



Dutch Friendship Glasses

by Gert Hekma

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During the eighteenth century prosecutions for sodomy were common in the Dutch Republic. About 200 men were executed for engaging in anal sex during the century and many more were sentenced to prison or exile.

During the period, clergymen published books condemning sodomy from a religious point of view, while broadsheets announced the names and penalties of the prosecuted men. The executions themselves were public spectacles, at which poems and other publications were sold to the public. These publications were sometimes illustrated, providing important representations of the era's condemnatory attitudes toward same-sex sexuality.

There are, however, some positive representations of same-sex sexuality in the art of the eighteenth century, which sometimes depicts homoerotic themes, especially based in classical allusion and subjects. In addition, there are "friendship glasses."

In the eighteenth century, engraved glasses were made on order for all kinds of festive occasions. They often featured both a text and an image. The glasses devoted to friendship frequently have engravings of words such as "vriendschap," "amitié," and "amicitia" (friendship in Dutch, French, and Latin) and images of David and Jonathan or two persons (of either the same or opposite gender) holding hands or facing each other.

The glasses were used to celebrate friendship. Friends often drank from them together, as with communion chalices in church. While the idea of friendship was very much in vogue in the eighteenth century as a philosophical and literary topic, it also served as a code word for same-sex love, and many of these friendship glasses may have covertly celebrated same-sex sexual desire.

In addition to the glasses celebrating idealistic friendship, there were also obscene glasses that show such images as a cock and hen copulating or a bird in a cage with an open door, referring to the loss of virginity. These bawdy glasses were probably used by groups of friends who were members of drinking clubs or who frequented brothels together.

One surviving glass from around 1750 combines the obscene and friendship traditions. It shows two cocks copulating, while the text reads "DE SOTE VRIENDSCHAP."

The word "sote" can be best explained as a mixture of "soete" (sweet), which is often used in combination with "minne" (love), and "sotte" (foolish). The word also appears in French, as "sottise," which had connotations of same-sex love. The illustration of the two cocks supports this interpretation of the word as a reference to same-sex sexuality. A literal translation of the text would be "Of Sweet, Foolish Friendship." An ahistorical translation would be, more simply, "Queer Friendship."



Top: A Dutch friendship glass.
Above: Detail showing the inscription "DE SOTE VRIENDSCHAP" ("Of Sweet, Foolish Friendship") above two copulating cocks. Photographs courtesy Gert Hekma.

It seems likely that the glass celebrates the sweet, foolish friendship of two sodomites. The glass is, thus, a rare positive expression of same-sex sexual desire at a time when such sentiments were dangerous to voice. Celebrating sodomitical pleasure, it is a daring and subversive, rather than respectable, work of art. Moreover, given the context of persecution in which it was created, it is both defiant and moving.

This particular glass--and there may well be many others that have not survived or come to light--witnesses that even under adverse circumstances tender, foolish friendships could be practiced and celebrated. The glass shows the resilience of "sote" men.

Bibliography

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About the Author

Gert Hekma teaches gay and lesbian studies in the department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam. He is editor of several books on gay history and sociology, including (with Kent Gerard) *The Pursuit of Sodomy*, (with Harry Oosterhuis and James D. Steakley) *Gay Men and the Sexual History of the Political Left*, and (with Franz X. Eder and Lesley Hall) *Sexual Cultures in Europe*. In the spring of 2004 his book on Dutch gay male history, *M/M*, will be published.