



Art and Homosexuality: A History of Ideas

Christopher Reed

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Product Description

This bold, globe-spanning survey is the first book to thoroughly explore the radical, long-standing interdependence between art and homosexuality. It draws examples from the full range of the Western tradition, including classical, Renaissance, and contemporary art, with special focus on the modern era. It was in the modern period, when arguments about homosexuality and the avant-garde were especially public, that our current conception of the artist and the homosexual began to take shape, and almost as quickly to overlap. Not a chronology of gay or lesbian artists, the book is a fascinating and sophisticated account of the ways two conspicuous identities have fundamentally informed one another. *Art and Homosexuality* discusses many of modernism's canonical figures--painters like Courbet, Picasso, and Pollock; writers like Whitman and Stein--and issues, such as the rise of abstraction, the avant-garde's relationship to its patrons and the political exploitation of art. It shows that many of the core ideas that define modernism are nearly indecipherable without an understanding of the paired identities of artist and homosexual. Illustrated with over 175 b/w and color images that range from high to popular culture and from Ancient Greece to contemporary America, *Art and Homosexuality* punctures the platitudes surrounding discussions of both aesthetics and sexual identity and takes our understanding of each in stimulating new directions.

Amazon Exclusive: Author Q&A with Christopher Reed



Arrow Shirt Collar advertisement, J.C. Leyendecker, 1910.
Photo courtesy of Archives of the American Illustrators Gallery, New York.

Q: Sexuality in art is a very personal thing, expressed and interpreted in many different ways. What does sexuality in art mean to you? **A:** That depends on what you mean by "personal." It's true, of course, we all experience our own erotic and aesthetic emotions personally, but they are experienced in relation to other people or things. And the categories of "sexuality" and "art" are social and collective. Different cultures create and develop them in different ways. The book is about those patterns. One of the primary ways our culture has defined art and sexuality is as expressions of individualism – that is as "personal." Our culture puts huge – probably historically unprecedented – value on the idea of individualism. Because we have made art and sexuality primary markers of individualism, they are enormously important to our culture. Just look at the expenditures of time and money we devote to them – and at the intense pleasures and frustrations they bring us. But if we look at how tastes change--tastes in sex and in art--we see that they do so across cultures. It's paradoxical but true: Our sense of what individualism is is shared and collective. What this book does is trace the way modern culture conjoined the kinds of individualism represented by the "artist" and the "homosexual" so that these were seen as closely interrelated types: outsiders, sensitive to aesthetics, who gravitated to cities and shocked conventional sensibilities by acting on their unconventional impulses. **Q:**

Will any of the artists in the book surprise people? **A:** Well I suppose that depends on how easily surprised people are! There are a lot of heavy hitters in the book, from Michelangelo to Andy Warhol. Maybe people will be surprised by the not-homosexual artists who play a role in the history the book lays out, people like Marcel Duchamp and George Segal. It's really no exaggeration to say that virtually every modern artist had to deal with ideas about homosexuality in some way because of the stereotypes that became so powerful about artists being gay. So almost any artists could be included. What I think might surprised people more is the range of "art" included in the book, which stretches from Native American weavings to European glassware to modern magazine advertising. **Q:** How much is censorship a part of the history and present of homosexuality in art? Does any particular period stand out as being more or less conservative? **A:** Censorship is a tricky term. There are the very obvious cases of censorship, like when the Speaker of the House phones up the Smithsonian and demands the removal of David Wojnarowicz's video, *A Fire in My Belly*, from the *Hide/Seek* show recently. Those episodes are probably the least dangerous kinds of censorship. For one thing, they result in the supposedly censored image being much more widely circulated (through the news media, on the web, etc.) than it ever would have been without the censorship. What is far more pernicious than such overt censorship are the subtler forms of self-censorship practiced by museums, commercial art galleries, and individual artists. To return to the example of the recent controversy over Wojnarowicz's *A Fire in My Belly* video, some of the museums that rushed to purchase and display the video once it was in the news for being censored had themselves refused to take the *Hide/Seek* exhibition, which was the first major museum exhibition in the US to focus on sexual identity as such. No major museum would touch this topic for a show. It was simply too controversial. And the same thinking excluded art that dealt with non-normative sexuality from lots of smaller shows at museums and galleries everywhere. And the same thinking makes commercial galleries turn away from art that deals with the politics of sexual identity. And that makes artists self-censor, both in their art and in the kinds of things they think and say about their art. I have examples of these dynamics in the book. When you have an art world that constantly claims to be promoting and celebrating artistic individualism, but it has ruled expressions of any kind of politics of identity out of bounds, that's dangerous. Beyond its implications for artistic innovation, it limits everyone's ability to think about the possible range of their individual desires, passions, and pleasures. And I would say that right now is one of the most conservative eras for that kind of censorship. It's hard to recognize, because we can't see things that are not being made, or not shown. And it's hard to think about ideas that are not being discussed. But these dynamics are very clear if we look back to the 1990s, when the art world--because of AIDS--was engaging these issues, and that engagement was rapidly shut down, not just by political conservatives but by academics and critics associated with the avant-garde. The chapter in my book on that gives some really egregious examples quoting people like Hal Foster who continue to be very influential in the contemporary art world today.

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