



Paul Cadmus's controversial painting, *The Fleet's In!* (1933). Courtesy Naval Historical Foundation.

## Censorship in the Arts

by Craig Kaczorowski

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Since recorded history, governments, religious authorities, and self-appointed arbiters of morality have attempted to regulate what individuals think and believe, read and write, see and depict. Sexuality of all kinds has been a prime subject of regulation and censorship, and homosexuality, the "crime not to be named among Christians" and "the Love that dare not speak its name," has been particularly so.

### Censorship and Its Consequences

The history of censorship in the arts includes such incidents as the placing of fig-leaves over the genitalia of Renaissance masterpieces, the confiscation by governmental agencies of art works such as the homoerotic paintings of D. H. Lawrence, the destruction of "degenerate art" by the Nazis in Hitler-era Germany, the banning of books such as Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) in England and Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* (1956) in the United States, and the denial of public funds to "promote homosexuality" or public space to exhibit sympathetic depictions of gay male and lesbian art and theater.

It includes both the criminalization of particular sexual images and the introduction of informal codes of censorship, such as the Motion Picture Production Code that restricted positive depictions of homosexuality by Hollywood from the 1930s through the 1960s.

Until 1958, when the United States Supreme Court ruled that the homophile magazine *One* was not "obscene, lewd, lascivious and filthy" simply because it discussed homosexuality, the distribution of work with homosexual content, even when it was not sexually explicit, was dangerous, even in the Western democracies.

Photographic images of nude men and women, whether or not they were engaged in erotic activities, were routinely confiscated and destroyed, and the creators and distributors often prosecuted.

Perhaps even more invidious than the official censorship enforced by governments is the self-censorship performed by gay and lesbian writers and artists themselves as a consequence of a pervasive climate of censorship and homophobia.

Realizing the danger of open homosexual expression, many gay and lesbian artists have in effect placed their artistic imaginations in the closet. They have sometimes destroyed their "private" art out of well-justified fear, and they have frequently made decisions to avoid homosexual subject matter in their art.

Many gay and lesbian artists who have defied the legal and social prohibitions against explicit depictions of sexuality have seen their art censored or suppressed, especially if it deals sympathetically with homosexuality or conveys positive images of glbtq people and culture.

Although censorship is by no means a thing of the past, in general the climate of censorship has alleviated since the 1960s. Consequently, there is a great deal of difference between the level of explicitness in gay

and lesbian art work created before the lessening of censorship as a consequence of the (hetero)sexual revolution of the 1960s and art that was created afterwards.

Pre-Stonewall art (work produced prior to the 1969 Stonewall uprising that inaugurated the more militant phase of the gay rights movement) dealing with homosexual subject matter is typically covert or indirect. Artists were forced to adopt strategies of concealment in order to avoid controversy or possibly even imprisonment. The meaning of their work is often discernible only through a decoding of signs and signals, or by reading the art in terms of the artists' biographies.

Conversely, an overt, even confrontational stance is much more common for post-Stonewall gay and lesbian artists. The imagery they employ is more often explicit and unguarded. They are increasingly likely to create openly homosexual work, just as they increasingly are able to conduct their lives openly.

In many parts of the world, censorship continues to be a major impediment to gay and lesbian artistic expression. In the United States and the Western democracies, however, efforts at censorship have become somewhat more subtle, often centering on questions of the public support for art and on the protection of the innocence of children rather than involving outright bans against the creation or distribution of gay or lesbian art.

It is important to note that sometimes censorship obtains the desired effect: the art is destroyed and the artist is reduced to silence or his or her vision is inhibited. But in other instances censorship backfires, causing an image to attract wider attention than it would ever have attained had it been ignored. Thus, sometimes attempts at censorship only encourage additional subversive art.

### **Pre-Stonewall Censorship in the Arts**

There are some striking examples of the suppression and censorship of pre-Stonewall artists' work with homoerotic content. One involves the painter Charles Demuth (1883-1935), who is perhaps best known for his landscapes of industrial America, featuring bridges, grain silos, factories, and so on. These landscapes earned him a reputation as an important artist.

However, early in his career, Demuth painted a series of watercolors of sailors with their genitals uncovered. He was unable to exhibit these works. He also painted flowers, fruits, and vegetables in a way that suggests human sexuality without directly portraying it. In 1950 officials of New York's Museum of Modern Art excluded the still life *A Distinguished Air* from a major Demuth retrospective because they considered its sexual theme too controversial.

The work of gay photographer Minor White (1908-1976) is also marked by a similar indirectness. In his work, rocks and cracks in stones often substitute for parts of human bodies. White learned to be cautious with his imagery early in his career when an exhibition of his work was canceled in San Francisco on the grounds of "public taste."

