A. Bronson (b. 1946), Felix Partz (1945-1994), and Jorge Zontal (1944-1994), the collective known as General Idea approached art from a conceptualist point of view, as

seen in their use of film, video, performance, and installation art. Their campy *Miss General Idea* project (1970-1978), which asked invited participants to vie for the pageant's title, questioned the nature of such popular cultural events.

Other artists, whose careers began in the 1970s, include the video artist Colin Campbell (b. 1942) and the photographer Evergon (b. 1946), whose work deals with issues of sexuality as well as of social and cultural identity.

The late 1970s and early 1980s witnessed a flourishing of multimedia artists who focused on issues of homosexuality, including Paul Wong (b. 1954), Richard Fung (b. 1954), Mike Hoolboom (b. 1958), and John Greyson (b. 1960). Both the painter Pierre Dorion (b. 1959) and the installation artist Micah Lexier (b. 1960) also deserve recognition in this context.

As the 1980s wore on, and as the full impact of the AIDS crisis was felt in the arts community, many artists throughout Canada confronted the subject directly. General Idea, for example, may be known best for their *AIDS Project* (1987-1991), a critical response to society's apathy toward the disease.

Other artists to approach and politicize issues related to AIDS are Andy Fabo (b. 1953) and Stephan Andrews (b. 1956). Further, a number of art institutions in Canada have participated in the AIDS awareness project, "Day Without Art."

Not all gay artists who matured in the 1980s focused on AIDS, however. The painter Attila Richard Lukacs (b. 1962) and the videographer Bruce LaBruce (b. 1964) are the most notable exceptions. Their often-controversial work forms a substantial attack against the conservative mores held by many members of the gay male community. In their depictions of skinheads, for example, they present unconventional and sometimes disturbing images of same-sex desire.

The 1970s and 1980s were crucial for lesbian artists in Canada, as well. Whether individually or as a group, the Vancouver collective, Kiss & Tell, consisting of Persimmon Blackbridge (b. 1951), Susan Stewart (b. 1952), and Lizard Jones (b. 1961), produced photo-based and multimedia performance art that questioned the nature of lesbian representation.

Other lesbian artists to work with photography include Cyndra MacDowall (b. 1953), Nina Levitt (b. 1955), and Shonagh Adelman (b. 1961). A fifteen-year collaborative enterprise (formed in 1981) between Martha Fleming (b. 1958) and Lyne Lapointe (b. 1957), actualized many site-specific installations, revolving around notions of memory and architecture.

Although Canada may have progressive laws regarding sexual orientation, many gay and lesbian establishments in major urban centers have nevertheless been subject to police harassment. Seizures of art and books alleged to be pornographic--often simply because of their gay or lesbian content--by Canada Customs has also been used as a means to harass the gay and lesbian community.

In addition, the reception of gay and lesbian art has sometimes been impeded by an exceptionally conservative art community. The work of such artists as Paul Wong, Evergon, and Marc Paradis has sometimes been censored or greeted with derision as a result of its same-sex eroticism. In an unfortunate case, the painter Eli Langer was even charged with creating obscene materials, though the case against him was eventually dropped.

Still, the possibility of controversy has not prevented galleries, including artist-run centers such as A Space and Mercer Union in Toronto, from displaying art dealing with gay or lesbian subject matter. Also located in Toronto is the O'Connor Gallery, established in 1995, which hosts an exclusively gay and lesbian roster of lesser-known artists.

Finally, a number of exhibitions devoted exclusively to gay or lesbian themes have been held across Canada, including *Sight Specific: Lesbians and Representation* (A Space, Toronto, 1988), *Homogenius* (Mercer Union, Toronto, 1989), *100 Years of Homosexuality* (The Photographers Gallery, Saskatoon, 1992), and *Queer Looking, Queer Acting* (Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery, Halifax, 1997).

Bibliography

Boyanoski, Christine. *Loring and Wyle: Sculptors' Legacy*. Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1987.

Buchanan, Donald. *James Wilson Morrice*. Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1936.

Fleming, Martha. *Studiolo: The Collaborative Work of Martha Fleming & Lyne Lapointe*. Montreal and Windsor: Artexpte Editions and Art Gallery of Windsor, 1992.

General Idea. *Fin de siècle*. Toronto: Power Plant Gallery, 1992.

Gonick, Noam. *Ride, Queer, Ride! Bruce La Bruce*. Winnipeg: Plug-In Gallery, n. d.

Hanna, Martha. *Evergon 1971-1987*. Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 1988.

Johnson, Lorraine, ed. *Suggestive Poses: Artists and Critics Respond to Censorship*. Toronto: Toronto Photographers Workshop and Riverbank Press, 1997.

Kinsman, Gary. *The Regulation of Desire: Sexuality in Canada*. Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1987.

Klusacek, Allan, and Ken Morrison, eds. *A Leap in the Dark: AIDS, Art & Contemporary Cultures*. Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1992.

Lee, Robert. "AIDS, Art and Activism in Canada: Contextualizing the Work of Steven Andrews and Andy Fabo." M.A. thesis, Concordia University, 1995.

Leiss McKellar, Elisabeth. "Out of Order: Florence Carlyle and the Challenge of Identity." M.A. thesis, University of Western Ontario, 1995.

Metcalfe, Robin. *Queer Looking, Queer Acting*. Halifax: Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery, 1997.

Miller, James. *Fluid Exchanges: Artists and Critics in the AIDS Crisis*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992.

Reid, Dennis. *A Concise History of Canadian Painting*. 2nd ed. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Reinke, Steve, and Tom Taylor, eds. *Lux: A Decade of Artists' Film and Video*. Toronto: YYZ Books/Pleasure Dome, 2000.

Townsend, Doug, curator. *100 Years of Homosexuality*. Saskatoon: The Photographers Gallery, 1992.

About the Author

Eugenio Filice is a doctoral student in art history at McGill University. He is currently preparing a dissertation on representation of gay men in contemporary Canadian art, and on the revival of figurative painting that occurred during late 1970s and 1980s.