



Subjects of the Visual Arts: Bathing Scenes

by Kieron Devlin

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Scenes of people bathing, whether in gymnasiums, hammams, pools, or private bathtubs, have attracted artists and patrons of all sexual persuasions for centuries. A common theme in painting since the Renaissance, bathing scenes were adopted by photographers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, giving us some of our most enduring images of the semi-naked or completely nude human form. Bathing scenes are often suffused with a distinctly homosexual atmosphere.

Coded Sexuality

The naked body interacting with water is the focus of most bathing scenes, but they often artfully reveal or code hidden erotic longings. The viewer is thus cast in the role of privileged voyeur, as we are drawn closely into the depicted scene.

Artists living in times when sexual openness was impossible sometimes used sly codes in their bath scenes to reveal their interests. Depicting Bathsheba with her close female attendant, for example, often signaled female same-sex intimacy.

This coded element is evident in Albrecht Dürer's *The Bathhouse* (1497), a wood engraving in which, according to Emmanuel Cooper, "homoerotic allusions abound."

Hans Block's *The Bath at Leuk* (1597) may similarly allude to homosexuality. It portrays perhaps a heretical cult that condoned mixed group bathing yet some of the men seem more interested in each other.

Heterosexual artists often used codes to hint voyeuristically at female homoeroticism, as in *Bain Turc* (1862) by Jean-August-Dominique Ingres. Though not known for his sense of humor, Ingres painted twenty-five naked ladies in a Turkish bath, some cavorting in a manner that suggests sexual intimacy.

In the nineteenth century, the fact that this painting was geared to an exclusively male heterosexual gaze was not subject to question. However, in the twentieth century, questioning the gaze became a significant gesture. Hence, Sylvia Sleigh showed in her *Turkish Bath* (1973) how the situation in Ingres' painting could be reversed by altering the gaze. She assumes a female voyeur who watches males who are depicted as naked, passive, almost emasculated, lounging creatures.

Thomas Eakins

One of the most important homoerotic bathing scenes is Thomas Eakins' *The Swimming Hole* (1883). Evoking a tradition of idyllic pastoral settings, the painting nevertheless strongly conveys homoeroticism.

Eakins, a disciple of poet Walt Whitman, regarded himself as a "scientific realist." He made photographic studies of his naked students at the Philadelphia Academy. Seemingly to concentrate on the anatomical, he



Top: *The Death of Marat* (1793) by Jacques Louis David.

Center: *Le Bain Turc* (1862) by Jean-August-Dominique Ingres.

Above: *The Swimming Hole* (1883) by Thomas Eakins.

used the freer photo studies as models for the more static painting, but his works suggest that a sexual interest may also have been an incentive.

The Eakins' painting typifies the documentary strand of the bathing scene genre. This approach allowed for ambivalent suggestions of the erotic under the guise of idyllic neo-classicism, which could be regarded as instructive and therefore respectable.

Other painters and photographers who employed his approach include Peter Henry Emerson, Edward Weston, and Frank Meadow Sutcliffe. The latter's photograph *Water Rats* (1886), which depicts naked young boys who were paid a penny each to pose, caused a minor scandal with local clergy, who objected and threatened to excommunicate the artist.

Distinct Themes

Bathing scenes can show the vulnerability of a human body. Pierre Bonnard (1867-1947), for example, returned again and again to scenes of his wife Marthe floating loosely in the bathtub. Marthe suffered a malady that required long spells in the bath, reminding us that one of the most impressive bathtub scenes is *The Death of Marat* (1793) by Jacques Louis David (1748-1825).

Marat too was obliged to spend time in the bath, providing the artist with a key moment, a time at which people are most vulnerable, thus adding a dramatic, non-erotic dimension to bathing scenes.

The Twentieth Century

In the twentieth century, bathing scenes painted by two members of the Bloomsbury group show two distinctly idiosyncratic approaches. Vanessa Bell's *Woman and a Tub* (1917) depicts a single introspective, self-absorbed female nude standing beside the bath tub and is not overtly erotic.

Duncan Grant's *Bathing* (1911), on the other hand, offers a lyrical, stylized view of the sequential motion of a male body in the act of swimming. Both artists in their way demonstrate a fresh approach to the subject.

Paul Cadmus's *The Bath* (1951), painted in egg tempera on wood panel, illustrates an approach both modern and retro. One figure on the left is looking in the mirror and the other one is seen bathing in the tub. Cadmus used Jack Fontana and Jensen Yow from among his circle of friends as models. It is a very formal, technically accomplished composition, yet it nevertheless conveys a slyly modern--and perhaps post-coital--feel to the homoerotic domesticity of its two male figures.

David Hockney

David Hockney has created some of the best-known homoerotic bathing scenes, especially in his depictions of Los Angeles swimming pools. *Two Boys in a Pool* (1965), for example, shows a stylized world of unabashed *plein air* nudity in bright Californian light. Although Hockney's style in these early works may seem flattened and impersonal, its static quality gives it a peculiar resonance.

Hockney's early work was heavily influenced by photography, especially images from Bob Mizer's *Physique Pictorial*. These photos particularly influenced Hockney's series of shower paintings and domestic scenes, which often highlighted the male backside as an area of particular interest.

Hockney also painted his lover Peter Schlesinger in the bath tub, continuing what is unquestionably a kind of portraiture with absolute intimacy and an enduring tradition in art.

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