

Queer Theory and Nineteenth Century Homoerotic Photography

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This article introduces my ongoing research on early queer photography's role in the language of the Other and how it serves both to produce and pervert standards of gender, beauty, performativity and homosexuality. My desire for understanding comes from a need to subvert the languages of hegemony, globalization, and colonialism. These subjects as well as their photographs are quite nuanced and incredibly complex. In fact, the subject of art history is extremely convoluted and, in my opinion, requires decentering from the Eurocentric baggage which has oppressed many of the non-normative voices of its own past. For these reasons, I will focus on just a few examples of early queer photography in this article.

Queer Theory as a structured field of study is relatively new. It has only been around since the early 1990s. But the questions, issues, and constructs fueling Queer Theory have been omnipresent for centuries. Something deeply fundamental has compelled the oppressed factions within our culture to ask questions about gender, performativity, and sexuality. Society has a long entrenched history of forcing the oppressed to sit just outside the confines of collective acceptance, refusing to embrace anything that questions the normative limits. For this reason, many artists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that would have fallen within that "queer" category remained somewhat in the shadows. So today we use the term "queer" to describe that segment of the population that has been oppressed. The term is a line of demarcation between the other and the normative. By definition, "queer" is whatever is at odds with the normal, so on its own it holds no particular reference or identity¹. With this definition in

mind, my primary focus will be utilizing Queer Theory in the field of nineteenth century nude photography. I believe this application will offer a vital new interpretation of Victorian era photographers of France and the United States, as well as insight into the dichotomous nature of nude photographs of that period. In this paper I will argue that nude male photographs of the nineteenth century were intended for the male gaze, to be used as homoerotica, not as a means of studying the male physique or depicting boyish comradery; which has been the standard photographic paradigm since their inception into the discipline of art history.

Each photograph and its translation is very much a function of the artist's inspiration. It is also the viewer's expectation that functions as a factor in the interpretation of the photograph. The image itself belongs to more than one discursive space and therefore inhabits multiple discourses within photographic history². Nude photography inhabits a liminal vastness in which it can be something different for each viewer. This space of liminality becomes a way to both conceal and reveal the homoerotic desires the artist places on the subject and later, on the artwork. The photograph is the material manifestation of the homoerotic gaze captured within the context of the image's given period. Therefore the meaning of the photograph is significantly influenced by the moment of its production. But it is also subject to changes as the photograph enters into new situations with new surroundings and different people. The photographic space occupied by the image can function as both performative and erotic. The struggle comes when attempting to codify this queer space in

¹ (Jagose)

² (Krauss)

terms understood through our own historical moment, because sexuality of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was more interchangeable than the gender and sex roles used today. Therefore what current society considers queer or heterocentric has little likelihood of offering the proper tools for reading the genders and eroticisms demonstrated within these images.

It has become evident that I need to find some way of further distancing myself from the work I intend to critique, and, in so doing, to present scholarly evidence that illustrates this idea of homoeroticism in fine art. Especially when reading images over a hundred years after they were made. A new set of interpretations is highly likely given the distance in time periods between the analyses and the photographs³. My critical analysis is guided by contemporary frameworks. This affords me the option to choose between more conservative or more innovative readings of these works. I find that art history typically chooses to view pictures from the past in a rather conventional manner. Understandably, there is a disconnect between the field of Queer Theory and art history as it applies to nude male photography, even when considering painted portrayals of the nude male form. There are inherent inequities that occur when discussing any queer imagery and the constructs within which they have been created. These biases have been formed through the pedagogy of a heteronormative gaze which has more recently, become mediated through the dogmas of globalization. This has quite a bit to do with closeting the true nature of art as it relates to homosexuality and very little to do with revealing the true intentions of an art historical critique.

The propensity is to disrupt any challenging inquiries about sexuality into some alternate area of historical investigation that does not threaten the status-quo

construction of heterosexuality and its heterocentric nature⁴. A homoerotic sensibility emerged through the manipulation of ideas about male comradeship, embodiment and eroticism, and their subjection to a homosexually inclined gaze. For this reason I will be stepping back a little further in time to Anne-Louis Girodet, whose methods both enforced the codified closeted neoclassical doctrines and broke from tradition to allow subtle statements of homosexuality within his art. Professor James Smalls theorized that through the simultaneous containment and releasing of sexual and erotic excess between men, Girodet created for himself a method of and space for identity construction. Through this space, he was also able to obliquely write himself into history and mythology⁵.



