



## Tom of Finland (Touko Laaksonen) (1920-1991)

by Ken Gonzales-Day

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Iconic artist Tom of Finland has created some of the most indelible (and erotic) images of twentieth-century gay life and has fueled the fantasies of generations of gay men.

Born Touko Laaksonen in the village of Kaarina, Finland on May 8, 1920 to school-teacher parents, the man who was to become Tom of Finland evinced an interest in art as a child. He moved to Helsinki in 1939, where he attended art school and began to create the erotic drawings that would later bring him fame.

In April 1940, after Finland had conceded territory to the Soviet Union as a result of the so-called "Winter War," Laaksonen was drafted into the army. He later saw military action, as Finland permitted German armies access through its territories to invade the Soviet Union, and then was in turn invaded by the Soviets.

After World War II, Laaksonen worked in advertising, while continuing to draw. He became a member of the Helsinki bohemian set, but avoided the small gay subculture because it was dominated by flamboyantly effeminate homosexuals. In 1953, he met Veli, the man who would become his life partner.

In 1956 Laaksonen submitted his drawings to the American bodybuilding magazine *Physique Pictorial*. The editor was delighted with the work and featured Laaksonen's drawing of a lumberjack on the cover of the magazine's Spring 1957 issue.

Like many of the illustrators and photographers whose work appeared in such implicitly gay publications, Laaksonen chose to be published under a pseudonym. Hence was born "Tom of Finland."

At a time when pornography was strictly regulated and individuals could face prison sentences for erotic drawings, Tom's work was particularly daring. Rejecting the use of slender or boyish men to signal a queer subtext, Tom chose to construct the gay male body as a square-jawed, scruffy and stubbled, hyper-masculine knot of bulging muscles with narrow waist and broad shoulders.

In a series entitled "Men of the Forests of Finland," Tom contributed numerous images to *Physique Pictorial* in 1957. His lumberjacks are predatory aggressors who cut down trees and play on logs.

In time, Tom expanded his pantheon of rugged physical types to include the sailor, biker, policeman, and prison guard, providing a little something for everyone. It has been argued that such images may have provided a fantasy space, a mental training ground, for those young men in America's heartland who, in the 1960s and 1970s, would shape the gay rights movement.

Tom's protagonists deserve as much recognition for being well drawn as for their devilish grins, tight jeans, and worked out bodies, but these attributes are themselves significant, for they suggested a gay subculture



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that was defiantly rejecting the invisibility, homophobia, and indignities of pre-Stonewall life.

At a time when an action as simple as going to a gay bar could mean a night in jail for homosexuals, the openness and visibility of Tom's depictions were especially shocking.

Placed in parks, forests, locker rooms, bars, and prison cells, Tom's men seem to wander an array of secluded public spaces but usually not far from small groups of interested onlookers. Their denim bound erections, bursting buttons, and turned up short-sleeves can barely conceal the irrepressible optimism of a gay liberation that was yet to come.

Although innocently posed in the early years, Tom's drawings became more explicit later and they came to take on a more aggressive edge. His work parallels the gay liberation movement (and the relaxation of censorship in the face of the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s) in that it progresses to depict nudity, the fully erect penis, leather accoutrements, and eventually S&M scenes.

At times in his drawings, Tom allows the engorged member a scale and prominence not found in nature but perfectly at home in the highly charged world of gay male desire.

Part of the significance of Tom's work is that it so openly depicts sexual desire between conventionally masculine men. Indeed, Tom's drawings present a hyper-masculine, working-class version of homosexual manhood that anticipated the emergence of the "clone" look in the 1970s.

But despite the exaggerated masculinity of his subjects, and even the brutality of some of their actions, Tom also injects both tenderness and amusement into his depictions.

Laaksonen worked in advertising until 1973, when he was finally able to support himself through his art. After 1973, his work began to be exhibited in museums and galleries worldwide. For many, it continues to be the quintessence of gay male erotic art.

In 1979, with his friend and business manager Durk Dehner, Laaksonen founded the Tom of Finland Company, which led in 1986 to the creation of the Tom of Finland Foundation, which is the official archive of Tom's work and a collection of gay male erotic art.

Laaksonen's longtime companion Veli died in 1981, and the artist in 1991.

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## **About the Author**

**Ken Gonzales-Day** is a Professor of Art at Scripps College in Claremont, California. His art has been included in solo and group shows in Los Angeles, Guadalajara, Mexico City, and New York. He has published in *Art Journal*, *Art & Text*, *Artissues*, *Artpapers*, and *Poliester*.