



## European Art: Twentieth Century

by Joyce M. Youmans

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A large number of significant twentieth-century European artists focused on gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender themes, making such concerns crucial to the understanding of twentieth-century art.

These artists span all the major art movements and are too numerous for all of them to be mentioned in a condensed essay. By necessity, the individuals discussed here constitute only a representative sample of the diverse range of twentieth-century artistic production in Europe of particular interest to glbtq people.

### Henry Tuke and Ethel Walker

The careers of two British painters, Henry Scott Tuke (1859-1929) and Dame Ethel Walker (1861-1951), peaked during the early part of the century.

Tuke belonged to a circle of poets and writers who discussed and wrote about the beauty of male youth. His paintings of male nudes are notably sensual. The oil painting *Noonday Heat* (1903), for example, presents two youths who, relaxing on the beach, are completely engrossed in their own private world. Since neither of them addresses the viewer, their relationship seems intimate, exclusive, and ambiguous.

Dame Ethel Walker produced her major works late in her life: from the time she was in her fifties until her death at the age of ninety. She did not demonstrate any special interest in art until she formed a close friendship with Clara Christian in the 1880s; thereafter, the two women lived, studied, and worked together as fellow artists.

Walker is perhaps best known for her portraits of women. She captures her sitters' individual temperaments and expressions. Her obvious, tactile brushstrokes obscure unnecessary detail, thereby allowing the artist to emphasize the compositional aspects that capture the mood of her sitter.

### Léonor Fini and the Surrealists

While artists such as Walker and Tuke represented the natural world in their art works, those individuals influenced by the Surrealist movement sought to discover, or even to be liberated into, an alternate reality. According to the Surrealists, this "new" reality necessitated the freeing of the unconscious and included outward manifestations of sexual desire.

The Surrealist attitude toward sexuality was revolutionary. The Surrealists celebrated and concretized desire in their theories, writings, and art works. Some of them manifested their beliefs in sexually open lifestyles.

Painter Léonor Fini (1907-1996) never officially joined the Surrealists but she displayed her works in many of their exhibitions. She had many lovers of both sexes. She never married but eventually settled with three individuals: two men, one mostly a friend, the other mostly a lover (Stanislao Lepri, a diplomat

turned highly successful painter), and one female lover (Constantine Jelenski, a celebrated Polish poet and writer).

A child prodigy, Fini was born in Buenos Aires to an Argentine father and an Italian mother. When she was a young child, her mother fled Fini's "overly macho" father to her hometown of Trieste, Italy. Since Fini's father repeatedly hired kidnappers to abduct his daughter and bring her to Argentina, her mother disguised Fini as a boy until she reached puberty. After many failed attempts to retrieve his daughter, Fini's father finally gave up and had minimal, if any, contact with her for the rest of his life.

Perhaps the unusual circumstances of Fini's early life contributed to her development into a fiercely independent young woman. Fini, who rebelled against formal education, taught herself to draw and paint through self-discipline and perseverance. She learned anatomy by making detailed drawings of corpses that she found in Trieste morgues.

The intricate sketches of Fini's youth later developed into increasingly simpler and more gestural drawings, usually of women. Shortly after her first exhibition in Milan at the age of seventeen, she moved to Paris, where she remained for the rest of her life.

Most of Fini's paintings are infused with a sensuality that is both beautiful and ominous. The oil painting *Le Lac* (1991), for example, depicts busts of women with full, rounded breasts submerged in water. The hair on top of their heads forms phallic-like structures. The women glow ghostly white, an effect that is enhanced by their ambiguous, lush, and dark environment. These incredible beings dominate their surroundings and seem to function as icons of female sexuality.

The oil painting *The Ends of the Earth* (1949) features a single nude woman who is immersed in dark liquid from the breasts down. Around her float animal skulls said by the artist to represent the extinct male race, which she thought was too brutal and cruel to survive. Like *Le Lac*, *The Ends of the Earth* is a stark, haunting image that presents woman as an icon.

*The Ends of the Earth* illustrates Fini's refusal to accept the world as defined by men and her consequent creation of a pictorial world defined by female desires. Although erotic connotations infuse her works, the female body is never objectified; the women Fini creates are always powerful and self-possessed.

The lithograph *Armine* (1976), for example, features a nude male figure in profile literally chewing his fingers in desire as he gazes at the beautiful woman who is presented frontally to the viewer. Seemingly aware of her unattainable status, the woman confronts the viewer with a full-on gaze beneath raised eyebrows.

### **Marcel Duchamp and Claude Cahun**

Some artists who worked in the Surrealist tradition, including Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) and Claude Cahun (1894-1954), experimented with the fluidity of gender roles. Frequently understood as the creator of conceptual art, Duchamp eschewed art that appeals only to the eye in favor of art made for the mind. Ideas became the focus of his work, and androgyny was a concept that interested him.

