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Review of exhibitions

British Library, “Gay UK: Love, Law and Liberty” (2017)

British Museum, “Desire, Love, Identity: Exploring LGBTQ Histories” (2017)

Tate Britain, “Queer British Art, 1861-1967” (2017)

British attitudes towards same-sex love and desire have changed enormously over the last fifty years. The United Kingdom once had some of the most comprehensive sets of anti-gay laws in Europe and a concomitant history of public hostility which also affected lesbians even though their sexual lives had never been criminalized. The country has now moved to being one of those in the world with the most positive attitudes towards the LGBTQ community. It is that newly established, if not entirely secure, mood not just of toleration but of celebration that enabled the fiftieth anniversary of the Sexual Offences Act (1967) to be marked by events at a series of major cultural institutions. The Act provided for the decriminalization of consensual sexual acts in England and Wales between two men that took place in private and where both parties were twenty-one years of age or over. **It was significant because of the severe nature of the previous legal penalties for sexual acts between men (sex between women has never been a criminal offence in English law). The Buggery Act (1533) made sodomy a capital offence. This provision remained on the statute book until 1828 but hangings continued under the Offences of the Person Act (1828) until the reforms of 1861. Thereafter, those found guilty were liable to imprisonment. However, a much wider range of sexual acts than anal intercourse were then criminalized under the definition of “gross indecency” as introduced by the Criminal Law Amendment Act (1885).** The partial repeal of this **latter** legislation in 1967 did not apply to Scotland, or Northern Ireland, where similar reform had to wait another fifteen years. It should be seen in the context of the liberalizing tendencies of the 1960s and the moderate reform agenda supported by certain religious and homophile groups. It pre-dated the movement for lesbian and gay liberation and was a measure intended to provide for private discretion rather than open celebration. Neo-conservative politicians supported attempts to reverse the trend towards liberalization in the context of the AIDS crisis. But with the advent of potent anti-retroviral therapies the mood of public panic abated and in 2013 same-sex marriage became legal (albeit not its celebration by Anglicans who comprise the state Church).

A series of major institutions that together form a substantial element of what might be termed the British cultural establishment staged exhibitions to mark the anniversary. The British Library called its exhibition “Gay UK: Love, Law and Liberty”; the British Museum presented “Desire, Love, Identity: Exploring LGBTQ Histories,” and Tate Britain (the foremost collection of British art) offered “Queer British Art, 1861-1967.” In terms of scale they ranged from a single small room at the British Museum, to a moderately sized range of displays off the main atrium at the British Library, to a full-scale hang across a series of rooms at Tate Britain. The latter institution, it should be added, was also hosting a retrospective of the gay artist David Hockney whilst its sister institution across town, Tate Modern, was presenting an exhibition of the work of the queer photographer Wolfgang Tillmans. The Tate Galleries clearly put considerable effort into queering 2017 and were rewarded by a good deal of publicity whilst the efforts of the British Library and the British Museum went largely unremarked. This is not to say that the press reviews of “Queer British Art” were always insightful. Some of them merely described images from the exhibition that caught their attention and indicated whether the show was worth a visit. Print journalism remains a powerful source of debate in Britain and one which continues to play a major role in influencing the direction of public policy (as was the case with the 2016 referendum vote to leave the European Union). Therefore, I will quote from a number of the reviews that made revealing comments about contemporary cultural politics. It seems that many visitors struggled to make connections between their expectations of LGBTQ cultures and communities and what they saw on display. These exhibitions were presented at a moment when there was a widespread if not uncontested consensus in Britain that lesbians and gay men should not face discrimination. But that feeling does not seem to have been accompanied by a widespread awareness of the complexities of the history of sexuality that run far beyond the simple binaries marked by legal/illegal and moral/immoral.

The British Library, like all libraries, faces a challenge in relation to exhibitions of its holdings: books, unlike most art works, are not made to be visible in their entirety. Therefore, what the viewer was presented with was primarily a series of book covers, or internal page-spreads, or archival notes together with a few audio-visual elements. The materials began more or less with the later nineteenth century and the Wilde scandal and moved through the twentieth century. Both women and men’s experience was included but the focus was very much on Britain. The exhibition engaged not merely with public and legal reform but also with private lives and closet expression as in the case of the queer subtexts of the plays of

Terence Rattigan. The exhibition garnered a respectful review in *The Guardian* (one of the key left-leaning news sources in the UK) which flagged up that the display was also supported by a series of events including lectures and poetry readings.¹

