



Erotic and Pornographic Art: Gay Male

by Jason Goldman

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Given the historic stigma around making, circulating, and possessing overtly homoerotic images, the visual arts have been especially important for providing a socially sanctioned arena for the depiction of the naked male body. They have even allowed the suggestion of homoerotic desire and physical affection within acceptable cultural and moral boundaries. Even so, much of the history of homoerotic image-making may be characterized by calculated ambiguity, coding, denial, and underground circulation.

Although recent controversies and attempts at censorship may seem to suggest that the visual depiction of homoeroticism is a new phenomenon, the existence of numerous pre-modern artworks (prior to *ca* 1700) that address homosexuality, either in the affirmative, as erotic records of homosexual delight and existence, or in the negative, as rhetorical blights against the love that dare not speak its name, suggests a long, complex, and variable relationship between homosexuality and the arts.

The Impact of Modernity on Visual Expressions of Homosexuality

As modernity brought colossal changes to the ways in which sexuality, and homosexuality in particular, is understood and experienced, so too did it severely impact visual expressions of homoeroticism. Although sex between men had been generally vilified and punished for centuries, the decades between 1890 and 1960 both found renewed disdain for homosexuality and witnessed the proliferation of coherent gay cultures, mindful of both gay pleasures and their policing by the larger society. The visual expressions of these cultures were either kept from the mainstream or engineered to circumvent its suspicions.

The broad, ideological shift away from sexual subterfuge and toward erotic openness, epitomized by the Stonewall riots of 1969 but underway well before and still in progress today, can be charted in the increasing sexual explicitness of homoerotic images as well as in advancements in their mass distribution.

Whereas the visual arts long served as a solitary, if inadequate and somewhat inaccessible source of homoerotic imagery up until the mid-twentieth century, the increasing availability and commercialization of gay pornography in recent decades have made it the main cultural fount of explicit homoerotic pictures. Although the same may be said about the proliferation of heterosexual pornography, gay pornography plays a much more complex cultural role, given the stigma attached to homoerotic imagery of any sort.

Although contemporary gay artists have by no means abandoned eroticism altogether, many contemporary homoerotic artworks tend to comment on or complicate--rather than merely serve up--depictions of sex between men. By calling into question previously unchallenged constructions of race, desire, gender, and sexual identity, and by challenging conventional distinctions between "art," "erotica," and "porn," many



Top to bottom:
1) An ancient Greek vessel decorated with a painting of dancing youths.
2) *Figure d'Etude* (*ca* 1835) by Hippolyte Flandrin.
3) *The Swimming Hole* (1893-1895) by Thomas Eakins.
4) A photograph of two nude youths (*ca* 1905) by Wilhelm von Gloeden.

contemporary queer artists articulate the postmodern pleasures of revision and subversion.

Reclaiming Homoerotic Art

Michelangelo's sculpture *David* (1501-1504) and Hippolyte Flandrin's *Figure d'Etude* (ca 1835) are two prominent examples of artworks that present a complex issue in the study of homoerotic art: the reclaiming of artworks and artists from a presumed heterosexual context or existence.

Each work depicts a solitary male figure, naked, muscular, and youthful. *David* stands in a strong but elegant contraposto pose, completely revealing his muscled body to the viewer, while the boy in Flandrin's picture sits, tucking his head between his folded legs and concealing his genitals from view.

Although both images are sensual, there is no concrete visual information contained in either artwork to suggest that either figure, the biblical hero *David* awaiting his enemy Goliath, or the boy posing in the artifice of the studio, is inclined specifically to or on display expressly for the erotic gratification of other men.

Yet, both of these artworks resonate throughout contemporary gay culture as icons of homoerotic desire--the monumental *David* has been often kitschified as a lofty ideal while the crouching pose of Flandrin's boy has been adapted by several gay artists and is reincarnated in countless gay-themed commercial images.

As these artworks and others like them began to be reproduced and widely published in the early 1900s, they became ideal masturbatory fodder for gay men during a time when illicit gay erotica was not readily available and risky to own or produce. That is, in addition to being visually stimulating, pictures of artworks like these also came with a ready alibi: the cultural auspices of high art could veil lustful interests with aesthetic ones.

