

Homoeroticism and the idealized male nude

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Homoeroticism is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as “characterized by a tendency for erotic emotions to be centered on a person of the same sex”, that is male-male or female-female. It does not refer to the sexual act itself, only to the feelings of arousal that a male can elicit from another male or by a female from another female. It is often depicted in visual arts as any form of representation of same-sex love and desire, including paintings, sketches, pictures, sculptures, literature and even theatrical performances. Fred Holland Day is dubbed as the first major gay fine art photographer (Summers). He is a man of many talents who became known at the turn of the century for his photographs of the male form drenched in erotic poses and classical lines. Hence, it cannot be helped but compare his works with his perceived guide, the idealized Greek male that is often illustrated in Attic vase paintings.

Homoeroticism in Ancient Greece By interpreting the imagery from Greek vase paintings and monuments, Ancient Greece, specifically Athens, was viewed by Keuls as a society dominated by the phallus. She described the reign of the phallus as a culture where men ruled Supreme in all aspects while women are delegated to a lower status no better than a slave. She explained that the phallus symbolizes the male sex organ or penis in its permanent erect position (2) as Athenian men were often illustrated nude with their phalluses exposed and erect. She explained how this practice led to the subjugation and myths of rape of women, the reduction of sex to a game of dominance and submission, both of women by men and of men by men, and standard practice of homosexuality as a rite of passage for young men to

adulthood (3-5). Indeed, same sex relationship, specifically between two males is considered a norm in ancient Greece.

Historians term the relationship between adult men and adolescent boys in ancient Greece as “ pederasty”. The practice was first noted in the archaic period of ancient Greece and the oldest surviving iconography is a brass plaque from Crete dated about 650-625 BC., which suggests a partnership between younger and older warriors (Hubbard 14). Dover identified the partners as the erastes, who was the penetrator or dominant party, and the eromenos who was the youth from 14 to 18 years of age (Ferrari 140, Hubbard 11) with a passive role (16). Knowledge on sexual life in ancient Greece was mainly derived from the interpretation of scenes depicted on the surviving Attic vases.

The ones that depict pederastic relationships was classified by Dover into three types namely (1) the up-and-down gesture with the erastes and eromenos standing and facing each other; the erastes, knees bent, reaches with one hand for the beloved’s chin and with the other fondles his genitals (see figures 1, 5 & 7); (2) the erastes presents the eromenos with a small gift, sometimes an animal (see figures 4); and (3) the standing lovers engage in intercrural sex (penetration between the thighs), or rarely in anal intercourse (see figures 8 & 10). The illustrations are very explicit and indicate that same-sex relationship is an acceptable part of ancient Greek culture. Historians explained this relationship as a rite of passage with the older erastes often acting as a mentor that would guide the young eromenos into adulthood. It often involves the actual act of courting of the young man by the older one as depicted in types 1 and 2. Meanwhile, whether the

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physical act of the sexual relationship is socially acceptable is still unclear since most of the iconography depict only intercrural sex alluding to the probability that actual body penetration of future citizens of their society may not be permissible since once the eromenos reach adulthood as indicated by the growth of facial hair or beard, then he may assume the role of the erastes then marry later in life. However, regardless of the different interpretations people may form when viewing the iconographies, one thing remains constant and that is the subject matter of the illustration, which is oftentimes not the adult Greek, but the youthful man usually depicted as the epitome of the ideal male beauty.

Ideal Male Beauty in ancient GreeceThe ideal male physique representing the beautiful Greek male youth portrayed in nude glistening archaic sculptures termed 'Kourus' include "broad shoulders, deep chest, pronounced pectoral muscles, slim waist, jutting buttocks, stout thighs and calves and small penis" (Steiner 215). This is the same characteristics depicted by the illustrations in black- and red-figures of Attic erotic paintings (see figures). Williams further qualified that the eromenos is identified by the absence of fully developed facial and body hair as a sign of his youth and graced with "smooth, sleek muscularity" (73). Aside from the aforementioned qualities Dover added good complexion and presented a more detailed description as "a beautiful creature without pressing needs of his own..