When dealing with art, there has been a tendency to quiet any questions that may challenge the heteronormative majority followed and disseminated by art historians. This problem goes all the way back to the father of art history, J.J. Winckelmann who created a subjective view of the art historical construct but called it objective. Art historians today still use his theories of art as the canon for art history, even though they are faulty in many ways because they mask much of art's real homoeroticism as the fictional narrative of

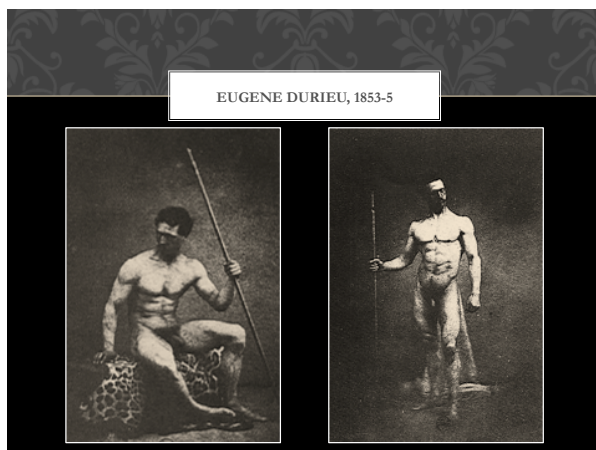
³ (Hannavy)

⁴ (Smalls)

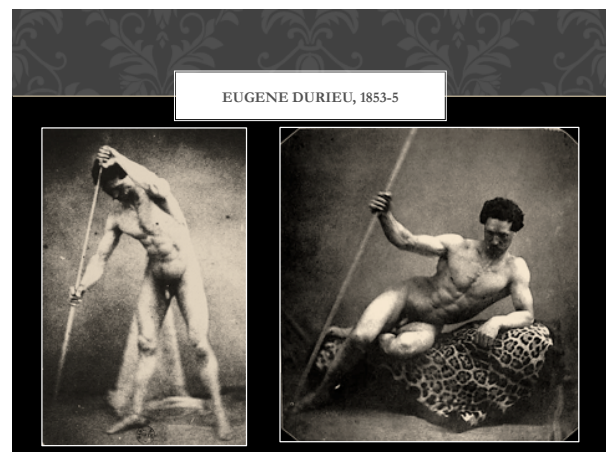
⁵ (Smalls)

Winckelmann's own deluded fabrications of a closeted homosexuality. Because of his own homoerotic desires, art history now perpetuates the closet of inference as the only viable option for deciphering this period of art when the male nude was depicted as an erotic object on a regular basis. This denial of homosexuality becomes especially significant when we look at Winckelmann's personal life and see that it has in fact been well-documented through his many correspondences that he took part in homosexual activity regularly⁶. This homophobic tension within his contrived art historical corpus is made even more complicated by the scandalous nature of his death; he was in fact murdered by a young male love interest⁷. So it would seem that what was so easily exposed to him, he chose to deny through the constructs of a fabricated heterocentric art historical gaze.

Many of the male nudes made during the nineteenth century had a Greco-Roman emphasis that was considered acceptable to depict, even within the confines of Victorian society. This is what Thomas Waugh termed the "Classical Alibi." This theory used the classical traditions of heroic Greek and Roman male perfection to justify male nudity and homoeroticism in imagery⁸.



As evidenced with the works of Eugene Durieu (1800-74), photographs of strong male physiques posed in classic Greco-Roman style had the ability of being read as both erotic and inspiring. When viewed by the public at large, an allegory of heroism was read into these photographs because of the traditions attached to the heroic male nude. Even in the nineteenth century the male body was thought of as good, heroic, and beautiful. These were qualities that could be eroticized depending on the viewer and the context. Most important was the fact that they could be de-eroticized as a means of concealing individual desires deemed inappropriate, even degenerate by many standards⁹.



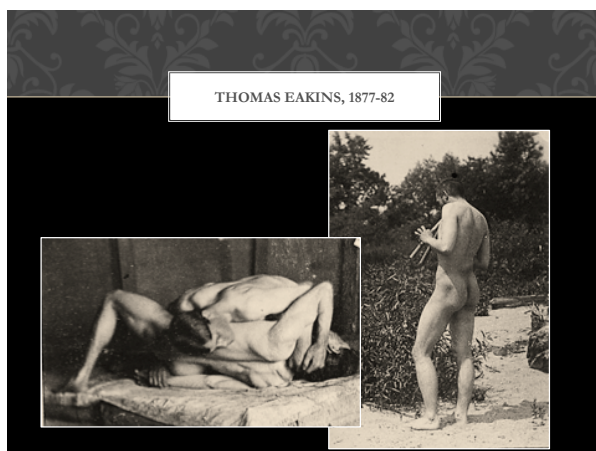
In the case of Thomas Eakins (1844-1916), we can see another Greco-Roman paradigm acted out within his photography. He used the affirmation of male kinship between the older master and his younger pupils, boys wrestling and fighting, male bathers, and pipe players; all of them were nude or scantily clad in togas. No matter what the intent may have actually been, nude photographs and the artists who took them had to hide under some sort of justification to avoid social and legal persecutions of the time.

