



European Art: Nineteenth Century

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Examining homosexual content and individuals in European art of the nineteenth century is problematic. The contemporary terms *gay*, *lesbian*, and *bisexual* are anachronistic when applied too easily to earlier periods. Still, nineteenth-century European art is particularly important because during the nineteenth century the homosexual as an individual in the contemporary sense was first acknowledged and the seeds of modern gay consciousness may be discerned.

Some artists and art critics of the nineteenth century, such as Simeon Solomon and Oscar Wilde, among others, achieved a self-aware homosexual identity, which is expressed in both their lives and their works.

Lesbianism in nineteenth-century art, however, is only rarely depicted in terms of identity. More commonly, lesbians were depicted as sexual objects, with only a few artists such as Rosa Bonheur emerging as lesbians themselves.

European art of the nineteenth century encompasses a variety of movements and has been the subject of a great deal of scholarship, though only rarely does this scholarship emphasize gay issues.

Robert Rosenblum and H. W. Janson, for example, have written a superb overview of nineteenth-century European art, but their exclusion of artists such as Solomon can be seen as evidence of their reluctance to recognize gay contributions to art history.

Similarly, in his survey of modernism, Richard Brettel focuses in one chapter on gender and sexuality, but he discusses only briefly the development of a homosexual identity or its contribution to modern art. Conversely, the best overviews of gay art history, such as those by Emmanuel Cooper and James Saslow, tend to neglect nineteenth-century art.

Neoclassicism

Nineteenth-century art in Europe began with two movements that both originated in the latter half of the prior century: Neoclassicism and Romanticism. Encompassing literature and music as well as visual art, both movements were broadly conceived.

Neoclassicism was inspired by a revival of interest in Greco-Roman art and culture. Also influential on Neoclassical visual art was the art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768), who infused his critical appreciation of ancient Greek art with homoeroticism, most noticeably in his rapturous descriptions of the *Apollo Belvedere*.



Top to bottom:
1) *Oedipus and the Sphinx* (1808) by J. A. D. Ingres.
2) *Sleep* (1866) by Gustav Courbet.
3) *Hercules and the Hydra* (1876) by Gustav Moreau.
4) *Under the Western Sun* (1917) by Henry Scott Tuke.

The impact of Neoclassical visual art was most apparent in France where the earlier fantasy-based Rococo style of Watteau and Boucher was identified with the aristocracy. Neoclassicism was particularly associated with the ideals of the French Revolution and was seen as anti-aristocratic.

Jacques Louis David (1748-1825) is credited with the first Neoclassical painting, *The Oath of the Horatii* (1785), because its layout and framing are balanced and harmonized, and the subject was Roman-based, emphasizing allegiance to the state.

Neoclassical art is frequently homoerotic because it is "masculine" in contrast to the more "feminine" Rococo style. Subjects are often male-oriented classical myths and history, reinterpreted to emphasize their application to the revolutionary politics of the day. Men are often depicted nude, their sculpted physiques emphasizing idealized masculinity.

David's painting *Leonidas at Thermopylae* (1800-1814) is blatantly homoerotic not only because of the nude youths, but also because of the erect scabbard over the central figure's penis and the obvious affection of the men towards one another.

Other nineteenth-century artists who depicted homoeroticism in a Neoclassical style were Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780-1867) and his mentee Hippolyte Flandrin (1809-1864).

Ingres was famous in his day as a Neoclassicist and critics often positioned him against the Romantic artist Delacroix. Ingres, however, was not a strict Neoclassicist in that he introduced sensuality in his figures. His nudes, such as *Oedipus and the Sphinx* (1808) and *The Turkish Bath* (1859-1862), occasionally incite same-sex desire in their sensual depiction.

Much of Flandrin's art is homoerotic. It typically emphasizes male sexuality or glorifies the male form as a sensual, spiritual figure. His painting *Figure d'Étude* (1835-1836) has become a gay icon.

Romanticism

Because of its connection with revolution, Neoclassicism is perceived by art critics today as an offshoot of Romanticism, the movement that truly defined early nineteenth-century culture.

