



Subjects of the Visual Arts: Sailors and Soldiers

by Jason Goldman

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Soldiers and sailors constitute a long-standing presence in gay male visual culture.

Across and beyond the heavily coded abstractions of Marsden Hartley, who painted about his love for a German soldier; the exaggerated fetishism of Tom of Finland, who established an entire erotic aesthetic based on the uniform; the inclusion of a seaman/G.I. among The Village People, a discotheque cross-section of butch fantasy roles; and on to the seemingly endless "hard service" plots of contemporary gay male porn, which set army barracks, close quarters, and shore-leaves as the backdrops of same-sex lust, soldiers and sailors are an easily recognizable mainstay of the gay visual vernacular in the West.

As is often the case in queer strategies of representation, the erotic appeal behind these archetypes is ironic and multi-layered, at once idolizing, undermining, and reinterpreting the rugged masculinity, virile physicality, and forthright patriotism that sailors and soldiers purportedly symbolize.

While the meanings that soldiers and sailors signify have certainly changed over the years, one aspect of their eroticism seems fairly consistent: a play on their ambiguous identity as "straight."

The image of the sexually available, morally capricious, ever-horny serviceman emerged in the early 1900s during a time when the identity "homosexual" was determined greatly by a man's role in sexual encounters with other men, not necessarily his attraction to them in the first place; only the "feminine" or receptive partner qualified socially as gay.

This ruling social code, known commonly as "trade," allowed soldiers and sailors to occupy a complex place in the gay worlds of World War I-era America; they were at once common players in gay urban culture--enjoying countless romps with civilian men during shore leaves and weekend passes--and patently detached from that culture and the social ramifications membership within it otherwise held.

Thus began what would become a long romance between gay culture and not only the servicemen themselves, but also the allure of their uncompromising hetero-masculinity.

While configurations of sexual identity have changed over the years, the precocious in-between-ness of the swarthy serviceman is central even in contemporary representations.

The World War I-era works of gay painter Charles Demuth (1883-1935) and the slightly later paintings of Paul Cadmus (1904-1999) readily depict the concept of trade, as sailors lounge in ambiguous fraternal groupings or are juxtaposed against queeny civilians--the "real" gay men--who lure them.

These paintings attest to the possibilities for sexual encounters between men in urban culture during the first half of the last century and posit the sailor's hetero-masculinity as a key component of his homoeroticism.



Top: *Dancing Sailors* (ca 1918) by Charles Demuth.

Above: *The Fleet's In!* (1933) by Paul Cadmus. *The Fleet's In!* courtesy National Archives and Records Administration.

As the photochemical media became the privileged form of gay imagery starting in the 1950s, soldiers and sailors became part of a vast vocabulary of the beefcake pin-up and bodybuilding photography.

The supposed heterosexuality of these erotic archetypes took on a new twist in the pages of physique magazines, which maintained an asexual veneer of wholesome (heterosexual) athleticism even though they were meant (in their production, marketing, and distribution) to tantalize the sexual tastes of gay men.

To be sure, these physique photographs became the erotic fodder for Tom of Finland, who later produced less ambiguous (although no more dreamy) images: strapping marines in tight uniforms eye each other while grabbing their bulging crotches or, in other drawings, explore the pleasures of corporal discipline.

As Tom of Finland's works were made expressly for gay audiences and as they cast soldiers and sailors in hard-core man-to-man encounters, they seem to share a certain narrative perspective with contemporary gay male pornography. In both cases, as "barracks buddies" submit to each other's advances, there seems to be less evidence that these men are "really straight."

However, it says a great deal that the action in current military-genre gay male video porn is often framed as circumstantial. The premise of sex-starved men, isolated in a strictly homosocial environment, who are wanton enough to do anything (or anyone) to get off, permits the idea to persist that lust among soldiers and sailors might not be "truly gay."

While contemporary viewers may tend to read the visual centrality of sailors and soldiers as commensurate with the "we are everywhere" slogans of current gay politics, their popularity is more likely an indicator of the psychic power that hetero-masculinity wields in the formation of gay desire and, in true postmodern fashion, our collective impulse to rewrite it.

Nonetheless, awareness of the circumstances that resulted in the infamous "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy of the United States armed forces and the harassment facing gay servicemen makes it nearly impossible to read homoerotic images of soldiers and sailors in an apolitical light.

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