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The First Homosexuals
The Birth of New Identities 1869–1939

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The exhibition *The First Homosexuals: The Birth of New Identities 1869–1939* at the Kunstmuseum Basel turns the spotlight on the early visibility of same-sex desire and gender diversity in the arts. Through around eighty paintings, works on paper, sculptures, and photographs, it illuminates how new visions of sexuality, gender, and identity took shape from 1869, the year the word "homosexual" first appeared in print. The multifaceted presentation frames perspectives on queer communities, intimate portraits, bold life choices, coded desires, and colonial entanglements.

The exhibition was first organized by Alphawood Exhibitions at Wrightwood 659, Chicago, where it was researched and curated by Jonathan D. Katz, curator, and Johnny Willis, associate curator. It was adapted for the Kunstmuseum Basel in collaboration with the curators Rahel Müller and Len Schaller.

The term "homosexual" first came into use in the German-speaking world in 1869 and underwent a substantial shift over the following decades. The debate over what the word designated ranged from a universal capacity for same-sex desire to the conception of a "third sex." The modern terminology originated in a series of letters exchanged by the East Frisian legal scholar Karl Heinrich Ulrichs (1825–1895) and the Hungarian writer Karl Maria Kertbeny (1824–1882). As early as the 1860s, Ulrichs described the "Urning," an individual with an innate same-sex desire, a product of their gender variance as they understood themselves to be a third sex, neither male nor female but both. This biological grounding of sexuality shifted the focus away from particular sexual acts and toward an essentialized difference, similar to how we understand homosexuality today. Kertbeny charted a different course. He rejected the idea of an inborn, biological identity and emphasized instead the primacy of a universal human right to desire. In two anonymous pamphlets he circulated in 1869, he coined the words "homosexual" and "heterosexual."

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During the decades that followed, artists grappled with the issue in a wide variety of ways: they portrayed friends and lovers, captured everyday life, or experimented with gender roles. The resulting works attest to changing visions of body, desire, and sex. Art offered them the latitude and the creative means to express realities and ideas for which there was as yet no appropriate language.

The First Homosexuals explores the nascent creative engagement with these themes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In six sections, it introduces visitors to artists and writers who openly grappled with homosexual and trans identities and in some cases also lived them. The presentation retraces the evolution of the nude in connection with changing ideas about sexuality and shows how friendship and familiar motifs from the history of art served as discreet (and sometimes not so discreet) codes for same-sex desire. The show also looks beyond Europe to explore how some European artists attributed same-sex desire to colonial peoples as an inherent flaw—and how, in response, artists around the world challenged and defied this colonial hegemony

The First Homosexuals reconstructs both the cultural and creative output and the early history of the LGBTQIA+ community. The exhibition and the accompanying publication illustrate how homosexual and trans identities informed each other and retrace the emergence of a distinctive trans identity as given form by modern artists since the introduction of the term “trans” in 1910.

The Basel adaptation of the exhibition brings together numerous international loans from institutions and private collections in countries such as Brazil, Chile, Denmark, Germany, England, Estonia, France, Croatia, Mexico, Peru, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the USA—many of which have never been on display in Switzerland—with the holdings of the Kunstmuseum Basel. Seen together, the works of art offer insights into the genesis of a concept that is now an integral part of people’s identities and contemporary life.

Publication

Monacelli Press (an imprint of Phaidon) has produced an extensive catalogue to accompany the exhibition at Wrightwood 659 in Chicago, with twenty-two insightful essays by leading experts in art and queer history that focus on selected geographical regions—from Japan and Australia to the Indigenous peoples of South America.

The exhibition is made possible by the Alphawood Foundation, Chicago, a private foundation working for an equitable, just, and humane society.

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Sections of the exhibition

Section 1: Before

Before homosexuality had even been given a name, homoerotic depictions found their way into art. In the early modern era, however, from around 1500 until around 1800, negative attitudes toward same-sex love prevailed in Europe. That is why the representation of same-sex desire was in many ways shaped by neoclassicism, a movement in the late eighteenth century that embraced Greco-Roman antiquity and its body ideals. Under the cover of ancient mythology, artists were able to explore homoerotic motifs without having to name them explicitly.

Outside Europe, homosexuality was socially accepted in many places. In Japan, erotic images called *shunga* (spring pictures) entered wide currency in the seventeenth century; many featured both homosexual and heterosexual love scenes, sometimes even on the same sheet. This openness ended with the Meiji Restoration in 1868: profound political changes and the pursuit of imperial power went hand in hand with the growing suppression of depictions of homosexual relationships. Like Japan before the Meiji period, Lima, the capital of Peru, had a reputation for uncommon tolerance in the nineteenth century. Especially after independence from Spain in 1826, gender and sexual diversity was lived more openly.

Section 2: From Concept to Image

As the idea of homosexuality became established in society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a new identity took shape. Homosexuality was no longer understood as merely a sexual act or private preference. At the same time, it became discernible in the works of artists; consider what is perhaps the earliest European depiction of a male couple in the drawing *La Blanchisseuse* (The Laundress, 1879) by French painter Pascal Dagnan-Bouveret (1852–1929).

Works from the late nineteenth century often revealed same-sex desire only to the more attentive eye—through details such as gazes, gestures, clothes, or postures. These compositions operated with allusions and required careful study and familiarity with visual references, as in the queer Danish artist Emilie Mundt's (1842–1922) *Malerinde og Barn i Atelieret* (Painter and Child in the Studio, 1893), a portrait of her partner and adopted daughter.

