



Day, F. Holland (1864-1933)

by Jason Goldman

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An American intellectual, publisher, and aesthete, Fred Holland Day belonged to a small, international group of early gay photographers of the male nude.

While Day's oeuvre is reasonably diverse, he is perhaps best known for two specific types of photograph, both of which center around the male body: pseudo-religious images, in which he and his male models reenact the suffering of Christ; and pictorial images, in which modernist visions of antiquity and pre-industrial cultures play out in nature.

These photographs locate Day's work both within important turn-of-the-century intellectual movements and within the kindling of a photographic homoeroticism. In addition to their poetic composition and exquisite technical execution, Day's photographs are notable for how their erotic male subjects relate to *fin de siècle* cultural interests, Day's homosexuality, and the then-burgeoning medium of photography.

Day was born on July 23, 1864, the son of a wealthy Massachusetts merchant, and enjoyed a life of privilege. He was schooled privately, was well established in aristocratic, intellectual, and Decadent circles, and traveled abroad extensively.

Day's fortune allowed him to pursue a number of endeavors, including the obsessive collection of ephemera relating to his idol, the poet John Keats, and the founding of a Boston publishing house, which, under Day's direction, published the works of other early gay figureheads Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley.

While Day's first amateur picture may have been made as early as 1885, the first works to suggest his artistic proficiency in the medium do not appear before 1895. His commitment to the advancement of photography as a fine art and his enduring interest in form and composition allowed Day to excel as one of the great early American photographers. His signature soft focus and keen attention to light and shadow suggest a modernist approach and give his pictures a rich, dreamy texture, which gained the attention of his preeminent colleague Alfred Stieglitz.

Day belonged to the pictorial generation of photographers. In the midst of increasing industrialization, the proliferation of science, and turn-of-the-century morality, the pictorial photographers were interested in turning back to the pure beauty of nature and romanticized the simplicity of antiquity and what they perceived to be "less-civilized"--that is, non-white--cultures.

Ironically, until the pictorial photographers pushed for the medium's acceptance as an art form, the photograph was largely considered a novelty or a scientific tool of the very machine age they sought to deny. Through their ethnographic portraits of "primitive" peoples and their "pagan" depiction of the adolescent nude in nature, the pictorial photographers sought to capture a world that was aesthetically and



Two photographs by F. Holland Day.

Top: One of many erotically charged photographs of the Crucifixion of Christ.

Above: A portrait of Khalil Gibran.

Image of the crucifixion courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

materially antithetical, but of great interest to the white urban bourgeoisie.

While homoeroticism was not a defining aspect of the pictorial tradition per se, the glorification of the young male body was particularly compatible with heady visions of pastoral life and dramatic throwbacks to an imagined, supple antiquity.

Similarly, Day's ethnographic portraits, such as *An Ethiopian Chief* or *Ebony and Ivory* (both 1897), in which he posed his Black chauffeur in skimpy, pseudo-African costume, expressed both Day's interest in the male body and a mainstream discourse of colonial exoticism.

A related dynamic is at work in Day's series of 250 photographs of himself portraying *The Passions of Christ* (ca 1898). The pictures in this series were hardly conceived as devotional emblems of faith; to the contrary, Day's images of a writhing, near-nude Christ, some of which actually depict the artist on the cross, and his equally suggestive St. Sebastian pictures of 1906, advance a wry, subversive homoeroticism with allusions to sadomasochism.

For Day and the members of his circle, the pictures were also a Decadent approach to the concept of suffering and a daring, sublime take on the Christ-figure. Nonetheless, the depiction of the sacred, much like the depiction of the classical, allowed the pictures to register also within mainstream bounds of acceptability.

At the same time, Day's Christian subject matter helped to promote photography as a fine art; his sacred images were praised as the photographic versions of great religious paintings, some works even being lent to an exhibition at a Boston church around 1900.

Accordingly, Day and other gay photographers working within these idioms, such as Baron Wilhelm von Gloeden, whose pictures Day published, produced homoerotic images in a complex social niche.

Their pictures of the exposed male body--be they in the context of Arcadian allegory or ethnic window-shopping--spoke mutually to different, but oddly compatible fantasies: homoerotic desire, spiritual abandon, and cultural otherness. Moreover, their potential for scandal placed them at the center of Victorian consciousness, which at once careened away from and thrived upon the existence of the profane.

Thus, while the impetus behind Day's work was largely homoerotic, it is impossible neatly to divorce or totally reconcile the artist's sexuality with the intellectual, cultural, and moral attitudes that characterize the *fin de siècle*.

In 1912, Day built a large house, which he called "The Chateau," on Little Good Harbor, Five Islands, Maine. Day conceived of Little Good Harbor as his own Arcadia, where he made many images of nude youths lounging amidst its picturesque landscape. Along with a cadre of other photographers, Day--white, affluent, educated, and well-connected--hosted there a number of impoverished boys, many of them immigrant workers from the urban slums of Boston. In addition to being Day's guests and enjoying a kind of summer camp, these boys modeled for Day's pagan compositions.

While Day is known to have taken philanthropic pride in mentoring many of the boys, training them in the craft of photography and preening them for social mobility, it is equally conceivable that his interest in poor immigrant boys and boys of color had to do with their social docility as well as their "exotic" beauty.

The conditions of his production are thus not without implications for the slanted power dynamics that often characterize erotic image-making and are further testimony to how the political climate of Day's time is manifest in his work.

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