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Samuel W D Walburn

Purdue University, swalburn@purdue.edu

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Sam Walburn

“A Most Disgraceful, Sordid, Disreputable, Drunken Brawl”:
Paul Cadmus and the Politics of Queerness in the Early Twentieth Century

In 1976, in an interview with *The Advocate*, Paul Cadmus stated, “Although I have never been in the closet, I have chosen as much as possible the semi-privacy of my semi-ivory tower rather than calling from the rooftops and shouting in parades.”¹ His philosophy and preference for semi-privacy are mirrored by his artwork in the 1930s and 40s. Cadmus’s art was never “closeted” *per se*, but it was covert in its representation of queer life. Indeed, his paintings were coded, providing subtle clues of queerness that only those “in the know” would be able to perceive. This strategy of communicating queerness in a way that only other homosexuals and fairies would understand, thus circumventing heterosexist backlash, mimicked gay men’s social interactions. As George Chauncey Jr. explains in *Gay New York*, “Many men kept their gay lives hidden from potentially hostile straight observers (by ‘putting their hair up’ [passing]), ... but that did not mean they were hidden or isolated from each other—they often, as they said, ‘dropped hairpins’ that only other gay men would notice.”² Reflecting this negotiation of queer presence in a hostile, straight world, Cadmus “dropped pins” in his art, and many of these hidden symbols came from queer culture itself.

Paul Cadmus began his career painting queer life in coded representations that went unnoticed by contemporaries and, indeed, modern commentators. Later, he adopted a much more openly political stance, equating compulsory heterosexuality with the downfall of civilization in the immediate postwar period. Cadmus’s art can be seen as a movement from the underground,

¹ Quoted in David Leddick, *Intimate Companions: A Triography of George Platt Lynes, Paul Cadmus, Lincoln Kirstein and Their Circle*, (New York, St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 281.

² George Chauncey Jr, *Gay New York Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay World, 1890-1940*, New York: Basic Books, 1994), 6-7.

vibrant queer culture of the 1930s to the implicitly politicized, rebellious politics of same-sex desire in the years following World War II. By representing queer culture and desire in his art between 1930 and 1948, Paul Cadmus embodied the shifting queer ideologies of the time.

***YMCA Locker Room:*
Paul Cadmus, Homosexual Desire, and Queer Culture**



Paul Cadmus, *YMCA Locker Room*, 1934. Image from the Smithsonian American Art Museum Renwick Gallery.

I begin this study with a quintessentially queer piece by Paul Cadmus, *YMCA Locker Room* (1934). In the etching (and later painting) men interact with one another in various states of undress. Typical of Cadmus's style, he accentuates the physique of the men, especially their back muscles and buttocks. The locker room scene is, as one writer explains, "A random membership, half-clad, damp, drying, or refreshed is halfway between costume and custom. There is still time left for banter, postponing reëntrance to worlds of cash and care."³ As is common for commentators on Cadmus's art, the author of this passage is partially correct, but he

³ Lincoln Kirstein, *Paul Cadmus*, (San Francisco: Pomegranate Books, 1992), 22.

does not go far enough. These men are living two lives, but they are not simply divided into the life of business and locker room jocularly. Rather, Cadmus has illustrated a homoerotic, and in fact, homosexual space where many of the men probably lived a double life, one gay, one straight.

The first (not so) covert reference to homosexuality in the piece is the title itself. As George Chauncey Jr. and John Donald Gustav-Wrathall have shown, the YMCA served as a veritable haven for gay men during the first half of the twentieth century.⁴ Not only was the YMCA part of gay folklore, “it was at the Y that many newcomers to the city made their first contacts with other gay men...As gay men used to put it, the letters Y-M-C-A stood for ‘Why I’m So Gay.’”⁵ The notoriously campy, gay musical group, The Village People, popularized (but did not invent) the idea of the YMCA as a queer haven with their 1978 hit “Y.M.C.A.” on their album *Cruisin’* (no doubt a reference to the gay male act of “cruising” or covertly soliciting other men for sex in public places).⁶ Thus, the YMCA holds a place in queer collective imagination as well as gay culture and history as a space where gay men could connect with one another and find sexual partners.