. aware of his attractiveness, but self-absorbed in his relationship with those who desire him" (96). He is likened to the image of a god. Majority of the vase iconographies' attention, however, seem to focus specifically on the <https://assignbuster.com/homoeroticism-and-the-idealized-male-nude/>

eromenos' developing penis which is either being fondled or looked at by his lover (Hubbard 10). This indicates that most painters of that time period view the penis as an important organ for symbolism. The typical genitals of the ideal male that was considered attractive to adult Greeks was described by Dover as normal sized scrotum and a thin and short, extremely small penis that surprisingly inflate to normal size when erect (126).

In contrast, older men have exaggeratedly large and deformed penises. Dover explained the discrepancy in that the small penis of youthful men represents their immaturity, modesty, passivity, subordination and lack of sexual initiative (134) while its pointed and horizontal position indicates their potential as future warriors (194). Meanwhile, the large size and position of the older men's phallus indicates their symbolism as powerful weapons for dominance. However, it had been noted by various authors (Dover 96, Keuls 70, Joint Association of Classical Teachers 149) that the eromenos either never gained gratification from his sexual encounter with the older erastes or he never reciprocated the feelings of the older man since the pictures often depicted that erastes with an erect penis whereas that of the eromenos' was always flaccid. Many artists have tried to capture this image of the ideal male in different forms of art in the succeeding centuries. However, very few did so in the context of homoeroticism in fear or rejection and ridicule by their society.

The artist Fred Holland Day was one of only a handful of people who dared defy the censure of society by using the then pledging art of photography in his pursuit of beauty in art. Fred Holland Day (1864-1933) A man of many talents, Fred Holland Day, was initially an American publisher and

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philanthropist from Norwood, Massachusetts before he took up interest in photography in the 1880's (Fanning 64). His mastery in the medium started to manifest in his works no earlier than 1895 (Goldman). As an innovative and experimental photographer, he took thousands of pictures of different themes and genres; however he became best known for his controversial projects that centered on the nude male body with homoerotic suggestions and symbolisms, either as pseudo-religious images or vivid striking pictorial ones depicting his modernist perspectives on ancient times and pre-industrial cultures (Goldman). Day reasoned that nude portraits are all shot for a specific underlying reason when he stated that "merely a nude figure, showing beautiful lines and beautiful modeling is not enough", rather, only a "well planned, well thought out, well executed motif..

. with the proper figures, can be considered worthy to be called Art."

(Fanning 95)Furthermore, Day wrote that ancient Greece represented his ideal age (Aldrich 153), hence his preoccupation with classical themes. Aside from the background and atmosphere which he ensured to be rural or pastoral, he often added props like laurel wreaths on the model's head, Greek statues and old vases, shepherds' crooks and pan pipes to suggest a setting in Greece of antiquity (Aldrich 154). The influence of Greece in his works appeared obvious as one contemporary viewers wrote:" It struck me as being rather characteristic of Mr. Day's style that the pagan idea was given the first place-for I have long felt that Mr.

Day approached all of his subjects, whether representations of 'Christ' or such themes as Ebony and Ivory, from a purely Greek point of view, and that it is on that account that they rarely move the observer to any stronger

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feeling than that of a cold, intellectual admiration.” (qtd in Aldrich 154) Among his controversial pictures with distinct Greek allusion include an untitled photograph of a young boy sitting on a rock, “ Negro Nude”, “ The Marble Faun”, “ Morning, Evening”; “ The Bather”, “ Ebony and Ivory”, “ Nude with Trumpet”, a series of Orpheus, an untitled nude with a lyre and another draped on the statue of Pan. The untitled photograph of a young boy sitting on a rock was his own depiction of renowned painter Jean-Hippolyte Flandrin’s canvas “ Young Male Nude Seated beside the Sea”. It depicts a naked boy sitting slightly curved on the rock looking intently at his hands that are covering his genitalia (Figure 11). His more identical representation of Flandrin’s canvas is entitled “ Morning, Evening” (Figure 13) showing a lakeside setting at dusk with young nude boy bent over with his forehead touching his bent knee. Day’s nude photographs of black people include “ Negro Nude”, “ Ebony and Ivory”, “ The Ethiopian Chief” and “ Menelek”.