Romanticism was based on emotional representation and response. Romantic artists painted works that challenged the bourgeois mindset of the day, often featuring controversial subjects and focusing on the emotionally intense. It frequently attempted to shock. Romanticism generated the stereotype of the artist as a bad influence, an adventurer, often bisexual, who scandalized his audiences.

Théodore Géricault (1791-1824) is often described as the prototype for the Romantic artist in the early nineteenth century. He lived a brief life, yet produced some of the most important European art. His work reflects a male homosocial world. He painted numerous images of soldiers on horseback.

Géricault's most famous painting, *The Raft of the Medusa* (1819), epitomizes Romanticism in its depiction on an immense canvas of a shocking contemporary news story (a shipwrecked crew forced into cannibalism to survive). The male figures, despite their dying state, have idealized physiques, and their physical prowess is arranged in a fluid motion towards the erect black man who waves down a passing ship.

Neoclassicism and Romanticism as art movements died out by the 1840s, although many of the new trends in art that followed can be perceived as offshoots of these movements. The two countries where these new movements flourished were France and England, their capital cities sharing in importance as major art centers. As these new "modern" art trends thrived, so too did the cultural development of same-sex desire.

France

From the rubble of the revolutions and the rise of the lower classes, a respect and admiration for simplicity and everyday living became popular in art. Called Realism, this new trend in art originated in the works of artists such as Géricault and Delacroix in France and Constable and Turner in England. The trend of French Realism took a new turn with the work of Gustave Courbet (1819-1877).

Courbet's approach to Realism was based on his view of the world. His most famous painting, *The Studio of the Painter: A Real Allegory Concerning Seven Years of My Artistic Life* (1854-1855), objectified the artist and his view of the world as the center of the universe.

The physical manifestation of the nude woman, Muse or model, behind Courbet in this painting is balanced by the nude Christ-like figure hanging behind the canvas. While the erotic presence of each is not uncommon, the centrality on Courbet's canvas of both figures surrounding the artist makes their erotic depiction especially suggestive.

Depictions of Lesbianism

Courbet's paintings are typically homosocial, often representing the world of the artist and his male friends. However, Courbet is among the few artists of the century whose depiction of lesbianism is noteworthy. For example, in his painting *Sleep* (1866), he depicts two women, one brunette and one blonde, asleep. Both are nude and their limbs are intertwined.

Courbet was no doubt painting the heterosexual male fantasy of two women together, which some would argue is not lesbianism in the truest sense. Nevertheless, its depiction of same-gender sex is clearly homoerotic.

Other lesbian-themed works, not uncommon in nineteenth-century France, were produced during the Impressionist movement by artists such as Renoir and Toulouse-Lautrec.

In addition to lesbian scenes, the Impressionist Jean-Frédéric Bazille (1841-1870) also painted homoerotic works depicting nude men, such as *Summer Scene* (1869). Interestingly, two of Bazille's contributions to the Salon, the male homoerotic *Fisherman with a Net* and the lesbian *La Toilette*, were both rejected the same year.

Rosa Bonheur

Lesbianism as an artistic trend arguably has its origins in nineteenth-century France. Rosa Bonheur (1822-1899) was famous as both an artist and a lesbian in her day. Encouraged at an early age to pursue art by her father, the artist Raimond Bonheur, she favored the Realist school, and painted landscapes and animals in works such as *The Horse Fair* (1887).

Bonheur never seems to have painted lesbian-themed work, but she lived as a bohemian artist. She wore men's clothing like the French author George Sand. She had obtained governmental permission to don masculine garb in order to be a better Realist painter by examining nature (for example, farm animals) more closely.

Bonheur never married, but instead maintained a 45-year live-in relationship with Nathalie Micas. After Micas's death, she had a relationship with the American artist Anna Elizabeth Klumpke, whom she lovingly and publicly referred to as her wife. Bonheur left her entire estate to Klumpke upon her death. All three women were buried together in Père Lachaise Cemetery.