Beyond the sheer homoeroticism of the YMCA locker room, Cadmus sexualizes the subjects of his etching.⁷ Not only are the muscles and buttocks of the subjects accentuated, but they are all interlocked with each other, leaning over one another, touching the man next to them, or reaching across lockers to interact with another partially clothed man. In the center, just above the man with a meticulously sketched behind, another man looks over the dividing lockers, either

⁴ George Chauncey, *Gay New York*; John Donald Gustav-Wrathall, *Take the Young Stranger by the Hand: Same-Sex Relations and the YMCA*, (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1998).

⁵ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 156.

⁶ The Village People, *Y.M.C.A. Cruisin’*. 1978; William Stewart, *Cassell’s Queer Companion*, (London: Cassell, 1995), 61.

⁷ Cadmus, *YMCA Locker Room*, 1934.

to voyeuristically see what is happening on the other side or to engage in homoerotic horseplay. In the background an older, large man lays his hand on the shoulder of a sculpted blonde (the typical hair color of a fairy) who lounges passively and femininely against the lockers. To the right, one man reaches across the lap of another whose pants and underwear are around his knees. This is a depiction of a homosocial, homoerotic space in which sexual and gendered barriers were suspended.

Indeed, Lincoln Kirstein wrote that this was a space between costume and custom, where men could interact free from social restraints.⁸ Going further, I argue that this piece reflects the liminal space between homo and hetero sexuality. Many gay men in the early twentieth century negotiated their space in a hostile, heterosexist society by living a double life, wearing a mask in public and taking it off when partaking in homosexual culture and relationships in safe spaces.⁹ Keeping in mind the queer understanding of the YMCA, the locker room can be considered the space in which men transition from gay to straight; where they reconstruct their public self after engaging in private liaisons.

Thus, as early as 1934, Paul Cadmus was preserving queer life and culture through his art. George Chauncey Jr. and John Gustav-Wrathall have shown the importance of the YMCA in queer life in the 1930's; this is affirmed by Cadmus's work.¹⁰ Comparing the social history of the importance of the YMCA to queer life in the early twentieth century to Cadmus's work, it is apparent that Cadmus actively worked to preserve queer culture and visually represented homosexual life and existence in the 1930s.

The Fleet's In!: Documenting and Erasing Queer Life

⁸ Kirstein, *Paul Cadmus*, 22.

⁹ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 6.

¹⁰ Chauncey, *Gay New York*; Gustav-Wrathall, *Take the Young Stranger by the Hand*; Paul Cadmus, *YMCA Locker Room*, 1934. Image from the Smithsonian American Art Museum Renwick Gallery.



Paul Cadmus, *The Fleet's In!*. Navy Art Gallery, Washington D.C. Image from the Naval History and Heritage Command.

Commissioned by the United States Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) for a 1934 exhibition at Washington's Corcoran Art Gallery, Cadmus set about documenting queer life, culture, and desire on the government's dime.¹¹ *The Fleet's In!* became Cadmus's most controversial work, and his first run in with censorship. Because the piece was commissioned by a New Deal program, PWAP, it was subject to government scrutiny. Before the painting could be exhibited, the Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Henry Latrobe Roosevelt, demanded its removal because, he claimed, it defamed the American sailor.¹² The author of an article in *Time* magazine charged that the painting "represents a most disgraceful, sordid, disreputable, drunken brawl, wherein apparently a number of enlisted men are consorting with a party of streetwalkers and denizens of the red-light district."¹³ However, the censorship of *The Fleet's In!* only served to

¹¹ Kirsein, *Paul Cadmus*, 25.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Quoted in Kirstein, *Paul Cadmus*, 25.

bolster its notoriety. In fact, Cadmus once claimed, “I owe the start of my career really to the Admiral who tried to suppress it.”¹⁴

