



## Subjects of the Visual Arts: Sex Workers

by Richard G. Mann

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.  
Entry Copyright © 2002, glbtq, Inc.  
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Modern art historians have given very little attention to visual representations of sex workers, especially those involving sexualities and gender constructions that challenge heterosexist norms. To a large extent, the neglect of this important theme is due to the same moralizing attitudes that long limited studies of queer issues of any sort.

Investigation of visual depictions of queer sex work in art has been hindered by several factors, including the systematic destruction of relevant images. Moreover, very few of the extant representations from earlier periods have been published.

Further complicating the study of the images of queer sex work is the circumstance that many of them can be securely distinguished from representations of other types of sexual encounters only by reference to contextual information, which is seldom readily accessible.

### Ancient Art

Images of queer sex workers extend far back into history. Among the oldest preserved scenes of homoerotic encounters are Greek vase paintings (6th-4th centuries B.C.E.), which depict various stages of the courtship of boys (ranging in age from the time of puberty to seventeen years old) by men.

Although payments to males for sexual services were illegal, a few of these scenes show a man offering a bag of money to a boy. The economic exchanges routinely involved in these complex relationships were more usually signified by the inclusion of a cock, hare, or stag, which were obligatory courting gifts.

While many of the vase paintings feature explicit scenes of intercourse and foreplay, others depict the instruction in intellectual, moral, and athletic values and skills that constituted an important component of the relationship between Greek men and the boys under their care.

The vase paintings eloquently reveal that while sex work inherently involves the sale of sexual activities for some type of economic benefit, it also often involves many other types of exchanges as well, including various psychological and spiritual factors.

The joyfully cavorting pairs and groups of figures that originally covered the exteriors of many Hindu temples probably were intended to allude, at least in part, to the sacred sex work practiced at them. Hinduism embraced sexuality as a means through which one could transcend earthly limitations and surrender in ecstasy to the godhead.

The temple complex at Khajuraho (950-1050) features one of the largest displays of sculpture to survive British efforts to eradicate this aspect of Indian culture; varied same-sex couplings are depicted with the



**Top:** An ancient Greek vase painting depicts a man offering a hare to a youth.

**Above:** A prostitute charms his client in this print created by Kitagawa Utamaro in 1788.

The image of the ancient greek vase is adapted from a plate in Licht, Hans, pseudonym of Paul Brandt. *Sittengeschichte Griechenlands in Zwei Bänden und Einem Ergänzungsband.* Dresden und Zürich: Paul Aretz Verlag. 1925-1928.

same zeal and objectivity as those involving both sexes.

The blunt commodification of sexuality can be exemplified by the quickly painted frescoes on the walls of many ancient Roman bathhouses and brothels. In most instances, same-sex encounters are presented alongside scenes of heterosexual intercourse.

However, the so-called *House of Jupiter and Ganymede* (184-192 C.E.), an apartment building that undoubtedly served as a brothel at the Roman port of Ostia, is decorated exclusively with frescoes and graffiti describing many types of sexual encounters between pairs and groups of men.

### **The Art of Tokugawa Japan**

Colored woodcuts produced in Tokugawa Japan (1603-1868) provide the most extensive visual documentation ever produced of queer sex work. For perhaps the only time in recorded history, brothel scenes were avidly collected by large numbers of ordinary middle class collectors.

Moronobu, Shunsho, and Utamaro were among the leading artists who recorded life in the "floating world" pleasure quarters of cities, where working and middle class Japanese citizens could procure entertainment at the legalized brothels, as well as at kabuki theaters and restaurants.

Approximately half of the many hundreds of Tokugawa era prints of brothels involve queer sex workers. Some scenes wittily reveal the monetary basis of the transactions in brothels; for instance, the anonymous *An interrupted tryst with a male prostitute* (approximately 1700) shows a madam stopping a man who has exceeded his allotted time as he is about to penetrate the youth lying beneath him.

However, numerous other images poetically evoke a mood of tender romance between the sex worker and client (for example, Nishikawa Sukenobu's *Customer with boy prostitute*, approximately 1740).

Liaisons with sex workers enabled clients to bypass otherwise rigorously enforced gender and sexual norms. Thus, many of the images show the erect penises of male sex workers protruding out through the women's attire that they habitually wore.