The portrait entitled “ Negro Nude” in 1897 exhibits a black man who sits on a table or pedestal covered with a leopard skin with a small brightly lit statue of a Greek god in front of him. His pose and appearance seem to emphasize his African ancestry which for the nineteenth-century English and American public signifies “ savage virility” (Aldrich 152). Meanwhile, the picture titled “ Ebony and Ivory” modeled by J. R. Carter shows another black man sitting on a leopard skin and holding a white marble-like statue of a warrior. It was described by Joseph Keiley as a “ source of constant pleasure” (qtd Fanning 82).

Other series where black models were seen include “ Ebony, Menelek” and “ The Ethiopian Chief’, both of which were modeled by J. Alexandre Skeete
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with the latter described by a critic as “ haughty and superb” (Fanning 94). Indeed, his careful addition of simple accessories like bird’s wings or heads and body ornaments, exquisite drapings, and carefully chosen pipes, statues and staffs made the black person appear noble, magnificent and powerful. This represents the first ever portrayal of the African American as glorified (Aldrich 153, Fanning 82, Haggerty 246) Day photographed some of his subjects with musical instruments found in ancient Greece. “ Nude with Trumpet” shows a naked youth except for a cloth across his lap (with a wreath similar to contemporary Baron Wilhelm von Gloeden’ photographs. He blows a trumpet, held in one hand, while the other rests on a vaguely ancient vase before which stands a small statue of a Greek god.

Though they both take sensual photographs, what makes the photo distinct from Gloeden’s work is that the model is a tidier and more elegant boy and the photo itself is more artistic with its velvety texture and subtle shading. (Aldrich 154) Another photo of a nude youth with a lyre (Figure 4) shows a handsome young man sitting on a rock and bent over the playing the instrument. Variations on the photo shows him posed against a rock wall, his head stretched to the side in meditation or ecstasy while another place the lyre-carrying youth in a grotto or show him at closer range. (Aldrich 154) Day also did a series of photographs illustrating the legend of Orpheus which were considered pioneering works of symbolist photography; in one, an overprinted image produced by multiple exposures, a naked youth stands in a cave opening, his profile imprinted in magnified size on the rocks behind him. (Aldrich 154) Day’s most controversial works are those with pseudo-religious images, that of St.

Sebastian in 1906 and his self-portrayal of the crucifixion. He shot a series of pictures of St. Sebastian capturing the saint in the last moments of his life. The resultant images showed a seminaked mobile and physically resplendent youth akin in appearance to a Roman athlete (Horne and Lewis 93) but deeply wounded and bound by ropes (Figure 18). However, instead of pain, his facial expression shows sexual ecstasy or someone on the peak of an orgasm, hence Pater aptly described these pictures as that which demand “ a higher sensibility than the beauty of nature, because the beauty of art like tears shed at a play, gives no pain ..

. and must be awakened and repaired by nature” (qtd. in Boscali 4).

Goldman and Boscali (4) both noted that the Day’s portrayal signify subversive homoeroticism and displays masochized masculinity. Horne and Lewis (93) further added that these depictions of Saint Sebastian opened the eyes of emerging homosexuals to the reality that “ Christian saints could be ‘ invented’ as ‘ homosexual martyrs’ just as the man of same-sex erotic preferences was being conjured up as a distinct category.” Lastly, Day’s series Crucifixion from 1898 showing images (Figure 19) of a writhing, near-nude Christ (Goldman) was labeled as “ taboo” during his time.