Contemporaries and historians today who account for the censorship of *The Fleet’s In!* remain silent on the issue of queer erasure. Even historians of sexuality and art historians who analyze the piece in context don’t go far enough in their queer reading. For example, in his groundbreaking exploration of gay history in the early twentieth century, *Gay New York*, George Chauncey Jr. reads the painting as “the efforts of women and gay men alike to seduce sailors.” The gay man to whom he is referring appears on the left side of the panel, “the man offering a cigarette to the sailor has the typical markers of a fairy: bleached hair, tweezed eyebrows, rouged cheeks, and a red tie. The sailor’s eyes suggest that he knows exactly what is being offered along with the smoke.”¹⁵ Chauncey and other modern commentators, however, fail (or refuse) to note that there is at least one other fairy in the painting. On the right side of the panel, there is a woman in a red dress with a ruffled white collar. She has bleached hair remarkably like the fairy noted by Chauncey, and her cheeks are similarly rouged, her chest is flat, her ribs prominent beneath her exposed chest, and an Adam’s apple protrudes from her long, bare neck. Going further than other historians, I argue that the blonde woman wearing red actually occupies what 1930’s gender ideology would consider a third sex. As Vicki L. Eaklor notes, “‘Fairies’—also called ‘faggots’ and queens—might adopt female names, wear makeup, and don some articles of women’s clothes.”¹⁶ The woman in red seems to fit the classic mold of a fairy. Queer Historian Michael Bronski, commenting on *The Fleet’s In!* notes that “Ironically, even though the mural features a clearly homosexual character and interactions, critics more often complained about the

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 64.

¹⁶ Vicki L. Eaklor, *Queer America: A People’s GLBT History of the 20th Century*, (New York: The New Press, 2008), 53.

female prostitutes.”¹⁷ In fact, contemporary complainants and Bronski failed to see that at least one of the “female prostitutes” was actually a fairy.

Another indication of queer eroticism in the piece is the focus on sailors. As Chauncey notes, “The sailor seen as young and manly, unattached, and unconstrained by conventional morality, epitomized the bachelor subculture in gay cultural imagination.”¹⁸ My own work on same-sex sexuality in the Civil War Navy has shown that a life at sea created a homoerotic, hypermasculine culture.¹⁹ The sheer sexuality of the image is only exacerbated by the sailor with yellowed skin, protruding teeth, and enlarged gums, a common early twentieth century representation of a secondary stage syphilitic.

My reading complicates the common understanding of this painting as an interaction between a fairy, female prostitutes, and sailors, and suggests that this painting, commissioned by the United State government, is far more queer than scholars have assumed. In fact, Cadmus, a gay man himself, says that the image is reminiscent of his experience observing fleet week in New York City. Cadmus documented his own personal memories of such interactions; certainly such reflections were influenced by his queer lens.²⁰

This is not to say that Cadmus documented only same-sex desire. He was certainly drawn to deviant sexuality and naval life outside of homosexuality. *Sailors and Floosies* (1938) presents three sailors consorting with presumably female prostitutes. Even so, this painting is not without queer undertones, as one sailor, an angelic blonde, is depicted as passed out, laying on his back in a femininely vulnerable position as a prostitute leans dominantly over him.²¹ An

¹⁷ Michael Bronski, *A Queer History of the United States*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), 139.

¹⁸ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 78.