The British Museum's exhibition was curated by Richard Parkinson, who is Professor of Egyptology at the University of Oxford; captions indicated that the contents and analysis was derived from his book *A Little Gay History: Desire and Diversity across the World* (2013).² The result, as this title implies, was a small exhibition with a vast remit. Objects on display ranged from a carving from the Ain Sakhri caves near Bethlehem which dates from 9000BC, to phallic Roman lamps, early modern prints, re-engraved coins from the nineteenth century that turned Queen Victoria into a man and finally 1980s protest badges.³ This is a representative sample of the range of the British Museum's vast and in some ways eclectic collections even if there may be doubts about whether it does justice to the full range of queer material cultures. The limited ambitions of the display were made clear by the fact that many of the relevant items in the collections had not been moved from their usual displays. One, therefore, was invited to join a self-guided "trail" in order to locate such objects as the Roman "Warren Cup" (named after a previous owner) which is notorious for showing a scene of sodomy between two adult men (when it was long assumed that classical culture only accommodated sexual acts between adult men and male youths).⁴

Tate Britain's exhibition was on a much bigger scale than the other two and was accompanied by an exhibition catalogue edited by the curator Clare Barlow.⁵ Whilst this book illustrated a wide selection of the items on show it was not laid out in the form of a catalogue but as a series of illustrated essays by art historians and cultural critics (I need to declare an interest here since I was one of the line-up). This gives a strong clue to one of the core aims of the exhibition—and one which was to be controversial—which was to foreground the lives and attitudes of the artists rather than the aesthetic content of their work. The significance of the period covered by the exhibition was, likewise, not immediately obvious to all. 1861, in fact, was the date when the death penalty for sodomy was removed from the statute book. Although there were paintings by more or less famous queer British artists from Simeon Solomon to David Hockney these were interspersed by sculpture, photographs, objects and ephemera. The conceptual approach, therefore, was very much more that of visual culture rather than of more conventional art history.

The response of reviewers varied, firstly, in relation to their political attitude toward LGBTQ issues and, secondly, in relation to their stance on the relevance of cultural politics to art exhibitions. *The Guardian* published two reviews. The first of these was by Adrian Searle and was strongly positive but the second by Laura Cumming was considerably less so. Searle enjoyed the fact that the images were only part of his experience which, he said, was as much about reading the stories in the information panels as it was about looking at the art works.⁶ He looked forward to a future exhibition on the same lines that would take the personal narratives forward from 1967. But what for Searle was “strange, sexy, heartwrenching” (5 stars) to Laura Cumming was “indifferent shades of gay” (3 stars). She also identified that the cultural was as important as the visual in this exhibition but for her that was a major weakness. She regretted the balancing by the Tate of “private lives with social history, sexual identity with mainstream politics, anecdotes and relics with poor old art, which frequently loses out.”⁷

Another left-leaning publication, *The Independent*, also covered the exhibition and was much more sympathetic to a project that aimed to “redress how overlooked, sidelined and forcibly ignored such artworks and artists have been by art history.”⁸ This article argued specifically against a previous article by the journalist and British media personality Janet Street Porter who, a year earlier, had criticized the idea of focusing on artists on the basis of their sexuality. She had argued when the project was being planned that the Tate was wrong to put on such an exhibition because “our obsession with sexuality dims our ability to simply respond to and enjoy great art for what it is.”⁹ The right-wing press was, predictably, similarly skeptical. The reviewer of the conservation magazine *The Spectator* duly took a pot shot at “queer studies—an academic discipline as abstruse as particle physics, and discussed in equally impenetrable jargon.”¹⁰ For the right-wing *Daily Telegraph* this was also a 3 star experience (and it only used the word queer in quotation marks which had the effect of implying that the show was of the work of artists who were merely so-called). Much of art was judged second-rate such as the “cruelly ostracized, but not very good artist, Simeon Solomon.” Robert Pennington’s portrait of Wilde which went up for sale with his other goods on April 24, 1895 was slated as “frankly boring” and as illustrating nothing more than “stultifying inhibition”—not a phrase that is generally associated with its original owner.¹¹ If the decadents’ position was that paintings were portraits of their artists then something similar might be said of many of the reviews of this exhibition. Michael Petry, writing in the *Huffington Post*’s blog, regarded the Pennington as one of many “visual jems [sic]” of the

exhibition which he defended as having championed the “queer community” in the face of critique from the likes of Street Porter and other “reactionaries [who] question the very notion of identity politics.”¹²

