



## Gloeden, Wilhelm von, Baron (1856-1931)

by Jason Goldman

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Baron Wilhelm von Gloeden was one of the earliest gay photographers of the male nude. His best known images--those enormously popular among the Victorians--depict nude boys in garlands or scant robes acting out Homeric themes; but many of his other images, which once totaled over 3,000, are ahistorical, elegant studies of the male body.

Von Gloeden's work is generally remarkable for its technical innovations in shooting outdoors, its kitschy use of "classical" motifs, and its homoerotic content despite the social mores of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. For contemporary gay viewers, the several hundred surviving images evoke a dreamy vision of forbidden desire, idyllic innocence, and a bygone era of agrarian sexual openness.

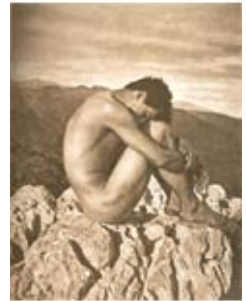
Like many artists, von Gloeden's current fame is partly owed to highly embellished accounts of the circumstances under which he worked. The standard tale paints von Gloeden as an affluent German--a member of the minor nobility of Mecklenberg in Northern Germany--who, suffering from what was probably tuberculosis, moved to the Sicilian village of Taormina in his twenties.

According to this account, he was instantly enamored of the village boys who eventually became the subjects of his Homeric photographs by day and the objects of his personal pleasure by night. The Baron's family wealth financed a lavish lifestyle; he hosted a slew of guests from throughout Europe, many of whom indulged in the nocturnal orgies he orchestrated at his villa with the local boys.

The bulk of von Gloeden's photographs were made between 1890 and 1914 and belong to a generation of pictures that romanticize pastoral life in the wake of widespread industrialization. Several of his models reportedly remained devoted to him until his death in 1931, shortly after which many of his glass negatives were seized or destroyed by Mussolini's Fascist police under a pornography charge.

Although von Gloeden has been largely mythologized as a charming, generous benefactor and hero of homoerotic photography, it is important also to think of his work in relation to the colonial dynamics of his presence in impoverished Taormina. His subjects' bodies were not classically athletic, but the callused products of hard labor--an effect the aristocratic German attempted to smooth over with a homemade emulsion.

The Baron's economic clout in the small village ensured both a civic stake in his work and tolerance of his open homosexuality. Not only did von Gloeden employ several boys as domestic servants, but he also became a pre-war sugar daddy, financing dowries and new businesses for his models. Despite the village's strong Catholic dogmas, von Gloeden was thus able to procure its sons for both his camera's gaze and his



A self-portrait by Wilhelm von Gloeden (1891, top) and three photographs he created of Sicilian youths.

guests' (as well as his own) sexual tourism.

Von Gloeden's images epitomize a standard tactic of early homoerotic image-making: the "classical" scenes, costumes, and props in his compositions act as alibis for their homoerotic narratives, legitimizing the camera's obsessive gaze upon the boys' bare bodies.

For the mainstream audience that consumed them, the Homeric themes and allusions to antiquity--coupled with the depiction of the pastoral countryside--were crucial for reading von Gloeden's images as nostalgic, asexual visions of a simpler life or as ethnographic portraits.

However, the homoerotic impetus of his work is by no means covert; the lack of moral scrutiny of his work by the Victorians is as surprising as the censorship of his work by the Fascists is predictable. Over and over again, carefully crafted poses, sultry looks, and passionate caresses cement a homoerotic subtext.

Given this, the "classical" themes are also readable as an early example of kitsch: the irreverent recombination of Greek and Roman regalia mixed in with faux leopard print rugs and potted palms set the boys' eroticism in a melodramatic vision of "old world" sensuality.

Equally important are the ways in which von Gloeden's pictures contribute to a long-standing tradition of the docile, brown-skinned sex object within European art. As his production is contemporaneous with the rise of modern tourism among the wealthy, and as his images were celebrated mainly among affluent socialites, these boys' eroticism is largely informed by racial, cultural, and class difference.

Indeed, many of his photographs were printed in postcard format, as if to capture both the cultural exoticism and sexual availability of the local boys in true souvenir fashion.

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