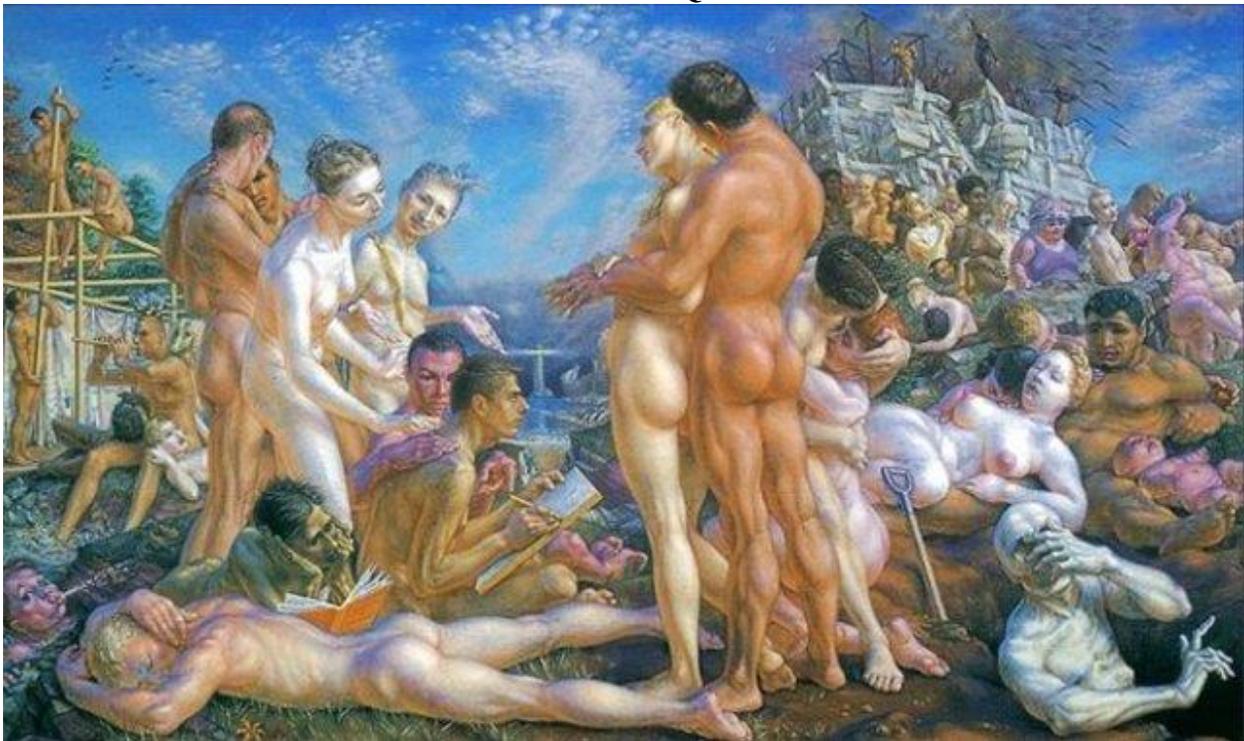
¹⁹ Sam Walburn, “‘Scandalous Conduct’: Sodomy and Sexual Regulation in the Civil War Navy,” Unpublished Honors Thesis, Purdue University, 2016.

²⁰ Kirstein, *Paul Cadmus* 25.

²¹ Paul Cadmus, *Sailors and Floosie*, 1938.

earlier painting, *Shore Leave* (1933), also incorporates the homoerotic sailor. In this piece there is a similarly lounged sailor laying femininely on his back. More explicitly queer, there is a rouged, bleach blonde man with shaped eyebrows and a red tie fraternizing with a sailor.²² Thus, while it would be inaccurate to argue that most of the women in Cadmus' paintings involving sailors are fairies, historians must analyze these works through a queer lens, the same lens through which Cadmus was undoubtedly designing his art. By finding same-sex desire in Cadmus's paintings, one is rediscovering the original meanings and exploring contemporary depictions of queer life. To dismiss such analyses would be to actively engage in the erasure of queer history, and by extension queer lives.

What I Believe: Overt Queer Politics



Paul Cadmus, *What I Believe* (1947-48). Courtesy of the Cuseum.

²² Cadmus, Paul. *Shore Leave*, 1933.

Paul Cadmus took a strong political stance in the mid-1940s. This was inevitable, as he was drafted into the United States military during World War II. In an act of honesty and political dissidence, he decided to disclose his homosexual identity to the draft board and received a deferment. Interestingly, he proved his sexuality through his art, “I took my artwork with me when I was called, and it was pretty clear where I stood. They were actually very nice and offered me several choices as to the type of rejection I could have. One of these, as I remember, was ‘insanity’.”²³ Thus, Cadmus’ queer art literally helped him avoid war. This faith that homosexuality, art, and beauty could overcome war and hate is manifest in *What I Believe* (1947-48).

In the piece, Cadmus portrays the development of two polar identities, gay and straight. Hetero and homosexuality stand juxtaposed against one another, reflecting the new imposition of the hetero/homo binary.²⁴ The painting is titled after an earlier work by the queer novelist E.M. Forster. In one of the essays in *What I Believe*, Forster argued that if Western culture would survive the tumultuous mid-century, it would be through an “aristocratic community of the sensitive,” who knew each other, who caught each other’s eyes on the street. This was a coded way of saying that only through gay culture could Western civilization survive.²⁵ Forster also wrote, “If I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friends, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country.”²⁶ This devotion to his friends and the queer artistic community is also reflected in Cadmus’ painting. Cadmus shows us a divided world; on one side

²³ Leddick, *Intimate Companions*, 176.

²⁴ Jonathan D. Katz, David C. Ward, *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Books, 2010), 128.

