



## Rivers, Larry (1923-2002)

by Craig Kaczorowski

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Prolific and controversial, Larry Rivers was an acclaimed artist, sculptor, and jazz musician, as well as a writer, poet, teacher, and sometime actor and filmmaker. He is considered one of the pioneers of Pop Art, as well as a masterly interpreter of the figurative tradition.

Twice married, and the father of five children, he nonetheless was very candid about his occasional sexual relationships with men, most notably the poet Frank O'Hara. Although he did not identify as either a homosexual or a bisexual, he nevertheless had significant same-sex sexual experience.

### **Biographical Details**

He was born Yitzroch Loiza Grossberg in the Bronx, New York, on August 17, 1923, to Jewish immigrants from the Ukraine. His father, owner of a small trucking firm, was an amateur violinist who encouraged his son to learn music. As a child Rivers studied the piano, then switched to the saxophone and began a career as a musician in his early teens, primarily playing in jazz bands.

His name was changed in 1940, accidentally, Rivers claims, after a nightclub emcee introduced the teenager and his band as "Larry Rivers and his Mudcats."

In 1942, over his parents' objections, Rivers enlisted in the United States Army Air Corps. After a short stint in the Army band, he was honorably discharged due to a neurological disorder misdiagnosed as multiple sclerosis.

Rivers next enrolled at the Juilliard School of Music in New York City. Miles Davis was a fellow classmate. Rivers met other jazz musicians, such as Charlie Parker, through Davis, and within a year left Juilliard and returned to playing jazz saxophone with various bands.

It was also around this time that he met and married Augusta Burger, the mother of a young son from a previous marriage, whom Rivers later adopted. The couple had another son, but divorced soon afterwards. In 1961 Rivers married again, to Clarice Price, with whom he had two daughters. They separated in 1967 but remained married and friendly. In the 1970s, Rivers had another son with the young painter Daria Dshuk.

Rivers died of cancer of the liver on August 14, 2002, at the age of 78.

### **Rivers's Early Art Career**

Rivers came to art almost by accident. Playing saxophone in a band in 1945, he was introduced to the young painter Jane Freilicher, who was married to the band's pianist. She suggested that Rivers try painting; he took to it immediately and decided to pursue it over music. "After a week or two I began thinking that art was an activity on a 'higher level' than jazz," he later explained.

In 1947 Rivers enrolled in Hans Hofmann's celebrated School of Fine Arts in Manhattan. He stayed for nearly two years, drawing during the day and playing saxophone at night to support his family. He absorbed Hofmann's theories about color and form, but "frantic to draw the figure," he rebelled against the emphasis on pure abstraction, which was the dominant mode of American art at the time.

A 1948 Bonnard exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, followed by a trip to Paris in 1950, where he lived for several months studying the works of Courbet and Manet, revealed a wealth of painterly possibilities to Rivers. As a result, he confirmed his commitment to the figurative mode of art.

Rivers had his first solo art show in 1949 at the Jane Street Gallery in New York. Clement Greenberg, perhaps the most influential art critic at the time, called Rivers "an amazing beginner" and wrote of the "superb plenitude and sensuousness" of his paintings. (A few years later, however, Rivers fell out of favor with Greenberg.)

In 1950, Rivers joined the Tibor de Nagy Gallery, where he was given a solo show every year until he left for the Marlborough Gallery in 1963. Rivers had been invited to join the Tibor de Nagy Gallery by its director, John Bernard Myers, who was gay. Rivers has divulged that he and Myers occasionally had sex together, although as Rivers later commented, "I always felt I was doing him a bigger favor than I was doing myself."

In 1953 Rivers created what has since become one of his most famous works, *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, both a parody of, and homage to, the classic 1851 painting by Emanuel Leutze. Rivers's painting has been widely celebrated as one of the first instances of the use of Pop iconography in postwar American art. Discussing the work several years later, Rivers remarked, "I wanted to take something corny and bring it back to life."

Rivers continued his exploration of Pop iconography in his famous series known as the *Dutch Masters*, launched in 1963. The series was inspired by a billboard for Dutch Masters cigars, which had appropriated images from Rembrandt's *The Syndics of the Clothmakers' Guild* (1662).

Another of Rivers's best-known works is *The Greatest Homosexual* (1964), a portrait of Napoleon painted after Rivers saw the Jacques-Louis David portrait *The Emperor Napoleon in His Study at the Tuileries* (1812) that hangs in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D. C. In his work, Rivers underscores what he saw as an effeminate pose and camp attitude in the David painting.

