

Classical Nudes

and the Making of Queer History

Curated by
Jonathan David Katz

Leslie-Lohman
Museum of Gay
and Lesbian Art



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"Consciously or unconsciously, artists have usually recognized that in making a nude, their real object is not to reproduce the naked body but to imitate some view of what the naked body should be."

Sir Kenneth Clark
The Nude: A study in ideal form

with uncovering our collective queer past—an obsession that I fully and wholeheartedly share—carries a significant, if unspoken, correlate. To uncover our queer past implies that that past must somehow have looked like our present—that akin to cruising in public today, you would know a homo when you see one. We want a gay past that looks like our present, for how else could



Agnolo Bronzino, *Portrait of Cosimo I de' Medici as Orpheus*, ca. 1537-39, Collection of Philadelphia Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. John Wintersteen, 1950

we possibly recognize it as our gay past? Modern homosexuality needs to find a familiar picture of the past in order to claim that we have always been around, that homosexuality is a transhistorical category, variously either celebrated (the Greeks) or repressed (Judeo-Christians) but always and everywhere present. That claim is key to our self-described minority status. Love us or hate us, we have always been here. Yet at the same time—and this is the rub—we need to show evidence that there have also been wild shifts in the social construction of a homosexual identity, that we may not in fact recognize past versions of queerness, because we need to establish homosexuality as an unpredictable, continuously shifting historical category. And why do we need homosexuality to be shifting and unpredictable? In order to make it historical, because the sole truth of history is that it changes, and history, after all, is the chronicle of these changes. A homosexuality that looked like our present queer world wouldn't—couldn't—be historical, just a self-evident projection onto the past of our present. We want our queer past to look and feel like the past, and in its remoteness, remind us that it was really long ago.

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That is where the classical nude comes in. It is both deeply, self-evidently historical and utterly familiar. The classical nude figures spaces where men touch other men—and women other women—sensuously and without shame.



Torso del Belvedere, ca. 1st century CE., Collection of Museo Pio-Clementino, Vatican Museums, Photo: Yair Haklai

It evokes a social world where nude people gather, their lithe, trim, beautiful bodies on permanent display, the highest realization of our physical ideal of beauty. Now are we talking about the gymnasium of Plato's time or its current incarnation, the gay bathhouse, the queer gym, the nude beach? The classical nude, modern or historical, is a civic form of homoeroticism, and that is at once what is so familiar and so strange about it. On the one hand, it is manifestly remote—who can afford a life-size marble sculpture these days?—and yet at the same time so very contemporary that we hardly have to look at a classical nude to see it; we know it so well. We see classical nudes every day,

and yet in seeing them, we also know that they are artifacts of the past—and that the past and present live, together, in them.

There is nothing better than a classical nude to frame and sharpen one of the defining questions we have about our history; did long-ago homosexuals find the possibility of a socially acceptable visual tradition in the canon of the classical nude, or rather did the classical nude, in its clear evidence of a queer past, catalyze the development of that identity we now call, variably,

homosexual, LGBTQ, Queer? Which is to say, did the homosexual invent the classical nude or did the classical nude invent the homosexual? The stakes of this debate are high. In asking if it was homosexuals who developed and sustained the tradition of the classical nude, or if it was the classical nude, and its implicit reference to a long homoerotic history, that helped create modern homosexuality, we are really asking where did we, as modern queers, come from. Let me clarify that I am talking about our identity here, not sexual acts. Queer people, not queer sex. In other words, homosexual as a noun, not the verb as Foucault famously put it. Homosexual acts are of course as old as sex itself. The question I am concerned with is how people understood themselves, how they developed what today we rather blithely call their "sexuality." The other point of clarification is that the classical nudes in this exhibition are almost exclusively male bodies until the late 19th century. Since we are explicitly interested only in homoerotic imagery, we were unable to find female artists actively representing female nudes before this period—a product both of a generalized historical sexism and of the particular forms of guild-specific exclusions that actively kept women out of the arts unless they happened to be lucky enough to be born into an artist family.

On one side of this debate, we can find the man deemed the founder of art history, the German classicist Johann Joachim Winckelmann. For him and so many others, the enticingly erotic flavor of classical nudes was made socially acceptable, even respectable, by virtue of the iconic status of its tradition. For Winckelmann and his kind, to see a work of art homoerotically had the benefit of a form of in-built camouflage; in that homoeroticism was made literally invisible in this context by virtue of classicism's sacrosanct cultural status. But implicit in this formulation is a buried historical claim; that homosexual aesthetes found in classicism a perfect opportunity for an eroticism that was socially and culturally above reproach. This, then, is the first of our positions: that the classical nude reflected a homosexual identity already nascent in classical times.

On the other hand, we could instead just as easily argue that Winckelmann, upon studying the context of the creation of such enticing nudes, finally came to recognize them as a kind of mirror of his own inchoate desires. Here the classical nude, with its implicit linkage to a homoerotic past, helped to usher into existence a form of identification with the classical tradition of same-sex love, and thus, that seeing these works of art helped bring about the erotic identity it was instead taken to represent. In other words, classical nudes helped bring our modern LGBTQ identity into existence.

This is the theoretical stand-off and the problem cannot be solved by pushing one or another of these perspectives ahead, because the very issue, the central problem itself, is that homosexuality as we know it today—as a

category of sexual identity distinct from, and in opposition to, heterosexuality—is a modern framing that would have been utterly nonsensical to our forebearers. The very form of our question—where did we come from? what is our past?—itself implies a uniquely modern notion of a distinct, transhistorical homosexual identity category that is the obverse of another transhistorical identity called heterosexuality. But throughout the long historical span covered by this exhibition, homosexuality and heterosexuality were hardly in opposition. Indeed, one of the very words we now use—gay—once signified an overindulgence in non-marital, non-procreative heterosexual pleasures; living the gay life once meant, among men, an inclination towards visiting (female) prostitutes and other residents of an erotic demimonde. That a word for, in essence, non-Biblical sexual relations could so easily shift in significance from different sex pairings to same-sex ones tells us that homo and hetero, now opposites, once shared the same side of the sexual coin. The problem for our forebearers, in short, was not whether the object of one's erotic interests was male or female, but whether that eroticism took place within a religiously sanctioned marriage for the purposes of procreation—or not.

So that is the conundrum: we modern queers want a past that has been both permanent and contingent, transhistorical and historical, stable and shifting, familiar and practically unrecognizable. We want a past we can know, but in order to understand that past as in fact “the past,” it has to be different from what we know today. As a result, modern queerness wants the past, but not too much, needs the classical, but only as evidence of how things change. Our identity today thus finds itself mirrored in and through a classical past that is both stable and ever evolving—no surprise, given that we invented that past in order to find ourselves within it.

Jonathan David Katz, a specialist in the arts of the Cold War era, is centrally concerned with the question of why the American avant-garde came to be dominated and defined by queer artists during what was perhaps the single most homophobic decade in this nation's history. He is currently the director of the doctoral program in visual culture studies at the State University of New York at Buffalo. Jonathan was co-curator of the exhibition *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture* at the National Portrait Gallery, Washington (2010), and of the upcoming exhibition *Art AIDS America* at the Tacoma Art Museum and other locations. Jonathan is President of the Board of Directors of the Leslie-Lohman Museum.



Patricia Cronin, American (b. 1963)
Memorial to a Marriage, 2003
Bronze, (edition 2/10) 3.5 x 9.5 x 5.5 in.
Collection of Richard Gerrig and Timothy Peterson