

Bethesda Fountain to Sheridan Square: Gays and Lesbians in New York's Visual Arts, 1900-1940

© 2001

James M. Saslow

Department of Art, Queens College and the Graduate Center, CUNY

Saturday October 6, 2001

[Bracketed text = caption for pictures (not included here)]

[BETHESDA FOUNTAIN, ANGEL OF THE WATERS: EMMA STEBBINS]

Around the time when Walt Whitman, the patron saint of of American gay culture, rhapsodized in his *Leaves of Grass* about roaming the Brooklyn and Manhattan waterfronts in search of “well-formed, beautiful-faced mechanics,” the familiar Bethesda Fountain in Central Park was being cast by Emma Stebbins, who got the commission thanks to her well-connected lover, the drag actress Charlotte Cushman. Since that mid-19th century, New York has been a prime incubator of gay and lesbian culture, including the visual arts. This prominence derives from an important historical coincidence: New York is the center of many worlds, two of which have overlapped synergistically: the international art world, and the nation’s, if not the globe’s, largest homosexual community. The Angel of the Waters in Central Park is not overtly lesbian in content; but she reminds us that a meaningful survey of the gay presence in local art must encompass much more than mere subject matter. For example, issues of personal biography: might Emma have seen this protective, smiling female figure as an allegory of her love for Charlotte? And I would include in the scope of “gay art” not only the widest array of subject matter -- images of, by, or for gay people, whether positive or hostile -- but also the major roles that members of this community have played as patrons, collectors, critics, curators, and dealers, as well as audiences. And I would add their

participation in not only traditional high culture, but also in the mass popular culture, where gays have been practitioners of commercial art and design as well as consumers.

["LORD CORNBURY" PORTRAIT, NEW-YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY]

We may trace a few distant ancestors, such as the New-York Historical Society's portrait of an 18th-century colonial lady, who has long been supposed to be our city's English governor Lord Cornbury in drag. There's no solid evidence for this hypothesis, but its dogged persistence as a high-brow rumor reveals the city's openness to, and even desire for, such originating myths and historical precedents -- that "gay tinge" attached to our local culture. But the continuous story of gay/lesbian art in New York began in the early twentieth century, and can be divided into three phases, bracketed by broader cultural watersheds: World War I, World War II, and the Stonewall Riot of 1969, which gave birth to the contemporary gay movement. That story had, from the beginning, three intertwined strands: first was the usual subjects of art history, the high culture of mainstream galleries, museums, and publications. But alongside that sphere, the burgeoning technological metropolis developed two other distinctly modern worlds. One: the urban homosexual subculture reached an unprecedented size, a critical mass from which emerged images of gays made -- and paid for -- by themselves. Second: urban society spawned a mass popular culture which challenged traditional painting for dominance of the public eye and mind, and which visualized and commented on the gay world from diverse viewpoints. Like everyone else, homosexuals were consumers of this new culture; but they were also particularly drawn to its creative and relatively tolerant milieu, so that by the 1960s gay men had become a familiar segment of the city's signature visual industries: fashion, the media, entertainment, and publishing.

It would be instructive to trace this new culture from its origin to the present, but the story is so rich and complex that I will confine my talk to surveying the first phase, up to World War II. This is a road map, not a detailed atlas; but it seemed useful in the context of this conference to suggest, however impressionistically, the many productive

intersections between “gay” and “art” during the formative years of both important local communities.

Well before the First World War, American expatriates, including many lesbian and gay New Yorkers, flooded to Europe seeking both the artistic and sexual avant-garde; European refugees from that war returned the visit, as the cultural balance began to tip westward. Artists on both sides of the Atlantic struggled to express a radically new world, questioning all traditions and values. The problem of narrative -- what stories are worth telling? -- set off a search for new subject matter, paralleled by the problem of a new style. Art branched into three broad “isms.” The first two were the avant-garde: the formalist Abstraction of High Modernism and the humorous or disturbing psychological experiments of Surrealism and its godparent, Dada. The third school -- traditional Realism -- was thrown on the defensive, but it continued to hold the fort of social comment and documentation, or genre. Some gays and lesbians participated in each of these trends, but their most congenial outlets for self-exploration were in Realism, or in Surrealistic evocations of the irrational and the erotic -- and also in the emerging commercial arts.