Given the active erasure of homosexuality from popular historical awareness, contemporary queer art history can be characterized in part by an impulse to uncover, or reclaim, homosexual artworks and artists (among the latter, Michelangelo). The project of literally "looking for" gay bodies, gay stories, and gay sex in the art of bygone cultures is central to repairing a visual history in which homosexuality has been largely scrubbed away.

While it is important to unearth these artists and artworks from a presumed or enforced heterosexual context, and although it is clear that many early-modern works are related to contemporary queer artworks and can themselves carry erotic significance in contemporary gay culture, it is also important to be mindful that they hail from times and societies very different from our own.

The visual depiction of homoeroticism exists at various points and in various cultures throughout history, but the cultural significance of that eroticism, the means by which it is communicated, and the social consequences of its depiction are vastly diverse. Scenes of men having sex and homoerotic narratives appear in the art of Ancient Greece, the Persian Empire, the Renaissance, and many places in between, long before the arrival of modern ideas about what it means to be gay. These early depictions of sexual experiences shared between men are essential records of homosexuality's longevity, but also of its social mutability.

The Greek Precedent

The homoerotic art of ancient Greece is central to the visual history of homosexuality in the West. As a culture whose upper class adult male citizens engaged in socially sanctioned pederastic relationships with younger boys, the ancient Greeks stand out as early makers of homoerotic artworks.

A number of surviving artifacts--mainly painted vessels--expound on the pleasures and rituals surrounding

the older mentor's seduction of his nubile young muse, while a number of sculptures reveal a broad cultural admiration of the athletic male body.

Homoeroticism is also a prominent theme in artworks about mythology: images of Bacchus, the wine god, and his bisexual trysts; the rape of young Ganymede by Jupiter; and the hedonistic orgies of male satyrs all depict same-sex lust with varying degrees of explicitness.

In addition to being among the earliest artworks to depict elaborate homosexual practices and relationships, these works are also important for how their narratives and formal values have inspired, and in many cases legitimized, subsequent homoerotic artworks.

During the Renaissance, classical themes were employed by many artists, but the classical idolization of the nude male and certain homoerotic fables from classical mythology were especially suited to the erotic tastes of the nascent homosexual (or, in the parlance of the day, sodomite) subcultures in cities such as Florence.

Centuries later, gay photographers and painters would similarly look to Greek culture for a romanticized example of tolerated homosexuality, and to Greek artistic traditions to rationalize their own homoerotic expressions.

Starting in the mid-nineteenth century, compositions of scenes from mythology, and more generalized renditions of men in wholesome Arcadian activities, including bathing, lounging in nature, or playing a sport, garnered cultural cachet with vague, nostalgic references to ancient ideals while also leaving room for homoerotic possibility.

For example, the work of the American realist painter Thomas Eakins (1844-1916) exhibits a strong, yet culturally acceptable interest in nude boys and virile male athletes. Eakins's *The Swimming Hole* (1893-1895) is a particularly good example of how the pseudo-Grecian pretext could be adapted to current artistic and social concerns (in this case, realism), but retain homoerotic appeal, allowing for two disparate narratives to be rendered in the same visual terms.

The painting depicts two men and four boys (plus the requisite dog) bathing in the great outdoors, reveling in their unashamed, supple nudity. The work simultaneously evokes forthright ideals of nature, democracy, cleanliness, and platonic camaraderie, as well as the homoerotic promise of a cadre of naked male subjects, one of whom represents the painter.

Other artists, such as the German photographer Baron Wilhelm von Gloeden (1856-1931), employed the Grecian pretext more literally, staging nude boy models in "classic" poses and with garlands or skimpy togas.

While allusions to ancient Greece in the homoerotic art of the *fin de siècle* by no means completely safeguarded it from the censorious morality of the mainstream, it is clear that Grecian themes provided for both considerable social allowance and homoerotic potential.

A similar double-edged effect was also achieved with religious subjects such as Christ and St. Sebastian.

Homoerotic Greek art is also important for how it documents a number of ideals for gay male beauty and desirability that persist to this day. For example, the unparalleled attractiveness of the smooth youth first rendered here has become a standard visual convention and telling psychological emblem in several subsequent generations of homoerotic art.

