



## Demuth, Charles (1883-1935)

by Mark Allen Svede

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One of America's first modernist painters, Charles Demuth was also one of the earliest artists in this country to expose his gay identity through forthright, positive depictions of homosexual desire. Demuth, the son of a successful merchant, had the financial freedom to pursue his artistic vision without debilitating regard for public opinion--concerning either aesthetics or sexuality--while his talent ensured that even the most provocative works were of unassailable quality.

Demuth was born on November 8, 1883 in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. From an early age, he suffered from frail health. He graduated from Franklin and Marshall Academy and studied painting at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, where the realist tradition of former faculty member Thomas Eakins (himself a painter of major works of homoerotic content) prevailed.

Accordingly, Demuth began working in a realistic manner, but his early admiration for the Aestheticism of Aubrey Beardsley and Oscar Wilde predisposed him to a certain expressive stylization (not to mention liberal attitudes about sexual identity).

Demuth was exposed to Cubism and other pictorial innovations during a 1907 trip to Paris, lessons that were reinforced by subsequent visits to Alfred Steiglitz's New York City gallery, "291," a beachhead of modernism. In that context, Auguste Rodin's erotic figure studies and John Marin's expressionistic watercolors were particularly inspiring, and by 1912 Demuth's own work began to exhibit modernist characteristics.

In 1912, he commenced a relationship with fellow Lancasterian, Robert Locher, who was to be his life partner.

A second trip to Paris, also in 1912, occasioned his lifelong friendship with Marsden Hartley, a gay painter slightly his senior, who introduced Demuth to expatriate American intellectuals and artists, among them Gertrude Stein, as well as gay European colleagues. Hartley also served as a stylistic mentor when Demuth began exploring abstraction later in the decade.

After returning to the United States in 1914, Demuth felt fully at home in New York's Greenwich Village bohemia and the summer artist colony of Provincetown, Massachusetts. When in the city, he attended salon gatherings in which Freudian psychoanalytic theories of sexuality were avidly debated, and he frequented Harlem nightclubs where prevailing racial and sexual boundaries were transgressed, often accompanied by his friend Marcel Duchamp, a Dadaist whose own artistic persona confused binary gender roles. In Provincetown, Demuth associated with leftist writers and artists committed to sexual liberation.

Little surprise, then, that his artwork began showing evidence of these unfettered environments. A watercolor series titled *Turkish Bath* (1916-1918), inspired by Manhattan's Lafayette Baths, insinuated the possibility of homosexual contact, the men's virile, mostly nude bodies suggestively arranged together



Two watercolors by Charles Demuth:  
**Top:** *Turkish Bath with Self-Portrait* (1918).  
**Above:** *Aucassin and Nicolette* (1921).

amidst phallic plumbing fixtures.

Moreover, one work from the series underscored Demuth's personal stake in such matters, showing himself naked and posed ambiguously before another bathhouse patron. Other series, such as those devoted to vaudeville and the circus (1917-1919), contained symbolic references to gay sexuality, while a work such as *Dancing Sailors* (1918) clearly shows latent erotic desire between men, even as they dance with women.

Demuth is best known for his many Precisionist paintings of the 1920s, works inspired by Cézanne's landscapes, Constructivist compositions and--closer to home--Hartley's abstractions, but his more significant historical contribution may be the audacious manner in which he responded to the homophobia that greeted his work *Distinguished Air* (1930).

Loosely interpreting Robert McAlmon's story of the same title, a story set in a Berlin "queer café," Demuth portrayed a situation at an exhibition opening, in which a male couple admires Constantin Brancusi's notoriously priapic sculpture, *Princess X*, while an ostensibly straight male gallery-goer admires the crotch of one of the gay men.

When several exhibitions refused to include *Distinguished Air*, Demuth responded by creating overtly homoerotic watercolors of sailors disrobing, fondling themselves, and even urinating in each other's company.

These works were executed during a two-year period near the end of his life, when a lifelong illness forced Demuth to leave his cosmopolitan surroundings and return to his conservative, small-town Pennsylvania birthplace. These works constitute a display of courage and self-respect that would not soon be repeated by other gay artists.

Demuth died on October 23, 1935 of complications from diabetes. He bequeathed his watercolors to Locher and his paintings to fellow artist and friend Georgia O'Keeffe.

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## **About the Author**

**Mark Svede** is a historian and curator whose work often addresses marginalized artists and communities. He publishes extensively about Latvian visual culture, ranging from nonconformist art and underground film to hippie fashion and dissident architecture. He also works as a residential architect.