[GERTRUDE STEIN Portrait by Man Ray]

After the Lexington Avenue Armory Show of 1913 introduced new continental art to this city, New York became an eager outpost of European experiments. The first movement, Modernism, was nourished by the two-way traffic of artists and writers between Gotham and Paris: Dada pioneer Marcel Duchamp arrived here in 1917, while gay American painters Charles Demuth and Marsden Hartley sailed for France, where they attended the salon of the expatriate Gertrude Stein. Stein and her companion Alice B Toklas (photo, ca. 1910), were only two of the wealthy and talented American lesbians who earned Paris a reputation as the “sapphic capital.” Stein’s literary innovations, plus her critical and financial support of writers and artists, won her fame as the century’s premier lesbian and the midwife of Modernism. She visited and worked briefly in New

York, but never lived here -- a reminder that the city, though growing rapidly, was still a provincial outpost of Europe. But many of her compatriots in Paris *were* New Yorkers:

[BERENICE ABBOTT, PORTRAIT OF DJUNA BARNES, 1926]

Portraits of lesbians by lesbians along the New York-Paris axis were a specialty of photographer Berenice Abbott. Better known as the chronicler of New York architecture, she also became the favorite portraitist for the lesbian elite, whose style owed a great deal to the liberated ideal of the "New Woman." Fashioning themselves as competent and "masculine," they often adopted a mannish wardrobe that was appealing to certain lesbian sensibilities. Abbott was sought after by androgynous tastemakers like Janet Flanner (who sent home the New Yorker magazine's "Letters from Paris" for fifty years) and her female lover. Abbott and Djuna Barnes, a writer and visual artist, met in New York, but Barnes commissioned this portrait about 1926 in Paris, where Barnes had moved with *her* lover, the sculptor Thelma Wood. Portrayed here in a suggestive mix of tailored tweeds and a metallicly chic turban and pearls, Barnes penned satirical novels about her sapphic friends, and illustrated them with comical drawings; she returned to live in Greenwich Village as an eccentric recluse until the 1980s. Although Abbott stayed resolutely in the closet all her life, her sharp-focus realism and freedom from feminine stereotypes all but invented the lesbian lens, gazing at these "new women" in sympathetic identification.

[CHARLES DEMUTH, DISTINGUISHED AIR, 1930]

On the male side, the modernist most involved in gay culture was Charles Demuth, who returned from Stein's Paris to the bohemian circles from Sheridan Square up to Harlem. He also frequented the salon of the whimsical painter and hostess Florine Stettheimer, who portrayed him along with their mutual friends among the gay cultural luminaries, such as composer Virgil Thomson and photographer Carl Van Vechten. This sophisticated creative crowd crossed many borders, both aesthetic and social, as they deconstructed the lines between high and mass culture, between blacks and whites,

between straights and queers. This watercolor, "Distinguished Air," from 1930, illustrates a memoir of the "Cabaret" era, in which a gallery display of Brancusi's phallic sculpture, Princess X, attracts a gently satirized crowd, including a sailor and a gentleman who stand furtively hand-in-hand, while the man at left with the cane (Demuth himself) discreetly ogles the sailor. Though nominally set in Germany, the sailor's uniform could as well be American, and certainly mirrors the basic conditions of gay life here: Homosexuality was illegal, and was tolerated if it remained discreet -- so that art, like the men in this scene, had to walk a tightrope, and images from this period emphasize themes of secrecy, masquerade, and camp.