One of the most famous incidents of suppression of pre-Stonewall art due to breaches of public morality and taste was the case of Paul Cadmus and his painting *The Fleet's In!* In 1933, Cadmus was hired by the PWAP (the Public Works Art Program, a forerunner to the better-known WPA projects) to produce paintings that dealt with American themes. Cadmus produced *The Fleet's In!*, a painting that depicts drunken sailors on shore leave carousing in New York's Riverside Park with a group of women--some of whom may be men in drag--and at least one flamboyantly effeminate man.

When *The Fleet's In!* appeared in 1934 in an exhibition of federally financed work at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., naval officials were outraged, and the painting was immediately pulled from the show. Cadmus expressed surprise at the response, and disavowed any scandalous intent; but the painting was not returned to public view until 1981.

Once out of sight, however, *The Fleet's In!* became sensationally visible. It was reproduced in newspapers and magazines across the country. Consequently, Cadmus became an art star who got considerable mileage out of inviting and evading questions about the homoerotic tenor of his work.

Five years later, in 1939, Cadmus was hesitantly commissioned, under the auspices of the Treasury Section of Fine Arts, to execute a mural for the Parcel Post Building in Richmond, Virginia. His subject--*Pocahontas Saving the Life of Captain John Smith*--seemed relatively safe. However, when design of the mural was publicly exhibited at Vassar College, controversy erupted.

The fact that one of Pocahontas's breasts was fully exposed met with little concern or unease, but a male warrior's bared buttocks in the center of the mural provoked an outcry of protest, as did the rendering of another warrior with an animal pelt dangling between his legs. Given the way Cadmus had positioned the fox skin, it bore a remarkable resemblance to male genitalia. Government officials ordered Cadmus to paint out the fox's snout, which resembled a penis.

In 1964, Andy Warhol (1928-1987) was commissioned to create a piece for the facade of the New York State pavilion at the World's Fair in Flushing Meadow, New York. The work, *Thirteen Most Wanted Men*, was a mural-size composite of enlarged police mug shots, mainly of young and handsome accused felons. Almost immediately after the work was installed on the pavilion, however, World's Fair officials had the piece painted over and destroyed.

Fair officials said that Warhol had been disappointed with his work and wanted to replace it. Others said that Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller had found the mug shots not in keeping with the fair's "Olympics of Progress" theme. What no one dared mention, including the artist, was the implicit homoeroticism of the work.

By whom were these thirteen handsome men really "most wanted"? On one level, it could be surmised, they were wanted by Warhol himself, whose homosexuality was widely presumed, but who chose not to acknowledge it overtly while he was shaping his art career.

### **Post-Stonewall Censorship in the Arts**

In direct opposition to such pre-Stonewall artists as White, Cadmus, and others, the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe (1946-1989) built a reputation on the explicitly gay content of his work, which came under aggressive political attack during the late 1980s and early 1990s, when it became a rallying cry in the era's "culture wars."

But here, as with Cadmus, censorship brought its own recognition and rewards. When the Corcoran Gallery (the same gallery that had come under attack in 1934 for the Cadmus painting) abruptly canceled a Mapplethorpe show in 1989, the story was widely reported in the media as a scandal, and the artist became a household name.

Mapplethorpe had his first gallery show in 1976; his association with many well-connected art world personalities accelerated his successful career as a "bad boy" in the art world. He quickly became known for his photographs in three classic genres: still lifes, celebrity portraits, and male and female nudes.

A strong current of sexuality runs through much of Mapplethorpe's work (including his still lifes of flowers often anthropomorphized into figures teeming with erotic power), but mortality, the fragility of beauty, and even innocence are also recurring motifs throughout his work.

In early 1989, a retrospective of Mapplethorpe's work was organized by the University of Pennsylvania's Institute of Contemporary Art, which had received \$30,000 for the show from the National Endowment for

the Arts (NEA). The retrospective, *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment*, included 150 of Mapplethorpe's images: formal portraiture, flowers, children, and carefully posed, sexually explicit, erotic scenes, some of which were sadomasochistic. The exhibit was scheduled to tour seven cities throughout the United States.

As the show traveled, there were widely disparate responses to the same material. For example, in Philadelphia and Chicago, early in the tour, the show went largely unremarked and generally received positive reviews. In Chicago, the show attracted record-breaking crowds at the city's Museum of Contemporary Art.

