



## Tuke, Henry Scott (1858-1929)

by Joyce M. Youmans

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In the late 1880s, British artist Henry Scott Tuke became part of a circle of poets and writers who wrote about and discussed the beauty of male youth. Tuke's paintings typically celebrate male beauty, as well as the artist's lifelong love of the sea, swimming, and sailing.

Tuke was born in York in 1858 to Quaker parents and moved with them to London in 1874. He was educated at the Slade School of Art, traveled to Italy in 1880, and lived in Paris from 1881 until 1883.

In Paris, he studied with the French history painter Paul Laurens and met the American painter John Singer Sargent.

Tuke also met Oscar Wilde in the 1880s and developed connections with the Uranian poets and writers who celebrated the adolescent male. He wrote a sonnet to youth that was published anonymously in the journal *The Artist* and also contributed an essay to *The Studio*, another journal that published Uranian verse and essays.

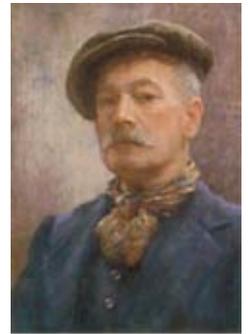
Tuke settled in a Cornish town near Falmouth Bay in 1885. He converted his boat into a floating studio and living quarters where he could pose his models and entertain his friends. Although he was also an accomplished portraitist, most of his works depict young men who swim, dive, and lounge on a boat or on the beach.

Early in his career, Tuke's major compositions were narrative or anecdotal. In the oil painting *All Hands to the Pumps!* (1888-1889), for example, seven figures aboard a sailboat on a violent, stormy sea exercise their strength and endurance to fight the elements. Overall, however, the painting possesses a contrived quality that does not successfully convey the drama of the moment.

In several other canvases from this period, Tuke attempts to situate his studies of male nudes within mythological contexts. The resultant works, among them *Cupid and Sea Nymphs* (1898-1899), have a stiff, lifeless quality.

While attempting to discover in which settings to position his nudes, Tuke realized that he desired to examine the human form separate from any meaning-laden context. During the 1890s, he began to render nude figures without reference to mythological or narrative themes. This method particularly suited Tuke: his handling of paint became freer, and he began using bold, fresh color.

*August Blue* (1893-1894), one of the most famous paintings from this period, is a study of four nude youths bathing from a boat in crystal clear water under bright blue skies. The work conveys a sense of enjoyment, of the simple innocence of sunlight on flesh, sea, and sky. With *August Blue*, Tuke established a genre that celebrates male beauty and the seeming timelessness of youth.



Three paintings by Henry Scott Tuke:

**Top:** A self-portrait (1920).

**Center:** *Ruby, Gold, and Malachite* (1902).

**Above:** *Bathing Group (Noonday Heat)* (1911).

Tuke's paintings of nude youths illustrate sensual, rather than sexual, feelings. They are not explicit either in the relationships they describe or in the details of the body.

The oil painting *Noonday Heat* (1903), for example, presents two youths who, relaxing on the beach, are completely engrossed in their own private world. They look at one another, perhaps engaged in conversation. Since neither of them addresses the viewer, their relationship seems intimate, exclusive, and ambiguous.

Similarly, the watercolor *Two Boys on a Beach* (1909) captures a close, intense relationship. In this work, the absence of a horizon heightens the feeling of intimacy.

Tuke only rarely painted the genitals of his models, thereby de-emphasizing a sexual reading of his works. The artist generally arranged his models so that anatomical details are concealed. In frontal views, shadows or draped pieces of clothing obscure the genitals.

Tuke's de-emphasis of the sexual may explain why his work, and his close friendships with many of his models, created no scandals.

Henry Scott Tuke worked outside the mainstream of his contemporaries. During a time when smooth, concealed brushstrokes were in vogue, Tuke favored rough, visible brushstrokes. He excelled at combining this type of brushstroke with color to produce unusual lighting effects that stall the viewer's eye on the nude male body.

Tuke also moved away from the popular historical and mythological scenes, indeed from any type of narration, and studied everyday life as a worthy subject matter.

Although Tuke is best known today for his gently homoerotic paintings, in his own time he was also well known as a portraitist and maintained a London studio to work on his commissions. Among his best known portraits is that of soldier and writer T. E. Lawrence.

After a long illness, Tuke died at Falmouth in 1929.

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## **About the Author**

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