[DEMUTH, ON "THAT" STREET, 1932]

Demuth never dared to exhibit his confessional series of watercolors documenting New York's gay erotic life, too explicitly for contemporary proprieties -- like this Brooklyn waterfront scene from 1932. The sailor in Distinguished Air is a polite brother of Demuth's many other navy boys, who dance together, fondle each other's penises, or, as here, get caught in a tense interrogation by a police officer. The title, "On 'That' Street," puts quote marks around "that," hinting at the neighborhood's reputation without naming it. He didn't have to: the city's great port facilities made sailors ubiquitous, and the sexual reputation Whitman gave them remained familiar.

[TURKISH BATH -- Demuth, 1915-18]

He also recorded that newly-popular institution, the bathhouse, whose atmosphere was "steamy" in both senses of the word. The towel-clad men prowling New York's Lafayette Baths offer the first glimpses of this sanitary import from Europe, which provided gay men a new playground for nudity and sexual contact, though at the risk of police raids. There is little love in these pictures, only anonymous pickups and voyeuristic glances. They reflect Demuth's own emotional life, which was limited by illness, as well as the limits on *all* social relations among an outlawed group.

[MARCEL DUCHAMP as RROSE SELAVY, MAN RAY PHOTO, 1920]

At Stettheimer's salon, Demuth and his Modernist friends could rub shoulders with representatives of the second major movement, Dada and Surrealism -- most importantly, with Marcel Duchamp, the French pioneer of Dada, who took refuge from World War I and stayed until his death in 1968. Now Duchamp wasn't gay, but he might as well have been. Where High Modernism was mathematical and rational, these artists were dedicated to the irrational, from psychology and intuition to chance and chaos. As this photo of Duchamp in drag attests, his work betrays a lifelong flirtation with desire, gender ambiguity, and cross-dressing that dovetails with Dada's nose-thumbing at all conventions. In 1920 he invented his female alter ego, "Rose Sélavy" (a pun on "Eros is life"), who signed many of his works. Duchamp may have been inspired to create Rose on his forays into local pop culture, especially to Harlem drag balls (of which more later); she made her visual debut when the American Man Ray photographed him/her in a series of fashionable Jazz Age outfits.

[DUCHAMP: "BELLE HALEINE, EAU DE VOILETTE," 1920-21]

Duchamp then collaged one of Rose's portraits onto the label of an imaginary perfume bottle, the very symbol of feminine allure. This matronly lady in a cloche hat is charming and droll, but actually, images as such were no longer Duchamp's main focus; he increasingly abandoned painting for esoteric projects like this one, more concerned with pure ideas than with object-making. In the '20s, Duchamp's celebration of ironic self-consciousness and erotic ambiguity drove a wedge for camp subversion of all norms, whether artistic or sexual. Even today, his drastic redefinition of art, along with his transgressive high-jinks, continue to serve as a beacon for today's postmodernists. Duchamp was not gay, but Rose is certainly "queer."

[F. STETTMEIER, DUCHAMP PORTRAIT, ca 1923]

Duchamp's camp side certainly appealed to his hostess, Florine Stettmeier. If he was a straight man who might as well have been a transvestite, she was a sexless

spinster in an all-female household who might as well have been a gay man. At her salon, she exhibited a bemused fondness for sophisticated genderplay: her own paintings were campy glorifications of herself and her friends, including numerous gay notables. She painted Duchamp's portrait in 1923 seated next to a moving sculpture of Rose Selavy, whose adjustable pedestal he operates with a toylike crank.

Many of Stettheimer and Duchamp's New York contemporaries also favored Surrealist styles, notably the circle around the writer Charles Henri Ford and his lover, émigré Russian painter Pavel Tchelitchew. Ford, a photographer and filmmaker, still lives in the Dakota apartment building, at age 93; for lack of time here today, I refer you to the new documentary film about him, "Sleep in a Nest of Flames."