England

In 1848 a group of rebellious young artists decided to break away from the traditions of the Royal Academy; they created the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Their credo was that all art since the time of Raphael was poor. They favored instead the art of the Italian quattrocento, including the work of early Renaissance masters such as Masaccio and Botticelli.

The PRB, as it became known, did not last many years, but by the late 1860s, their attempts to celebrate this part-Gothic, part-Renaissance mindset was revitalized with new subjects, themes, and artists. It became known as the Aesthetic Movement, and included the artists Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones, and Simeon Solomon.

Aestheticism reflected a trend popular among the rising middle class to enhance their lives with beautiful works of art and to refine themselves culturally. Many of the Aesthetic works were commissions by middle-class industrial barons who had earned their wealth from the Industrial Revolution. They requested images of languorous, beautiful women to enhance the decorative appeal of their homes.

Some of these female-dominated works, such as Rossetti's *The Beloved* (1865-1866) and Burne-Jones's *The Golden Stairs* (1872-1880), could be seen as lesbian-based with their mirrored female sensuality, though none were as clearly sexual as those of Courbet and Toulouse-Lautrec.

The androgyne also became a popular image among the Aesthetes. In their depictions, the figurative merging of the two sexes in the androgyne may be a statement on homosexuality, the "intermediate sex" or "third sex" as theorized by such writers as John Addington Symonds and Edward Carpenter.

Simeon Solomon

Among the Aesthetes, only Simeon Solomon (1840-1905) converted the subject of languorous women into that of languorous men. Solomon, born into a middle-class Jewish family of artists, found popularity among his colleagues with his Greco-Roman images. He ultimately used the god Eros as his symbol for same-sex desire. He often depicted the youthful Eros nude, as in his painting *Dawn* (1871).

Solomon was also one of the few British artists to depict the lesbian poet Sappho in visual art. In the painting *Sappho and Erinna in a Garden at Myteline* (1864), Sappho's passion for her lover is quite apparent. In 1873 Solomon was arrested and charged with homosexual crimes and his public career as an artist ended.

Frederic Leighton

The Aesthetic Movement also produced the artist Frederic Leighton (1830-1896). Leighton was educated in continental art schools and returned to England with a new interpretation of Hellenism for the Aesthetes. His paintings are erotic, if not homoerotic, in both the choice of mythological subjects and presentation of the nude. His work gave rise to the concept of "supersensuality," spiritual eroticism that surpasses physical sensuality.

His numerous nude Venuses and women bathing are highly erotic. His painting *Daedalus and Icarus* (1869) reveals a soft, if not androgynous, nude Icarus waiting to fly to the heavens. His bronze sculpture *An Athlete Wrestling with a Python* (1874-1877) is a life-sized study of the idealized nude male form.

Leighton never married and kept his personal life very private, even from those who were his close friends. He kept company with known homosexuals of the day. His home in London, much of it decorated and designed by Leighton himself, is a museum, a shrine to Aestheticism.

Pater, Wilde, and Symonds

Three art critics are important equally for their contributions to nineteenth-century European art and to the history of homosexuality.

Walter Pater (1839-1894), the doyen of Aestheticism, taught classical studies at Oxford and wrote extensively on art appreciation. His conclusion to the first edition of *The Renaissance* (1877) became a gay manifesto for his followers.

Oscar Wilde (1856-1900), a master of publicity, was the most successful popularizer of Aestheticism in the 1880s. Wilde's conviction of gross indecency in 1895 did more to make homosexuality visible in the nineteenth century than any other single event.

Like Wilde, John Addington Symonds (1840-1894) was an active homosexual despite being married. Symonds wrote numerous works on artists such as Michelangelo and Cellini, often commenting on their homosexual liaisons, and published in 1883 a pamphlet on Greek homosexuality.

Symbolism and the Fin-de-siècle

By the late 1860s, Paris had begun to surpass London as an art center, and artists flocked to Paris either for inspiration or camaraderie. The French capital gave birth to modernism with the Impressionists and exerted a profound influence on art throughout Europe and North America.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century there emerged one of the great queer art movements, Symbolism. The movement had its origins in France, starting in many ways as a literary movement by the poets and lovers Paul Verlaine and Arthur Rimbaud. Symbolism, however, was not limited to France, and many of its greatest adherents and practitioners were non-French Europeans.