⁶ (Davis)

⁷ (Smalls)

⁸ (Waugh)

⁹ (Budd)

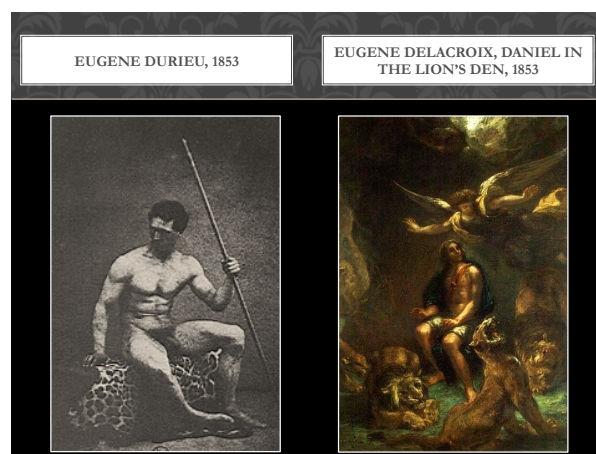


The body of work these early photographers were creating in the European and American era of Victorian propriety needed functional legitimacy; some purpose other than a homoerotic context in order to be viewed as art and not pornography. Many of these nudes were subject to judgment and government censorship, which would have led to fines and even imprisonment for possession and sale of “obscene objects.” Around the mid-1800s photography piqued the interest of artists wanting to document and explore nudity, sexuality, and homosexuality in a new manner. Photography takes on a life like no other art form can because it has the ability to steal the very essence of the subject being photographed. In my opinion, the most interesting aspect of a photograph is really what lies outside the view of the lens. The artist’s psyche has everything to do with the way a photograph is framed; just as the viewer’s subconscious has everything to do with the way a photograph is perceived¹⁰. In the nineteenth century, that collective viewer perception is what judged homoerotic photographs to be immoral and pornographic.

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these nudes were titled “artist’s studies” to avoid conservative homophobic judgment and government censorship, which could have led to fines and even imprisonment for possession and sale of “obscene objects.” Nude photographs such as those of Durieu were called “artist’s studies” to help legitimize them as aesthetic endeavors, when their true purpose was likely fulfillment of the male homoerotic desire.

In the early days of photography, before it was considered a valid art form, photographs were increasingly used by painters as cheap substitutes for actual nude models. This practice mostly took place in France where Victorian modesty had less influence on artistic practice. Much of the nude photography by Durieu was commissioned and used by the French painter Eugene Delacroix¹¹. Both men have sexually ambiguous histories and from the research I’ve done, I find no evidence that either man was ever married. Although Delacroix’s journals did offer information on dalliances he had while he was abroad. I do not however, believe that they were romantically involved, only very intimate friends¹². Delacroix supervised each session so he could pose the models in a specific manner of his own choosing, which helps to explain their classical aesthetic.

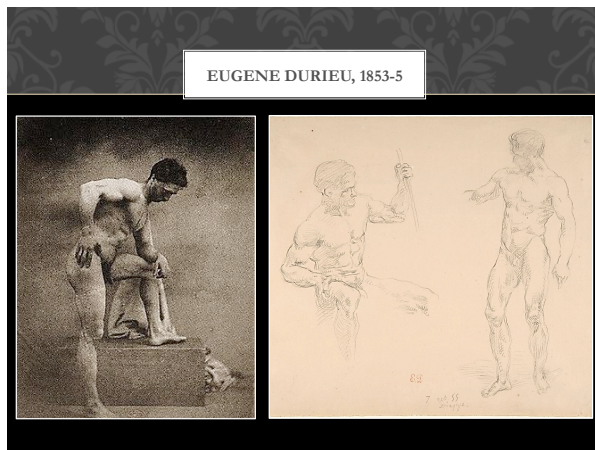


¹⁰ (Friedberg)

¹¹ (Hannoosh)

¹² (Ellenzweig)