The combination of male and female elements in Duchamp's art symbolizes duality and, by extension, the larger truth of non-duality--or the unity of all reality. In other words, two-ness actually is oneness when understood from a higher, perhaps surreal, level of perception.

Perhaps the best example of Duchamp's experimentation with gender roles is the creation of his female alter ego in 1920 named *Rose Sélavy* ("Eros, c'est la vie," or "Eros, that's life"). Works that present Duchamp as a female include *Belle Haleine* (*Beautiful Breath*, 1921), a perfume bottle with a photograph of Rose taken by Man Ray. In addition to appearing in various works of art, Rose "signed" a number of them, as well

as most of Duchamp's literary works, between 1920 and 1940.

Duchamp, a heterosexual, intended Rose to be amusing, but he also wanted to propagate androgyny as a concept to ponder seriously. The artist also experimented with androgyny outside of his alter ego. In 1938, for example, Duchamp presented a female mannequin half dressed in his own male clothing for the Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme in Paris. The torso, chest, and arms of the figure wore a suit while the pelvis, legs, and feet remained alarmingly bare.

A contemporary of Duchamp, the French lesbian artist born Lucy Schwob lived her life under the androgynous pseudonym Claude Cahun (1894-1954). Throughout her writings and photography, Cahun explored the idea that gender is a masquerade. Her photographs, which convincingly present her as either male or female, suggest that gender is a construct.

In a 1929 self-portrait, for example, Cahun wears a blond wig and heavy make-up in an obviously elaborate charade of doll-like femininity. In a 1919 self-portrait, however, Cahun looks like a male as she sits in profile.

Cahun's photographs that present her as a mixture of male and female components are shocking, outlandish, and ingenious. In a dramatic self-portrait from 1928, Cahun is a sexy, glamorously made-up female with a scarf draped around her neck. With a twist that makes the viewer unfamiliar with Cahun's work wonder whether the sitter is male or female, the artist wears a shirt that looks like bare skin in the black and white photograph. Since the garment makes the artist's chest seem completely flat, the two nipples painted onto the fabric look male.

In another thought-provoking self-portrait from 1928, the artist, with characteristically cropped hair, presents herself as an androgynous being with her left cheek next to a mirror. Most intriguing is the fact that the unaltered mirror reflection of the artist, presented within the same image, highlights the fact that the human face is not bilaterally symmetrical.

With this photograph, Cahun suggests that the existence of "two faces" within a single individual has gender implications. She holds the jacket she is wearing to her neck with her right hand, concealing her neck from the viewer. In the mirror reflection, she appears to hold the collar open with her left hand. Thus, Cahun is able to contrast her feminine neckline, or a more feminine version of herself, with a more masculine portrayal. Within a single image, then, the artist reveals that neither identity nor the perception of identity are fixed or stable.

Cahun's photographs challenge the notion of two distinct, polar opposite genders, and they do so in an unabashed manner. In almost every self-portrait, Cahun gazes directly, unapologetically at the viewer.

While Cahun was alive, her questioning of gender roles did not end with her art works. In everyday life, Cahun dressed alternately as a male or a female and sometimes as a combination of both. She was known to make grand entrances wearing the suit of a man, monocle over one eye, on the arm of her life-long companion Suzanne Malherbe.

### **Hannah Höch**

Like Cahun and Duchamp, the German artist Hannah Höch (1889-1978) also experimented with androgyny in her artistic production. While Cahun created seamless, believable images, however, Höch worked with the collage, frequently emphasizing its constructedness.

Affiliated with the Dada movement, Höch's works are characteristically nonsensical; Dada artists frequently poked fun at the art world. The very nature of the collage, made from pre-existing, or found, materials, challenges the definition of art as an original creative production.

In the photomontage (collage of photographs) titled *Dompteuse (Tamer, ca 1930)*, Höch leaves the ripped edges of the photographs exposed to reinforce the point that the fantastical being created in the work is constructed. This seated, slim-bodied figure wears a woman's skirt and shirt, sports hairy, muscular arms, and possesses a demure, black and white face of a mannequin (the rest of the photograph is in color).

By combining stereotypical male and female imagery, Höch forces the viewer to consider what characterizes specific gender traits, and perhaps also why. *Dompteuse* could also be viewed as a joke about which combination of qualities constitutes a "third sex" since some theorists at the time ascribed bisexuality to a visible, physical combination of masculine and feminine attributes. This investigation may have been of particular interest to Höch since she was bisexual.

Höch sometimes addresses the objectification of women in her work. In the photomontage *Marlene*, for example, two male viewers gaze at a pair of gigantic legs adorned with stockings and high heels that are mounted upside down on a pedestal.

This image is not a simple illustration of male desire for the female form, however. The bright red mouth positioned in the upper right hand corner is outside of the males' sight lines, and so is presented to the viewer, whether male or female, as an object of desire.

Adding another layer to the work, the name "Marlene" is scribbled across the center of the image. This is probably an allusion to Marlene Dietrich, an actress well known for her androgynous image and her ambiguous sexual identity.