### **Rivers's Late Career**

By the 1960s, Rivers's career was at its zenith. John Canady, the chief art critic of the *New York Times*, called Rivers "the cleverest, even the foxiest, painter at work in the country," an artist "who can do anything he wants with a brush."

In addition to painting and sculpture, Rivers performed in experimental plays such as Jack Gelber's *The Connection* (1959), about the downtown New York drug scene, and in films such as Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie's Beat movie based on the life of Neal Cassady, *Pull My Daisy* (1959), with Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg.

Rivers designed the sets and costumes for a 1966 New York Philharmonic performance of Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex*. Rivers set the opera in a boxing ring, and dressed the chorus in sleeveless undershirts and sunglasses; the production outraged critics and audience alike.

In his last decades, Rivers began experimenting widely, creating large-scale multi-media works. The flamboyance of the artist and the controversy surrounding the art often overshadowed the merits of the works themselves.

His *Lampman Loves It* (1966), a nine-foot-tall assemblage, complete with strategically placed light bulbs, represented a heterosexual couple having intercourse. Another electrified mixed-media piece, *America's No. 1 Problem* (1969), depicted "a black cock, a white cock, and a ruler," as Rivers once described it.

His most ambitious project, *History of the Russian Revolution* (1966), is a 76-panel multi-media work inspired by Rivers's reading of a biography of Leon Trotsky. As Rivers himself explained, it is "either the greatest painting-sculpture-mixed media of the 20th century, or the stupidest."

### **Rivers's Sexuality**

Rivers has admitted that, "like any normal heterosexual boy," he had his first homosexual experience at the age of 14.

Throughout his 20s and 30s, Rivers experimented from time to time with same-sex desire. In his autobiography, Rivers explained, "sex with men wasn't exactly my bag, but if they got my cock hard they could have it."

However, a friend of Rivers, the painter Anne Tabachnick, clarified: "Larry didn't have gay episodes to have sex but to improve himself! He thought by hanging out in gay company he would learn to be classier . . . . He was insecure about his manners . . . . He really wanted to learn how to dress and talk."

Perhaps Rivers's most significant gay partner was the poet Frank O'Hara (1926-1966). The two men met at a party in 1950. After being introduced, they "talked [their] heads off for two hours," and then moved "to a quiet spot behind a window drape" and kissed.

Rivers has stated that, with the exception of John Bernard Myers, O'Hara was his only male sexual relationship that lasted longer than one night. During his relationship with O'Hara, Rivers continued to have sex with women, but was intrigued by, and attracted to, the poet.

Nor was O'Hara exclusively involved with Rivers. In a letter to Rivers, O'Hara wrote, "I am neither starved nor sated by you alone, and I'm sure it's the same with you, but we do interest each other in some way."

Rivers once described O'Hara as "a charming madman, a whoosh of air sometimes warm and pleasant, sometimes so gusty you closed your eyes and brushed back the hair it disarranged."

Rivers and O'Hara were enthusiastic about, and influenced, each other's work. O'Hara wrote several poems about Rivers and his art, including "Walking with Larry Rivers," and "On Seeing Larry Rivers' *Washington Crossing the Delaware* at the Museum of Modern Art."

Rivers designed and built the sets for a 1953 New York production of O'Hara's play *Try! Try!*, and a year later they collaborated on the prose poem "How to Proceed in the Arts." The two men also worked together on a lithographic series called *Stones* (1958), in which O'Hara inscribed several poems onto litho stones in and around Rivers's drawings.

During the peak of their sexual relationship, Rivers created a powerful, homoerotic portrait of O'Hara titled *O'Hara Nude with Boots* (1954). In the life-size painting, the poet is depicted naked with one black-booted foot on a cinder block, his hands locked on the top of his head.

Although their friendship continued, their sexual relationship eventually faded. As Rivers explained, "by the time Frank O'Hara took his last trip to Fire Island [O'Hara died on July 25, 1966, after he was struck by a dune buggy at night on Fire Island], my curiosity about homosexuals and life and sex among them had diminished. They were my friends and their exotic and erotic aura continued, but only as a warm glow in

my memory."

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### **About the Author**

**Craig Kaczorowski** writes extensively on media, culture, and the arts. He holds an M.A. in English Language and Literature, with a focus on contemporary critical theory, from the University of Chicago. He comments on national media trends for two newspaper industry magazines.