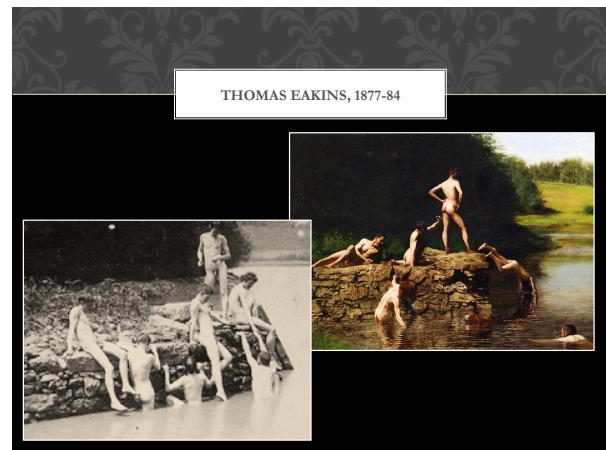
The extent of his involvement in the nude commissions is documented in his surviving journals. Delacroix's writings suggested that he hand-picked the models based on a certain type of physique. Each of his male specimens had broad, well-defined shoulders, a chiseled chest and torso, and strong defined thighs.



It is likely that Delacroix went searching for his models on the poorer side of town, since men there were manual laborers and would have been more likely to pose nude for money. Delacroix's fantasy was of no ordinary man, but one whose anatomy was reminiscent of classical proportions¹³. Very few of these nudes ever made it to a canvas, but Delacroix sketched them many times in his private journals. When he died, many nude male photographs were found among his belongings¹⁴. In his correspondence he wrote, "With passion and without fatigue those photographs of nude men, that admirable poem, that human body from which I am learning to read."¹⁵

A closer look at the work of Eakins has revealed a number of noticeably homoerotic connotations. Eakins took many photographs of young nude swimmers in preparation for his seminal work *The Swimming Hole* from 1884. Actually he had quite a few shots of his

male students and friends swimming even before getting this commission, as I found photographic critiques with similar compositions taken a few years prior to these¹⁶. The figures in his painting are aesthetically clothed because of the piece's Greco-Roman theme; however the bathers can legitimately be read as eroticized projections of male yearning as well as subverting signs of sexual ambiguity.



In his paintings, as in his photographs, Eakins was not a detached observer. He painted himself strategically into the position of voyeur, peering out at the young men from the water. Eakins painted himself strategically into the position of voyeur, peering out at the young men from the water¹⁷. There is also a theme of penetration connoted by both the figure diving into the water and the figure caressing the water with his hand. Both of these gestures can be read as a homoerotic content¹⁸. The current painting is actually more sexually ambiguous than the photographs because the commission for this came from Edward Coates, the chairman of the Pennsylvania Academy and he wasn't pleased with amount of overt homosexuality depicted. Eakins had to make multiple revisions to the piece and even after the

¹³ (Ellenzweig)

¹⁴ (Delacroix)

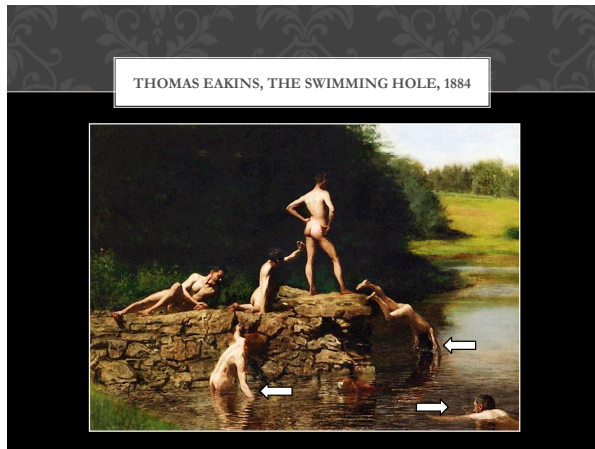
¹⁵ (Hannoosh)

¹⁶ (Berger)

¹⁷ (Hatt)

¹⁸ (Brickell)

changes, the commission ended up not being hung in the intended site.¹⁹



Closing Thoughts

Queer theorist Judith Butler has affirmed that all aspects of gender are performative acts based on social and cultural signifiers²⁰. I believe nineteenth century photographers were using nude models to act out or perform homoerotic desires that they were otherwise unable to construct. As a consequence of this convention, the imagined and secretive world

of homoerotica beyond the closed door was now accessible to the voyeur and the closeted homosexual.

This argument also allows the opportunity to recreate the homoerotic performance over and over by means of the photographic vestige left behind. The concept of gender performativity also subverted structured labels that hyper-conservative society began arbitrarily imposing in the 1800s. Victorian era society was secretly interested in anything queer, erotic, and apart from mainstream life. However using photographs to study the body, movement, or for some other higher purpose helped shield photographers and patrons from society's harsh homophobic judgments. With that said, homoerotic imagery has been depicted for thousands of years, whether or not the annals of art history chooses to recognize it exists. In this respect, art historical constructs must begin to atone for its need to "Other" queer artists and their work, especially when looking through a globalized lens.

¹⁹ (Ellenzweig)

²⁰ (Butler)

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