[PAUL CADMUS, SEEING THE NEW YEAR IN, 1939]

Alongside the two European-born movements of formalism and surrealism, interwar New York incubated a third series of trends, known as Social Realism -- especially after the Depression inspired art dedicated to social comment. Though realism too had European roots, its Gotham flowering was more of a home-grown phenomenon, focused on documenting the less elevated social circles, including gay bohemia. Reginald Marsh, a leader of the so-called "Fourteenth-Street School," made etchings of working-class girls and other same-sex couples dancing together in cheap nightspots, which were popular gay and lesbian hangouts. Most important for our purposes is Paul Cadmus, the only realist who made his own gay surroundings a central theme of his career, at considerable cost. As the unofficial painter laureate of New York gay life from the 1930s right down to his death in the late 1990s at 94, he depicted genre scenes in which gay men, and a few lesbians, feature as integral parts of the city's human comedy. His images glare at human foibles with a satire that spares homosexuals no less than complacent suburbanites.

Cadmus documented gay and mixed milieus, from the infamous 63rd Street YMCA locker room to this raucous and crude New Year's party in 1939 Greenwich

Village -- America's original bohemia, a haven for all non-conformists, including artists and homosexuals. Typically, Cadmus tucks the gay subplot into the background at rear right, a part of the larger scene but possible for those not "in on the joke" to overlook. The two men in animated conversation are marked as what were then called "fairies," by their dyed blond hair, tweezed eyebrows, languid gestures, and red necktie -- a series of coded stylistics through which group members could identify one another safely in the urban crowd.

[THE FLEET'S IN, 1934]

The Fleet's In, one of a trilogy of monumental sailor scenes painted in 1934, depicts New York's cruisy Riverside Park with irreverence and documentary precision. Under the pickle-faced glare of an elderly bluestocking, raunchy sailors on shore leave consort with floozies while, in the left background, a slick-haired blond offers one seaman a cigarette. His plucked eyebrows, rouge, and multiple finger-rings tip off the knowing that he is trying to make a pick-up, as does -- once again -- his red necktie. Although commissioned by the federal government, when the scene was displayed in Washington, public outcry provoked the Assistant Secretary of the Navy to yank it off the wall. The controversy guaranteed a succès de scandale; Cadmus later said, "I owe the start of my career to the admiral who tried to suppress it."

[CADMUS, "Fantasia on a Theme by Dr. S." 1946]

A final Cadmus image, this one documenting the growth of gay community and its artistic longings. Fantasia on a Theme by Dr. S. (1946) spoofs the denizens of Fire Island, the wilderness beach off nearby Long Island that was fast becoming a gay hide-away, including a sunburned lesbian couple, a musclebound sailor wannabe, and a limp-wristed fairy. This canvas personified the Island's magic allure, as a haven where gays could let their hair down without fear. When the Whitney Museum, then located in Greenwich Village, bought this picture, they kept selling out their postcards of it: it must

have fallen on the eyes of the coalescing gay community, hungry for self-images but accustomed to cultural crumbs, like aesthetic manna.

[DEMUTH, CARL VAN VECHTEN IN A HARLEM CABARET]

Soon after World War I, regardless of their aesthetic and sexual preferences, the mainstream world of white high culture flocked to Harlem. New York's mushrooming African-American community was the jazzy capital of black culture. From drawing rooms and nightclubs to speakeasies, the Harlem Renaissance offered a creative magnet and a tolerant oasis, an exciting intersection of races, classes, and orientations. Artists and writers basked in the patronage of a prosperous educated elite; in her Sugar Hill mansion, cosmetics heiress A'Lelia Walker hosted elaborate soirées for her female lovers and a salon open to gay male friends and artists. The gay critic and editor Alain Locke played impresario, orchestrating white patronage for writers like Langston Hughes, black America's poet laureate (who hid his gay affairs). With black culture briefly in vogue, artists like Demuth and Duchamp joined the tourists flocking uptown -- as did Stein and Stettheimer's gay friend Carl Van Vechten, a writer and photographer who played publicist and portraitist for the Renaissance artists, gay and straight.