In the early twentieth century, by contrast, queer self-expression could already be quite explicit. The American-French painter Romaine Brooks' (1874–1970) *Portrait of the*

Marchesa Casati (1920), a bold portrait of her naked, blue-blooded Italian lover, exemplifies this new self-assurance.

Section 3: Changing Bodies

Around 1900, the depiction of male bodies in homoerotic art undergoes a transformation. Until the end of the nineteenth century, bodies have been shown as slim, androgynous, and youthful, but at the dawn of the twentieth century, the body shapes being rendered are increasingly muscular and emphatically masculine.

It was a time when European body ideals were changing. Various movements promoted the health and strength of the male body, whether in service to the nation, to increase performance in early capitalism, or to build strength in the class struggle. While political movements focused on a natural athletic body, homoerotic works foregrounded the artificial quality of muscular men, reflecting a changing conception of homosexuality.

Homosexuality was understood at the time not as a sexual orientation but as a "third gender." The prevailing theory was that homosexuals were born in the body of one sex but with the "soul" of the other. Since adolescents combined physical aspects of both sexes, homosexuals were thought to be naturally androgynous and youthful in appearance. As the term "homosexual" increasingly came to be used to define same-sex relationships, normative gender identity in the molds of masculinity and femininity took on added importance. This also changed the visual representation of male bodies, which became more mature and more distinctly masculine.

No concurrent shift is unambiguously evident in female artists' depictions of women's bodies: there is no discernible trend toward more feminine body shapes. Rather, these artists, too, show a growing interest in muscular bodies.

Section 4: Speaking in Code

While the definition of homosexuality was still being debated, artists employed specific codes to make same-sex desire visible. Many drew on established traditions in visual art: motifs from mythology, religion, and the canon of art history opened up ranges of interpretation in which homoerotic themes could be negotiated.

The German painter Ludwig von Hofmann's (1861–1945) painting *Nackte Fischer und Knaben am grünen Gestade* (Naked Fishermen and Boys on the Green Shore, ca. 1900), for instance, reprises the motif of the bathers, which has been popular since antiquity.

The homoerotic desire of the work remains implicit: there is no straightforward eroticism or physical contact. Around thirty years later, the Swiss painter and architect Paul Camenisch's (1893–1970) painting *Badende in der Breggia-Schlucht* (Bathers in the Breggia Gorge, 1927) is more frank about the motif's homosexual connotations.

As for female homosexuality, the term "friends" appears in the titles of works with striking frequency. The term "romantic friendship" was in currency as early as the eighteenth century; the nineteenth century sometimes also spoke of "sentimental friends." Works from the early twentieth century reveal that the concept of friendship had a twofold function at the time: it served both as a cover for and as a clue to homosexuality. The sometimes explicitly erotic depictions of so-called friends demonstrate that the intimate nature of such relationships was by no means always a secret.

Section 5: Gender Diversity

Around forty years after the term "homosexual" was coined, the first specific designations were proposed for trans people—individuals whose gender identities did not match the sex assigned to them at birth. During this period, new ways of naming and understanding identity emerged. Sexuality and gender were increasingly thought of as separate dimensions.

This shift toward a diversity of genders came to an abrupt halt in the 1930s. Nazi rule in Germany and the Second World War had a profound impact on queer people in general and more particularly on many of the artists whose work is featured in the exhibition.

The pioneering Institut für Sexualwissenschaft (Institute for Sexual Science) founded by physician and researcher Magnus Hirschfeld (1868–1935) in Berlin was destroyed in 1933. Toyen (1902–1980), a member of the Czech and French surrealist movements, was forced to go underground during the occupation of Prague, while Estonian artist Karl Pärsimägi (1902–1942) was murdered in Auschwitz concentration camp. The French artist couple Claude Cahun (1894–1954) and Marcel Moore (1892–1972) were active in the resistance on the occupied British island of Jersey.

Section 6: Colonial Images and Counter-Images

Beginning in the fifteenth century, European nations' colonial expansion imposed their ideas of value and legal conceptions in regions such as North and South America. In places where same-sex desire and diverse understandings of gender had long been an

integral part of local cultures, the colonialists now deliberately encouraged hostility toward them. For a haunting illustration, consider Theodor de Bry's (1528–1598) depiction of the Spaniard Vasco Núñez de Balboa's (1475–1519) massacre of members of a "third sex" in Panama around 1513.

A rejection of homosexuality was also harnessed for political purposes: The Ottoman Empire was depicted as weak and decadent in the nineteenth century because it condoned the ancient practice of pederasty, or men having sex with male youths. Such representations served to justify colonial claims by Europeans to power over areas where the decline of Ottoman rule was recognizably imminent. Meanwhile, some Western artists also disseminated a homoerotic Orientalism and catered to the erotic fantasies of European audiences.

Numerous artists rejected such colonial instrumentalization and outlined counter-images. The Mexican painter Saturnino Herrán (1887–1918) emphasized that same-sex desire was a part of precolonial Aztec culture. The photographer Lionel Wendt (1900–1944) showed the male body in his native Sri Lanka between the poles of colonial modernity and local tradition. And Harlem, New York, was the birthplace of a thriving Black cultural scene, the Harlem Renaissance. The movement, many of whose leading exponents were queer, forged a new African American self-conception and a distinctive aesthetic that defied the dominant settler colonialism and racism in the United States.