A further issue was one of expectations. Visitors might have been expecting that the exhibition, being related to the history of sexuality, might be focused on heavily eroticized imagery when, mostly, it was not. Because of the various laws against pornography, let alone those which criminalized male same-sex acts, artists had to be very careful when presenting explicit imagery. Sex *is* present in the exhibition but is frequently encountered indirectly as in the box of buttons kept by the artists and partners Denis Wirth-Miller and Richard Chopping (friends of Francis Bacon) that they had collected as souvenirs from the uniforms of military personnel stationed near their home at Wivenhoe in Essex.¹³ It is perhaps not surprising that the viewing of lesbian taste via an oblique source such as the domestic interiors painted by Ethel Sands might have puzzled or bored those expecting overt forms of titillation. Such approaches were, however, lauded by Jack Halberstam in the exhibition catalogue. In their view the “casting of queerness as a relation to furniture, flower arranging, dance, night, journeying, war and solitude offers a more nuanced account of queer looing, queer presence and absence, and queer relations to nature and culture.”¹⁴ Few reviewers, however, showed much awareness of the problematics of “reading” images. An exception was that published in *The Financial Times* which spoke of the challenge for “straight viewers... [of seeing] 100 years of British art history through the unfamiliar lens of queer looking.”¹⁵

The overall design—as opposed to the contents —of these exhibitions was competent but in no way seized opportunities to explore themes such as visual queerness, kitsch or camp. The British Library exhibition was presented in dull tones in a dark and slightly claustrophobic space but at least it was prominently located close to the main entrance of the building. The British Museum’s show was, by contrast, secreted in a tiny-side room (room 69a) accessed via stairs and through the Citibank™ Money Gallery. The reason why this window-less space has the appearance of a bank vault is that it is, in fact, the entrance lobby to the study room of the Department of Coins and Medals. Much relevant instructional amusement could have emerged if the designer had considered the feeling of the space in relation to that of a prison cell. In similar fashion there was no great attempt to curate a queer or subversive hang for the Tate exhibition. Images and objects there were arranged in a thoroughly conventional fashion around the walls of a series of rooms. It was here, rather than in relation to the “quality” of the items included, that I felt that the relative down-rating

of aesthetic considerations in these displays became problematic. The modulations of discretion versus more or less camp and subversive self-expression could have emerged more clearly in relation to some of the twentieth-century material in particular. This section might have benefitted from explicit connection with ironic movements in modernism such as pop art.¹⁶ This might have helped present the perception of a lack of quality as an issue for discussion rather simply as appearing to indicate failure on the part of the artists and curator. Queer camp, for example, has often revealed in the second-, or indeed, third-rate but acknowledgment of such playfulness lost out to the imperative to be seen to be taking LGBTQ culture seriously.

A key challenge was that the anniversary that was being marked by these exhibitions was of a law that was specifically addressed to homosexual men. All three institutions struggled to present that fact in a manner that was appropriately inclusive. Works by women were included in all three exhibitions. The British Library's signage indicated that its aim was to explore "gay lives and loves" and that "we have chosen to respect current debates that define transgender identities as distinct from those of the gay, lesbian and bisexual communities." The British Museum's display claimed that that it "offers only glimpses of LGBTQ histories of love and identity. It does not represent all expressions and perspectives equally." The lack of consensus on nomenclature has elsewhere resulted in the "London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival" being rebranded as "Flare" and then having to be subtitled "LGBT" because it was clear audiences would otherwise not have known what it was about. Clare Barlow, the Tate's curator, employed the word "queer" not as the marker of those identifying as such (as opposed to as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender) but as an "umbrella term for same-sex desire and gender-variant identities."¹⁷ That decision certainly simplified the issue of what to call the exhibition and connected with the tradition of queer studies in academia but aroused some hostility toward what *The Telegraph's* reviewer sneered at as the "essentially reductive 'queer' category."¹⁸

It is clear that part of the remit of these exhibitions was to showcase items in their respective host organization's collections. This led, at times, to a certain introspective air which did not always appear to focus on connecting with the visitors and their own lives and experiences. For instance, Brian Dillon, writing in the *London Review of Books* about the Tate's exhibition, chafed against the presentation of "doggedly historicist tales" and demanded engagement that took the story through to the present day or "dared to ditch even that narrative for more electric affinities between queer modernity and today."¹⁹ Writing from

my own perspective as a historian I would also have hoped for more overt clues to “electric affinities” between the queer past and present. **Transhistorical engagement with the force of erotic desire, fascination and obsession under conditions of legal and societal constraint would have helped viewers to appreciate how dangerous queer expression was until relatively recently in Britain. And further comparative exploration of the relative liberality of certain societies remote from our own in time and space would also have provided rich source material for reflection on the degree of our own contemporary liberation and empowerment.** There was plenty of potential. Whilst the British Museum did provide a leaflet describing the aforementioned “trail” of “objects that highlight LGBTQ histories at the British Museum” that did not include a very prominent sculpted “well head” sitting just outside the exhibition space. The descriptive label for this Roman marble indicated that it showed “aroused males pursuing a women and a youth”, that the latter had originally been identified as a hermaphrodite, and that one of the men was the heavily muscled hero Hercules who was shown cross-dressed as a woman.

