



Minton, John (1917-1957)

by Shaun Cole

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John Minton was a painter of landscapes, town scenes, and figure subjects in oil and watercolor, as well as an acclaimed illustrator. Minton's homosexuality was an important influence on his work. One of his main themes was the young male figure in emotionally charged settings.

Like many middle class gay men of his generation, Minton was drawn to men who fulfilled a manly ideal, and this attraction manifested itself in much of his work, where he portrayed his handsome working class lovers and other ideals of masculinity such as Guardsmen and matadors.

A key figure of the 1940s neo-Romantic movement and a celebrity of London's bohemia, Minton lived and worked with most of the younger generation of neo-Romantic artists including Michael Ayrton, Robert Colquhoun, Robert MacBryde, and Keith Vaughan.

Born on December 25, 1917, Minton studied at St John's Wood School of Art from 1935 to 1938 and later went on to teach at Camberwell School of Art (1943-1946), Central School of Art and Crafts (1946-1948), and the Royal College of Art (1948 until his death in 1957).

Minton's early work focused on the urban landscape he discovered during nocturnal jaunts around London, where he also discovered an active sexual underground. Visits to Spain in 1949 and Jamaica in 1950 offered Minton a fresh repertoire of subjects and enriched his palette of colors.

Although Minton was dedicated to painting, his reputation developed as a result of his skill as an illustrator. He produced a large number of illustrations for a wide range of books, such as *Time Was Away* by Alan Ross (1948) and *French Country Cooking* by Elizabeth David (1951), as well as for magazines such as *The Listener* and *The Radio Times*.

Minton's illustrative style became the fashionable norm of the 1940s, but after 1950, with the arrival and increasing popularity of abstraction, his figurative style went out of fashion.

Between 1950 and 1952 Minton lived openly with his lover Ricky Stride, a bodybuilding ex-sailor. Theirs was a volatile relationship and ended as a result of almost constant fighting, which often resulted in violence on Stride's part.

On January 12, 1950, *The Listener* published a letter Minton wrote in response to a review of a new biography of Oscar Wilde by Herbert Read in which Dr. Marie Stopes discussed Wilde's sexuality and relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas in a denigrating fashion. Outraged, Minton pointed out the enormous contribution made to society by homosexuals and highlighted the fact that "the same vicious law which imprisoned Wilde still operates" and pleaded for a "saner and more comprehensive attitude towards the homosexual in society."

Minton's character revealed some great contradictions--his wild gaiety and love of wit and banter disguised

and competed with an inner melancholy that verged on depression. Towards the end of his life, Minton began to express an obsession with death, and he was particularly moved by the death of film star and symbol of disaffected youth James Dean.

Minton's last painting, which remained unfinished, was initially based upon a car crash that he had witnessed in Spain; but it also, he told his friend Ruskin Spear, represented "James Dean and all that." As a result the painting was posthumously titled *Composition: The Death of James Dean in September 1955*.

On January 20, 1957 John Minton committed suicide by taking an overdose of Tuinal.

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About the Author

Shaun Cole is curator of Designs at the Victoria and Albert Museum. He is author of *"Don We Now Our Gay Apparel": Gay Men's Dress in the Twentieth Century* and has curated numerous exhibitions, including "Graphic Responses to AIDS" (1996), "Fashion on Paper" (1997), and "Dressing the Male" (1999), as well as two innovative "Days of Record" to document Tattooing (2000) and Black British Hairstyles and Nail Art (2001).