Although women could (and did) freely utilize the services of both male and female sex workers, only about ten percent of brothel scenes represent women as clients. It has been suggested that most of the relatively rare lesbian brothel scenes (such as Katsushika Hokusai's *Lesbian sex with double-headed dildo*, early 1800s) may have been intended primarily to titillate male viewers, but they certainly could have been purchased and enjoyed by women as well.

### **The Art of Early Modern Europe**

In contrast to the situation in Tokugawa Japan, scenes of queer sex workers were relatively rare in early modern Europe, no doubt because of the rigorous suppression of any type of "deviant" behavior. However, it seems likely that many of Caravaggio's early scenes of youths (such as *The Musicians*, 1596) represent the street hustlers with whom he is known to have associated.

A pair of eighteenth-century Venetian prints evokes the allure of transgender sex workers. One of these images depicts a full-bosomed woman in male attire; the other shows a lavishly dressed man, whose (apparently) very large penis has caused his skirts to bulge out.

Most preserved early modern European images depict queer sex work from a very negative point of view. For instance, a sixteenth century Italian majolica plate depicts a monk with a large money bag lustily pointing at the buttocks of a naked boy beneath an inscription that can be translated "I am a monk, I act like a hare."

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, several Symbolist artists catered to the fascination of avant-garde circles with "decadence." Thus, the Belgian artist Félicien Rops produced numerous engravings of lesbian brothel scenes, with notably morbid overtones.

### **Pre-Stonewall Twentieth-Century Art**

In the context of the emerging gay and lesbian communities in major American and European cities in the pre-Stonewall era of the twentieth century, several artists provided more objective images of queer sex work.

For example, in a remarkable series of watercolors, which he allowed only his most intimate gay friends to see, Charles Demuth depicted the solicitation of street hustlers and other types of anonymous sexual encounters. In many of his exhibited paintings, Paul Cadmus also included coded references to queer sex work.

For lesbian and other feminist magazines published in the free environment of 1920s Berlin, Jeanne Mammen created numerous illustrations of the women's club "scene," which prominently featured lesbian sex workers.

*Physique Pictorial* (published by Bob Mizer from 1952 to 1992) and other "underground" erotic publications of the post-World War II era included many images of paid sexual encounters and other activities that flagrantly challenged the legal restrictions of mainstream society.

Similarly, lurid covers (and texts) of women's pulp novels of the 1940s and 1950s often presented provocative images of lesbian sex workers.

Andy Warhol literally starred gay and bisexual sex workers in several of his early, kitschy films, most notably *Blow Job* (1963). Later in his career, Warhol incorporated sex work into the making of his art by hiring street hustlers to urinate on his *Oxidation Paintings* (1978).

### **Post-Stonewall Art**

In the post-Stonewall era, several queer artists have made sex work a primary theme of their work. Prominent among them is David Wojnarowicz, who depicted his experiences as a street hustler in fiercely angry, yet intensely erotic, paintings and prints, as well as in powerful prose works.

Wojnarowicz's close friend, photographer Peter Hujar, created dignified portraits of queer and transgender sex workers. Hujar often suggested the inner strength that enabled his subjects to cope with poverty and other difficulties.

The world of hustlers and their clients is also depicted in several works by Patrick Angus.

Queer and transgender sex workers also are featured prominently in *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* and other ongoing photographic projects by Nan Goldin. Her loving and inclusive representation of gay and transgender sex workers as an essential part of the panorama of her extended family signifies an important transformation in the treatment of this important subject.

### **Bibliography**

Cooper, Emmanuel. *The Sexual Perspective: Homosexuality and Art in the Last 100 Years in the West*. 2nd ed. London and New York: Routledge, 1994.

Davis, Whitney, ed. *Gay and Lesbian Studies in Art History*. New York: Harrington Park Press, 1994.

Leupp, Gary P. *Male Colors*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

Saslow, James M. *Pictures and Passions: A History of Homosexuality in the Visual Arts*. New York: Penguin Putnam, 1999.

### **About the Author**

**Richard G. Mann** is Professor of Art at San Francisco State University, where he regularly offers a two-semester multicultural course in Queer Art History. His publications include *El Greco and His Patrons* and *Spanish Paintings of the Fifteenth through Nineteenth Centuries*.