For the ancient Greeks, the centrality of the younger subject was in part a matter of social decorum: homosexual relationships between adult men were less acceptable. However, it is clear that this emphasis on youth is still entrenched in contemporary hierarchies of gay desire.

Similarly, as ideas and images of "Greek love" were adapted to modern homosexual sensibilities, so too were they co-opted by modern notions of race and history, which tend to classify the ancient Greeks as white but also think of them as culturally exotic; their civilized (that is, white) virtue coexists with traces of pagan indulgence.

Accordingly, visual allusions to Greek homoeroticism often simultaneously promote a myth about the paramount desirability of white bodies, but find "darker" pleasures in their pagan hedonism--a construct that reveals the anglocentric and racist underpinnings often at work in homoerotic art.

Veiling, Coding, Pretext, and Ambiguity

While the pictorial conventions and subjects of homoerotic Greek art have been widely adopted, its prolific, aboveboard existence in the first place constitutes a major exception in the history of homoerotic art. The usually deviant status of homosexuality has largely required that any affirmative depiction of it be carefully handled.

If art was to be made that expressed homoerotic interest in the male body, or worse, suggested sexual acts or sexual attraction between two or more male subjects, that art would either have to remain private, circulating only among gay men and their cohorts, or artists would have to employ several tactics to code their work, making its erotic content legible to other gay viewers but passable in the mainstream.

Much as people with deviant sexual interests have historically had to hide their erotic lives from the oppressive mainstream, so did artists have to employ strategies of veiling, coding, deliberate ambiguity, and false pretexts.

These tactics are especially prominent in the early decades of the twentieth century, as small European and American homosexual subcultures, which had been forming in urban centers in some capacity since the eighteenth century, continued to develop.

Public openness about homosexuality, to say nothing of making pictures of men engaged in homosexual activity, was cause for scandal or imprisonment. Nevertheless, the erotic possibilities facilitated by these emerging pockets of urban homosexuality became the topic of a handful of artists.

The works of American painters Charles Demuth (1883-1935) and Paul Cadmus (1904-1999) are particularly good examples.

Some of Demuth's works (such as *Three Sailors on the Beach*, 1930) show men having sex outright and were not exhibited publicly in the artist's lifetime, while others, such as those in his *Eight O'Clock* series (1917), can be read as either platonic pictures of urban homosocial domesticity or, for those who are able to read their erotic nuances, windows onto the lives of male lovers.

The coy title of Demuth's *Three Sailors Urinating* (1930) reveals the flimsy double narratives often at work in his pictures; *On "That" Street* (1932), whose title serves as a euphemism for a gay cruising area, depicts an outwardly innocent scene of a homosexual dandy in the midst of two boyish sailors.

Sailors and gaunt dandies--the latter characterized as the fashionable, swishy, and effeminate homosexual of these new gay ghettos--also appear in Paul Cadmus's early paintings. Although these works may outwardly seem to depict only drunken, debauched, straight sailors and wanton women, the subtle presence of the dandy at the margins of Cadmus's pictures indicates a submerged erotic narrative.

The dandy (or fairy), with his dapper suits and tell-all red tie, which was then a street symbol of homosexuality, subtly signifies for what audience the muscled sailors are really on display.

The use of insider knowledge in artworks such as these signals both an increasingly codified gay culture and continued vigilance at once to reveal and to hide its very existence. Accordingly, although illicit same-sex pornography had been made by the 1930s in small, risk-laden underground networks, erotic openness in emerging art, which was subject to scrutiny by patrons and the public, remained limited.

These tactics for simultaneously displaying and refuting homoeroticism would be epitomized--and eventually worn thin--by the physique magazines of the 1950s and 1960s, whose g-stringed beefcake models were supposedly on display for the wholesome appreciation of fitness enthusiasts or, not insignificantly, as anatomical references for figurative artists.

Over time, certain titles became more explicit, revealing their homoerotic motivations, while others continued to capitalize on the mystifying lingo of the "physique enthusiast" to veil (however thinly) their brawny eye candy.

Featuring both photographs and highly stylized drawings, the physique magazines conveyed an interest in what would soon become two distinct breeds of gay erotica: the photochemical media, which are thought to capture the raw authenticity of bodies and sexual acts, and handmade renderings, which can exaggerate and fetishize more freely.