[RICHARD BRUCE NUGENT: DAVID AND GOLIATH, 1947]

Although gays and lesbians were integrated into Harlem life, the situation was ambivalent, and Richard Bruce Nugent sorely tested the limits of acceptability. Nugent dabbled in poetry, painting, caricature, and theater, but most enjoyed shocking his more traditional brethren with open promiscuity and sensational images. Drawings like this "David and Goliath" turn the tales so beloved of churchgoing Harlem matrons into a pretext for eroticized semi-nudity. He helped found and illustrate the short-lived magazine Fire!, in which his autobiographical story "Smoke, Lilies, and Jade" told of a black Harlem artist discovering his bisexuality when he falls for a young Hispanic Adonis, whose nude body he describes with near-pornographic fever.

[F. GARCIA LORCA, COLLAGE, WALT WHITMAN]

Nugent's Hispanic fantasy had plenty of basis in the realities of that time. The city's gay appeal was becoming international: the Spanish poet and artist Federico García Lorca spent a year studying at Columbia University in 1929-30. Lorca had sketched his fantasies, including eroticized sailors, since his student days; so when he chronicled his enthusiasm for the political and sexual openness of American society, and his own erotic awakening which took place here, in a verse anthology called *Poet in New York*, he illustrated it with his own surreal images. The section titled "Ode to Walt Whitman"-- the premiere symbol for the homosexuality he had chronicled in our town -- was accompanied by this photocollage of Whitman's snowy beard swarming with butterflies (a pun on mariposa, also Spanish slang for a homosexual). Lorca also wrote harsh yet uplifting dramas that wept for his homeland, spiritually and sexually stultified by the Franco regime. For his freethinking ideas on sex, politics, and religion the Fascists assassinated him in 1938?; Lorca's executioner bragged "[I] fired two bullets into his ass for being a maricón [a fag]."

[JAMES VAN DER ZEE, "BEAU OF THE BALL," 1927]

The highlights of the Harlem social season were costume dances held at cavernous ballrooms like the Savoy. Many guests competed for prizes in lavish drag outfits. One radiantly chic contest queen was posed by James VanDerZee, Harlem's reigning photographer, as the "Beau of the Ball" in 1927. Though his punning title lets us in on the gender joke, far from caricaturing the sitter, VanDerZee glamorizes "her" just as he did A'Lelia Walker and legions of heterosexuals. Among a people struggling for respectability, the skill to measure up to bourgeois standards trumped sexual nonconformity. Ebony magazine, the voice of the black middle class, later enthused: "The men who don silks, satins and laces for the yearly masquerades are as style-conscious as the women of a social club planning an annual charity affair or a society dowager selecting a debutante gown for her favorite daughter."

[DRAG BALL CARTOON, Amsterdam News, 1936: “And Girls, how they carried on!”]

Other surviving Harlem images were not aimed at the elite or the avant-garde, but the general public. The black press, in common with mainstream newspapers and magazines like *Vanity Fair*, depicted the gay scene, usually satirically. This cartoon appeared in 1936 in the *Amsterdam News*, still the city's black paper of record. Captioned “Girls, How They Carried On!,” it shows two black men at lower left gawking at a white queen, two queens at upper center tearing each other's hair, and another at upper right unsure which restroom to go into. The tone is light-hearted -- more puzzled and titillated than upset -- showing how homosexuality was considered colorful, naughty, funny, but not really a “problem” that needed to be taken seriously.

[LESBIAN CARTOON, BROADWAY BREVITIES, 1932]

The press's humorous awareness of deviants extended equally to women. This cartoon appeared in the satirical periodical “*Broadway Brevities*” in 1932. The tuxedoed gentleman in the center at this lively “SPOT IN THE VILLAGE,” bored because the women around him are more interested in kissing each other, says, “I think I'll call Percy....” In several couples, like the one at the right, one of the pair wears a men's suit, a fashion familiar from Abbott's photo portraits.