This is a self-portrayal wherein Day presented himself as the dying Christ. Similar to that of Saint Sebastian, some of his images have inappropriate facial expression with sexual undertones. Crumps (28) explained that most of the criticism came from the fact that Christ’s divinity was undermined and he was reduced to the level of a mortal who is subject to the mixed criticism of both religious and artistic communities. Crumps and Roberts (18) also explained that Day probably viewed Christ’s suffering during the Crucifixion <https://assignbuster.com/homoeroticism-and-the-idealized-male-nude/>

as a symbol for the suffering and lack of understanding of the artists, including himself. Taking these entire contexts into consideration, it is now clear that Fred Holland Day's nude photographs have several similarities.

First, the previously mentioned photos are seductive to the viewer and serve as good representations of homoerotic arts. Next, the background or setting is always rural and all pictures show deep influences from ancient Greece. Such influences may appear in the props that Day added to the model or to the set or the portrayal itself. Furthermore, taking into consideration the characteristics of ancient Greek iconography, Day similarly focused his art on young men on the cusp of adulthood. He specifically chose models that can represent his "manly" ideal of pure and healthy masculinity as handsome men with good physique and smooth hairless bodies similar to the ideal male depicted in the Attic vases. One author even commended Day on his ability to find such attractive models (Aldrich 154).

However, unlike the ancient Greek paintings wherein the images often depict eroticism between men in pairs or groups, Day's pictures show the erotically charged male in isolation, often in pensive poses, which according to Aldrich (154) gives the figures a forlorn, solitary character, and reinforced by nature such as boulders, grottoes or forests. His subjects are also oftentimes shown in sharp relief compared to his blurry background. Haggerty (687) explained that Day's nude photos are often about a single god or hero in different settings and the dreamy but blurry landscape is aimed to signify distance between the viewer and the subject because one has to keep his distance from such gods and heroes lest one angers them. To create his unique background, Day experimented with lenses, filters and used soft focus and <https://assignbuster.com/homoeroticism-and-the-idealized-male-nude/>

chiaroscuro lighting (Haggerty 246). Goldman clarified that Day's "signature soft focus and keen attention to light and shadow suggest a modernist approach and give his pictures a rich, dreamy texture". This is especially important since Day, as among the leading contemporaries who approached photography as a fine art, he aimed to make his photos look like paintings.

And it is a mark of his expertise and artistic talent that make his nude studies appear far from indecent (Aldrich 154). Finally the meaning behind the iconography between the ancient Greece's and Day's are different. The images in the Attic vases depict actual ways of life as experienced by the people who lived in ancient Greece hence they serve as important clues to the past. However, Day's imagery is replete with symbolism. An example is his African studies wherein the subjects in his photos entitled Nubia, The Ethiopian Chief and Menelik can be viewed as representatives of the ancient history of Ethiopia. However they also have obvious modern relevance which social worker Alvan F.

Sanborn suggested as "ancient savagery (for Nubia), the later humiliation (The Ethiopian Chief) and the present hopes (Menelik) of the colored race" (Fanning 94). And it is the subtle meaning beyond the external appearance of the subject that makes any artistic work endure in the art historical context. Furthermore, Horne and Lewis (93) commended Day on the uniqueness of all his photos because of his ability to artfully invent a fictional world rather than simply capture a sensually available and real one. This means the no two photographs of his will be exactly the same. In summary, the contemporary photographer Fred Holland Day's works have similarities and differences from the artwork pervasive during the ancient Greece

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period. Both present with homoerotic themes and focused on the young nubile male.

However, unlike the paired or group eroticism of the iconography of ancient Greece that is mostly presented in sharp detail and color, Day's work is characterized by studies of subject in isolation, often in sharp relief against a blurry background. Symbolism also abounds in his works making them unique and bound to endure and be appreciated for centuries to come. Day's photographs are replete with sentimentalism; some display Orientalist tinges. His boys are as flesh-and-blood as those of Gloeden but his technique is photographically more sophisticated and the s, Day seems more intentionally artistic. Never do his homoerotic photos show more than one model (except for statues), which gives the figures a forlorn, solitary character, often reinforced by boulders, grottoes or forests.

(p. 154) Aldrich, Robert