²⁵ Katz and Ward, *Hide/Seek*. “Hide/Seek: ‘What I Believe’ By Paul Cadmus” Youtube video, 3:42, Posted by National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, April 8, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hSfVjN_Z5SM.

²⁶ Quoted in Leddick, *Intimate Companions*, 218.

we are presented with a world of art, literature, architecture, beauty, and peace, a queer world that incorporates portraits of Cadmus's homosexual friends. As Johnathan Katz points out, On the straight side of the image we see death and destruction. Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini are pictured in the top, right-hand side of the image, and the Earth is opening up, releasing death and decay. The images of people on the heterosexual side are reduced to caricatures and many wait in line for their destruction. The piece is a provocative commentary on politics and where queers fit within Western society. Cadmus splits the world into gay and straight with the phallic Lighthouse of Alexandria, and challenges the viewer to decide which side they wish to be on. The clouds in the center of the painting form a question mark, asking "will culture continue?"²⁷

The Importance of Paul Cadmus

Cadmus was not alone in his decision to portray queer desire through art. Coded depictions of gay men and same-sex desire can be seen in multiple paintings from the first half of the twentieth century. For example, J. C. Leyendecker's *Men Reading* (1914) is filled with covert queer imagery. Leyendecker depicted a scene where two men share an intimate, but unknown domestic space. A bleach blonde man reclines to the left (a classic depiction of a gay man or fairy) as the other, modeled after Leyendecker's lover Charles Beach, stares longingly and intensely at the blonde.²⁸ In another painting from the same era, Charles Demuth drew upon the importance of sailors in gay imagination. His painting *Dancing Sailors* (1917) incorporates gender bending and homosociality, and he emphasizes sailors' buttocks, as did Cadmus. Though it is ambiguous whether the sailors on the left and right are dancing with women, fairies, or men, the couple in the middle cannot be mistaken, as it is obvious that they are two men embracing

²⁷ Katz and Ward, *Hide/Seek*, 128.

²⁸ *Men Reading*, J.C. Leyendecker Oil on canvas 19x39 in. 1914, American Illustrators Gallery, New York City; Katz, *Hide/Seek*, 78-79.

each other and dancing together.²⁹ Thus, Cadmus was not alone in his depiction and documentation of same-sex desire and queer culture.

Cadmus' legacy is unique because his art documents the shifting conceptualizations of gender and sexuality in the first half of the twentieth century. He is also notable because he so masterfully maneuvered the liminal space between private and public, painting subversive images immersed in covert queerness early in his career and later using queer art as a tool of political commentary. His paintings were never overtly queer to the point that the heterosexual majority could recognize the subversive symbolism he employed, but Cadmus's art is extremely political to the trained eye. It is, in fact, Cadmus's ambivalence surrounding his own identity—his personal policy to be simultaneously privately and publicly gay—that makes his work so important to understanding shifting conceptualizations of queerness in the first half of the twentieth century. The covert, yet undeniable queerness of his work, though largely overlooked by historians, documented the lived experience of queer people in the first half of the twentieth century. His importance is only exacerbated by the fact that the United States government paid Cadmus to paint, and he used governmental funds as a platform to express queer sexuality.

By examining Paul Cadmus's works between 1933 and 1948, it is clear that the artist went through a political transformation. He began his career documenting queer life and culture in *YMCA Locker Room*. With the censorship of *The Fleet's In!* Cadmus was thrust into the political realm, and while the United States government unknowingly commissioned the preservation of queer culture, his work was seen as vulgar and inappropriate. Ironically, it was this scandal that catapulted Cadmus into fame. By 1948, Cadmus had avoided military service by proving his sexuality through his art. No longer intent on documenting queer life covertly,

²⁹ Charles Demuth, *Dancing Sailors*, 1917 The Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio. Watercolor over graphite on paper, 8x10 in.

Cadmus engaged in a political discussion, firmly rooted in sexuality, through his paintings. The art of Paul Cadmus is representative of queer sexuality in the United States between 1930 and 1950. His work documents the shifting conceptualizations of queerness from fairy culture to the hetero/homo binary, and is a visual representation of the evolution of queer identity. Over the span of just two decades, Cadmus's art followed the pattern of the rising political importance of outing oneself as gay, where he was previously content to remain in the liminal space of covert queerness, neither closeted nor out.

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