Symbolism, by definition, is based on the idea of the symbol, either the artist's personal symbol or a universal symbol known to all. Symbolist paintings are very visually-based, and are considered modern for what they represent rather than for the way they were painted. Symbolic sources ranged from classical mythology and poetics to obscure authors.

Critics have noted that the problem with Symbolism has been the difficulty of identifying the artists' symbolic language, as it is often very obscure. However, Symbolism offered homosexual artists an opportunity to explore their sexual identity in a veiled language.

Gustav Moreau

One of the most famous Symbolist artists was Gustave Moreau (1826-1898). Moreau enters the canon of nineteenth-century European art as an academic painter in technique, but his subjects were noteworthy. Obsessed with painting recurring motifs, he chose as his favorite subjects mythological or Biblical themes, often interpreted today as queer in their construct. His numerous paintings of the Biblical Salome as a femme fatale conjure suggestions of incest and necrophilia.

Moreau also painted androgynous images of Narcissus and Saint Sebastian, both of whom were longstanding icons of same-sex desire. His paintings of Orpheus, also considered a homosexual symbol because of his rejection of women after losing his wife, reveal homoerotic desire in the softness and beauty of the figure.

Beardsley

In England, the artists Solomon and Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898) are considered by critics today to be Symbolists. Solomon's recurring motifs of youthful Eros figures or androgynous angels are homoerotic symbols for same-sex passion. His later works often depict disembodied heads such as Orpheus, Medusa, and others.

Beardsley established a career for himself by illustrating black and white hypersexual figures, ranging from sex-starved soldiers with enlarged phalluses in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* to androgynous figures in Wilde's *Salome*. Beardsley socialized with many known homosexuals of the day, including Wilde's former lover and friend Robert Ross, but notably not Wilde himself.

Other Symbolists

Throughout Europe, Symbolist artists depicted queer subjects. Charles Filiger (1863-1928) painted cartoon-like depictions of saints, often paired in homosocial couplings. Like Solomon, he endured a homosexual scandal and spent much of his life working in private in the French countryside.

The Flemish artist Fernand Khnopff (1858-1921) incorporated lesbian-based themes in many of his works. The artist Jean Delville (1867-1953), also from Belgium, painted homoerotic, androgynous disembodied heads like those of Moreau and Solomon. Delville also painted one of the gayest paintings of the fin-de-siècle. His *School of Plato* (1898) depicts a Christ-like philosopher in pink garments lecturing to his pupils, all nude or scantily dressed youths who listen to his every word while reclining in sexual poses alone or with other young men.

Male Nudes

The posing of youthful male nudes as in Delville's painting was not new and the veiled homoerotic message it sent became popular for a time. The English artist Henry Scott Tuke (1858-1929) painted nude boys frolicking in natural settings. The German baron Wilhelm von Gloeden (1856-1931) settled in Taormina, Sicily and established an artistic career for himself by taking staged photographs of nude or partially nude boys among the classical ruins of southern Italy.

Critics note that these paintings and photographs by Tuke and von Gloeden were widely popular throughout Europe because they depicted a "natural" setting. Furthermore, von Gloeden attempted to recapture the days of classical Greece and Rome by depicting the descendants of the ancients. However, for all the respectable naturalness and classicism of these works, there is little doubt that these images were also meant to be erotically charged and geared towards a male homosexual audience.

Conclusion

Homosexuality served as both an inspiration and way of life for many European artists during the nineteenth century. As the century progressed, new artistic trends and social theories worked together to give rise to a gay artistic sensibility. The flourishing of gay art and gay artists such as Bonheur and Solomon seem to be a part of the modernism that began at mid-century. However, Aestheticism and Symbolism met their premature demises due in part to their association with homosexuality, particularly as a result of the trials of Oscar Wilde.

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