By the summer of 1989, however, with the show heading to the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., outrage over Mapplethorpe's work and the use of federal money to fund the exhibit grew to a fever pitch. Although most of the controversy focused on the gay sexual content of several of the photographs, many conservative leaders and critics also purported to find Mapplethorpe's portraits of Black men racist and branded the nude studies of young children (both male and female) child pornography.

The outrage over Mapplethorpe's work was fueled mainly by such conservative politicians as Jesse Helms, Dick Armey, and Alfonse D'Amato. Conservative cultural critic Richard Grenier, writing in the *Washington Times*, labeled Mapplethorpe "the great catamite" and fantasized about dousing the body of the photographer with kerosene and burning it.

But it was columnist Patrick Buchanan who launched the most sustained attack, through a series of virulent syndicated newspaper columns. Declaring a cultural war, Buchanan detected a struggle for the soul of America in the battle over the arts.

Ultimately, a letter signed by over 100 congressmen was sent to the chair of the NEA denouncing the use of federal money to fund the Mapplethorpe exhibit (as well as other federally-funded and so-called "obscene" work, such as Andres Serrano's photograph *Piss Christ*, which depicts a crucifix submerged in a vat of the artist's own urine; it is important to note, however, that Serrano is not gay and his photograph was denounced for religious, rather than sexual, reasons).

The letter threatened to seek cuts in the agency's \$170,000,000 budget that was up for approval, and demanded that the NEA end its sponsorship of "morally reprehensible trash," and provide new grant guidelines that would "clearly pay respect to public standards of taste and decency."

Amid these attacks on the NEA, the director of the Corcoran Gallery announced that it would be unwise for the gallery to go forward with its commitment to host the Mapplethorpe retrospective. The Corcoran's director felt that the appearance of such controversial images could jeopardize the future of the NEA. The Corcoran itself was also vulnerable since it has no endowment of its own and is dependent on federal funds for a significant portion of its yearly budget.

The artistic community, both gay and straight, reacted with outrage. Three days after the cancellation was announced, up to one hundred protesters demonstrated outside the gallery. Later that week, close to one thousand demonstrators viewed slides of Mapplethorpe's work projected on the facade of the Corcoran. Students at Corcoran's school of art demonstrated several times. Several artists also boycotted the gallery, withdrawing from scheduled group and solo shows.

The Mapplethorpe retrospective continued to generate heated debate, and legal action, when it moved to Cincinnati's Contemporary Art Center. Within days of the exhibition's opening, the Center and its director were indicted on charges of pandering, obscenity, and the illegal use of a child in nudity-related material.

The arrest and subsequent trial were a first in the history of American art museums. The director of the Center faced up to one year in jail and a fine of \$2,000, and the Center itself could have been fined

\$10,000. Several months of legal wrangling followed, during which time the exhibit was allowed to remain open. The Center and its director were ultimately acquitted of all charges, but only after a humiliating spectacle.

The NEA was again under attack in 1990 when, after sustained politicking from conservatives in Congress and the media, the government agency revoked federal grants that had been awarded to four performance artists--Karen Finley, John Fleck, Holly Hughes, and Tim Miller. Their individual work involved the body and sexuality, and often included strong language and nudity. All but Karen Finley were gay.

The NEA Four, as they came to be known, protested this suppression of their art, as well as a new "decency clause" enacted by Congress that grantees were required to sign, pledging that their work would not contain, among other subject matter, "homoerotic content," which was labeled as "obscene."

Lawyers from the Center for Constitutional Rights argued the case of the four, who sued the NEA and challenged the constitutionality of the decency clause. They won their case in 1993. However, the Clinton administration appealed the decision, wishing to let the decency clause stand, and moved the case to the Supreme Court where, in 1998, the NEA Four lost to the government.

The widely publicized cancellation of the Mapplethorpe exhibition and the revocation of grants to the NEA Four are only the best known recent instances of censorship in the arts. A more comprehensive account would mention the mid-1980s confiscation of gay and lesbian art, including the work of photographer Tee Corinne and the lesbian magazine *Bad Attitude*, by Canadian Customs agents; the 1992 conviction of the owner and manager of Glad Day Bookshop (Toronto) for the possession and sale of "obscenity"; the closing of exhibits of artists such as Patrick Angus and David Wojnarowicz; and numerous other attempts to silence the voices and cloak the images of gay men and lesbians, often in the guise of protecting children and public morality.

Luckily, however, these attempts often succeed only in generating more interest in the very images the censors would like to destroy.

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**Craig Kaczorowski** writes extensively on media, culture, and the arts. He holds an M.A. in English Language and Literature, with a focus on contemporary critical theory, from the University of Chicago. He comments on national media trends for two newspaper industry magazines.