### **Keith Vaughan**

Different in style and in content from Dada and Surrealist works is the art of the openly gay British painter Keith Vaughan (1912-1977). Untaught as an artist, though tutored at Christ's Hospital in London, Vaughan developed his skill through unrelenting practice.

From his early twenties until the end of his life, taken through a suicide that resulted from Vaughan's struggle with cancer, the artist portrayed the male form within the landscape. As his works demonstrate, he conceptualized man as integrated into nature.

The oil painting *Head with Raised Arm* (1948) features a blocky torso and head surrounded by patches of color. The repetition of forms and tones creates an ambiguity between figure and ground. The male figure, in fact, is so much a part of the surroundings that his body seems to become part of the landscape, with only the mouth and an ear fully articulated.

Vaughan's mixed media work *Ochre Figure* (1952) features a sinewy, linear male form that, like the figure in *Head with Raised Arm*, blends into its surroundings. The face, sketchily articulated, is set into a small head that ultimately functions as a design element.

As Vaughan's career progressed, his work became more abstract. In the 1963 oil painting *Group of Dinkas*, for example, the artist uses a minimum of brushstrokes to suggest three human forms.

### **Francis Bacon**

Widely recognized as Britain's most important twentieth-century painter, Francis Bacon (1909-1996) is best known for his elegantly composed works featuring ugly and disturbing subject matter, especially crucifixions, screaming faces, and beaten bodies. His work has been seen as reflecting the violence and trauma that has characterized twentieth-century Europe, but it also reflects the artist's interest in gay male sadomasochism.

Although Bacon was openly gay and his work presents uncensored radical sexuality, he has nevertheless enjoyed wide praise from mainstream critics. Even works such as *Two Figures* (1953), which depicts male-male rape, have been acclaimed for their symbolic significance and beauty of composition.

Indebted to the old masters, but strongly influenced by modern psychological insights and awareness, Bacon produces deeply disturbing works that nevertheless appeal even as they repel. What has not been sufficiently recognized by mainstream critics is the autobiographical roots of Bacon's paintings, especially its origins in his psychosexual make-up.

### **David Hockney**

Another openly gay British artist, David Hockney (b. 1937) sometimes treats the male form in a funky, even whimsical manner. Hockney developed a distinct style during his studies at the Royal College of Art in London in the late 1950s. Representational but deliberately naïve, his style was influenced by both abstract art and children's drawings.

Hockney has deemed a work that dates from this early period, *We Two Boys Together Clinging* (1961), propaganda for homosexuality. In the painting, two scribbled, simplistic, human forms embrace and kiss one another. Alluding to the poem by Walt Whitman, the artist incorporated the words "we two boys together clinging" into the composition.

Hockney moved to Los Angeles in 1964, perhaps in part drawn by California's more relaxed attitude toward homosexuality. In Los Angeles, blue skies, swimming pools, and homoerotic images of tanned young men became the most common themes of his increasingly naturalistic work. The voyeuristic *Man Taking Shower in Beverly Hills* (1964), for example, features a nude male seen from the side bending over in the shower.

### **Rotimi Fani-Kayode**

Toward the end of the twentieth century, many artists working in Europe reflected the increasing internationalization of the art world. For example, the Nigerian-born photographer Rotimi Fani-Kayode (1955-1989) moved to London during his adolescence. His work is at once African and European.

One of Fani-Kayode's goals was to use art to undermine the Western world's misperception and misrepresentation of black Africans. His photographs of nude or semi-nude black males frequently blend African and Western iconography with sexual, sometimes homoerotic, themes. They present an alternate reality, transporting the viewer into unfamiliar worlds that encourage a reconsideration of commonly held ideas and assumptions about racial and sexual identity.

The black and white photograph entitled *White Bouquet* (1987) is a reinterpretation of Edouard Manet's famous painting *Olympia* (1863). It depicts a white man presenting a bouquet of flowers to a black male lounging on a chaise. Both nude figures turn their backs to the viewer. In Manet's work, a clothed black female servant gives flowers to a nude white female prostitute, and both women face the viewer.

*White Bouquet's* gender and racial reversal is echoed in its compositional inversion; even the presenter of the flowers is on the opposite side than that in *Olympia*. This undoing of the familiar results in an ambiguous image left open to many complex interpretations.

### **Conclusion**

Many European artists explored gender-related and homosexual themes during the twentieth century. The breadth of this output is immense and continues to influence artists working today. The figures mentioned above were chosen not only because of their distinctive achievements, but also because their interests are

both representative and diverse.

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### **About the Author**

**Joyce M. Youmans** is Curatorial Assistant in the Department of African Art at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City. She curated the exhibition "Another Africa." Her article "African Art at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art" appears in *African Arts*. Her research interests include contemporary Western and African art, the abject in visual art, and pragmatist aesthetics.