Moreover, unlike painting or sculpture, which (reproductions notwithstanding) are relatively inaccessible media, photography and illustration are more conceptually geared toward the masses--fitting media for the newly emerging gay consumer who could purchase physique paraphernalia through the mail or at the newsstand.

Tom of Finland (Touko Laaksonen, 1920-1991), arguably the most widely celebrated maker of homoerotic art to date, would come to popularize the hand-drawn dirty picture. At first adhering to the softcore ambiguity of the physique genre, Tom of Finland later brought new "girth" to homoerotic explicitness with his raunchy pictures of impossibly muscled and colossally endowed subjects: domineering soldiers, randy sailors, mischievous cops, and leather-clad bikers. Gone are the heavy-handed allusions to bygone Greek ephebes, ambiguous sensuality, platonic friendship, or old-world tropes of any kind.

No matter how physically repropotioned, Tom's men reign from contemporary life and employ twentieth-century narratives, locating gay lust not in a hazy, imagined past, but in an accessible (if highly exaggerated) present.

While Tom of Finland may not uniformly represent the interests of gay artists of his time, his work is emblematic of a number of major shifts--from ambiguous to explicit, from historical allegory to contemporary narrative, from delicate youths to virile hunks, from high art to popular smut--that prefigure a new era of explicitness, capped by the rise of commercial gay pornography and its imminent detachment from gay artistic production.

Contemporary Issues

Starting in the 1970s, gay and lesbian civil rights groups began to make inroads against oppression and homophobia, pushing for visibility and working to lessen the stigma long associated with homosexuality and images of it.

Within the last decade, as a number of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered political groups have turned away from more radical politics to seek out the acceptance of the mainstream, the most tolerated images of homosexuality are those that adhere to heterosexual models for normative gender, monogamy, family, domesticity, and decency, and that downplay the carnal pleasures of their subjects.

But this mainstreaming of homosexuality does not account for the entire picture: "less palatable" homoerotic cultural products (including art, but also television shows, films, and the like) are still often held to higher levels of moral scrutiny than their heterosexual counterparts and encounter a disproportionate amount of censorship and backlash.

Even contemporary homoerotic artworks whose subjects or motivations are not overtly political can generate considerable political shockwaves when exhibited publicly--such is the case of Robert Mapplethorpe (1946-1986), whose explicit photographs of S/M scenes incited public outcry and fueled tremendous backlash from conservative legislators and religious leaders in the 1970s and 1980s.

Also beginning in the 1970s, gay commercial pornography began to proliferate, first in magazines and adult theaters and eventually into its present multimedia ubiquity, taking over much of the erotic functionality that homoerotic artworks had long quietly performed for those with access to them.

Although there may have always been an invisible audience for homoerotic images, a commercially lucrative demographic of gay men was identified in the 1970s and emerging technologies of mass distribution and shifting social mores made possible its targeting by an emerging porn industry. The allure of bona fide pornography easily surpassed the erotic table scraps that artworks had previously made available.

The seemingly endless supply and increasing accessibility of gay pornography has dramatically altered the landscape in which gay artists work. Indeed, in postmodern style, it is not uncommon for gay artists to create a dialogue with the gay pornography industry by employing its aesthetic vocabulary in their own work.

Much as AIDS deeply impacted the public and private erotic lives of gay men in a diversity of ways, it also wrought a number of changes in visual expressions of homoeroticism. In the midst of great suffering, loss, and mainstream complacency, many gay artists directed their work toward activism and the public while others focused on personal lamentations of friends and lovers.

Generally, the randy, sexually charged tone that characterized a good deal of homoerotic art in the decades before the 1980s was now greatly complicated by widely felt emotional turmoil around the consequences of sex between men. Loathe to accept that the emergence of AIDS meant the end of taking pleasure in male bodies or pictures of them, many artists adopted a meditative tone, trying to reconcile enthusiasm for gay sex with its new risks, necessary precautions, and various emotional entanglements.

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About the Author

Jason Goldman is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Art History at the University of Southern California. His academic interests include the history of photography, twentieth-century art, pornography, contemporary art, and contemporary visual culture.