[J. C. LEYENDECKER, ARROW COLLAR AD, ca 1915]

In these same years, New York was also becoming the nerve center for other popular art forms, the mass visual media brought into being by corporate commerce and its advertising industry, including publishing and the print media, and later television -- all of which carried heavily gendered baggage. For 3/4 of a century, new fields like graphic and media design, fashion styling, and commercial photography, which reward artistic flair with access to glamour and tacit tolerance, have attracted legions of that stereotypical subspecies known as the “design queen.” Their godparent was the German immigrant Joseph Leyendecker, who modeled America's original “Arrow Collar Man” on

his Canadian lover, Charles Beach -- here, one example from about 1915. Advertising psychology rests on sex appeal, on awakening the fetishistic desire to own or to buy whose sexual undercurrent sparks the dual meaning of "possession." No doubt Leyendecker jumped at the chance to mint Madison Avenue's prototype of suave masculinity. But from the outset the eroticized male body posed the ticklish problem of homophobia; if men are being looked at, can sex be far behind? Leyendecker's classic solution was to flirt with the phallic glow of upscale glamour, yet remain noncommittal. A mass audience might imagine the chumminess of these two men taking place in some exclusive men's club, but a blank background permitted gay viewers to project their own brand of domestic bliss. To this day, marketing exploits that same ambiguity, attempting to stimulate the eyes, the genitals, and the wallets of the most prospective buyers while turning off the fewest.

[ANONYMOUS PHOTO, PATERSON, NJ, 1905: "DON'T SHOW ANYONE"]

One frequent claim by homophobic historians is that this kind of subtextual reading is mere speculation. Quote: "How can you know there was a 'gay gaze'? There's no written proof." One example of why there is so little first-person testimony is this postcard from 1905, recently exhibited at David Deitcher's touching exhibit of anonymous photos of men together -- a suggestively common genre in the 19th century. This portrait of two men in work clothes, with their arms thrown affectionately around each other, was inscribed from Paterson, New Jersey -- just across the Hudson River. "Best regards to all the folks," writes one of the pair, "but don't show this to anyone." The sense of a secret fraternity, of outward respectability maintained by secret codes and coy discretion, is palpable, but by definition, can never be spoken.

[WEEGEE. TRANSVESTITE IN A POLICE VAN, 1941]

Much of this busy, if discreet, artistic scene ended around World War II. By 1941, when the tabloid press photographer known as Weegee captured this drag queen showing off in a paddy wagon during a police raid, attitudes toward deviancy had begun

to harden. The 1950s are infamous now for suburban conformity and the suppression of unorthodox opinions that culminated in McCarthyism. That chapter of gay expression is understandably somewhat more meager and straitjacketed than before the war -- but that's a story for another occasion, as is the eventual flowering of gay and lesbian self-expression after 1969.

[PICASSO, PORTRAIT OF GERTRUDE STEIN, 1906]

A brief but significant coda to the art of the interwar years: Pablo Picasso's 1906 portrait of Gertrude Stein, a pivotal picture in the development of Cubism, was equally pivotal in Stein's campaign to perpetuate her own reputation. Regally self-contained yet hunched forward in keen but unblinking curiosity, the image perfectly captured how she wanted to come down to posterity. After her death, she shrewdly donated it to the Metropolitan Museum. Her bequest has served her well, and also her cultural grandchildren: thanks to the godmother of modernism itself, we have had "the" lesbian icon of the last century hanging in our most prestigious museum, like a patron saint overlooking, and still blessing, contemporary culture.

I've only been able to sketch this formative period of our local gay history with the broadest brush, and much still remains unstudied. Enterprising graduate students out there looking for research topics, come see me upstairs. The rest of you, stay tuned for further developments.