Part of the message of much queer theory is that queerness is not just for queers but is a structuring element in culture as a whole and is not just to be found in designated exhibition spaces be they expansive or tokenistic or on official “trails.” The past collusion of the three institutions in repressing queer awareness only emerged tangentially as, for instance, via the inclusion at the British Museum of a nineteenth-century reproduction of an Etruscan wall-painting showing anal sex between two men. The original painting and the rest of the reproduction have not survived save for this fragment which had been cut out of the original and placed in the British Museum’s “Secret Museum” of obscenities. The “Secret Museum” operated until around 1953 after which its contents were sent off to other parts of the Museum. The British Library was not, at that date, a separate institution and it too had a locked “Cupboard” where “difficult” material was reserved from easy access.²⁰

Yet it is clear that these institutions, particularly the Tate, have been making substantial attempts to engage with contemporary ideas of sexual identity and diversity in the context of some degree of continuing criticism and hostility. The Chairman of the Tate is Lord Browne of Madingley. He was Chairman of the oil company BP (British Petroleum) from 1995 until 2007 when he resigned after press allegations concerning a same-sex relationship with the Canadian Jeff Chevalier. Browne had made a court deposition in which he stated that the two had met when exercising in a public park whereas the connection had really come about via the commercial escorting website “Suited and Booted.” As he wrote in

his foreword to the Tate catalogue, “when I turned eighteen in 1966, consensual sex between two men was a crime... I resolved to keep my sexuality a secret. I remained in the closet, hiding my true identity, until 2007.”²¹ The right-wing tabloid *The Daily Mail* broke that story then and its reviewer now found “Queer British Art” to be without a “central, convincing thread.”²² The Tate’s exhibition, in particular, was a spirited and ambitious attempt to engage a general public that was far more familiar with the idea that some artists were lesbian or gay than they were with queer theory and academic debates in visual culture. However, amongst the various LGBTQ communities there were those who regarded the 1967 Act as having fallen so far short of liberation and positive affirmation that its anniversary should not be celebrated at all. It was a fact, after all, that police harassment of gay men peaked *after* the Act in the course of the 1980s. Some even thought that cultural subversion had been fostered by criminalization and the current mood of celebration around the legalization of same-sex marriage represented the victory of homonormativity as opposed to queer self-expression. Nevertheless, the very fact that a set of major cultural institutions in London all felt the need to do *something* concerning same-sex love and desire was new in itself. Let us hope that this marks a step forward to even more sophisticated events in the future and is not looked back on as a high point of institutional recognition, respect and attempted sensitivity.

¹ Nadia Khomani, “British Library Explores Changing Attitudes to Gay Love in Exhibition,” *Guardian*, June 1, 2017: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/01/british-library-explores-changing-attitudes-to-gay-love-in-exhibition>, accessed August 15, 2017.

² Richard Parkinson, *A Little Gay History: Desire and Diversity across the World* (London: British Museum, 2013).

³ British Museum, “A History of the World in 100 Objects: 7. Ain Sakhri Lovers Figurine”: http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/a_history_of_the_world/objects.aspx#7, accessed September 21, 2017.

⁴ Stuart Frost, “The Warren Cup: Highlighting Hidden Histories,” *International Journal of Art and Design Education* 26.1 (2007): 63-72.

⁵ Clare Barlow, ed., *Queer British Art, 1861-1967* (London: Tate, 2017).

⁶ Adrian Searle, “‘Queer British Art, 1861-1967’ Review—Strange, Sexy, Heartwrenching,” *Guardian*, April 3, 2017: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/apr/03/queer-british-art-review-tate-britain>, accessed August 15, 2017.

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- ⁷ Laura Cumming, “‘Queer British Art, 1861-1967’ Review: Indifferent Shades of Gay,” *Guardian*, April 9, 2017: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/apr/09/queer-art-tate-britain-review-laura-cumming>, accessed August 15, 2017.
- ⁸ Matilda Battersby, “‘Queer British Art’ at Tate Britain: Is It Wrong to Group Together LGBT Art?” *Independent*, April 6, 2017: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/features/queer-british-art-tate-britain-lgbt-a7669581.html>, accessed August 15, 2017.
- ⁹ Janet Street Porter, “The Tate Gallery Is Wrong to Put on a ‘Queer’ British Art Exhibition,” *Independent*, April 22, 2016: <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/tate-gallery-wrong-put-on-queer-art-exhibition-a6996351.html>, accessed August 15, 2017.
- ¹⁰ Martin Gayford, “Would the Artists in Tate’s ‘Queer British Art’ Show Have Approved of Being Included?” *Spectator*, April 15, 2017: <https://www.spectator.co.uk/2017/04/would-the-artists-in-tates-queer-british-art-show-have-approved-of-being-included>, accessed August 15, 2017.
- ¹¹ Joseph Bristow, “Oscar Wilde: the Pennington Portrait,” in Barlow, *Queer British Art*, 60 and Mark Hudson, “‘Queer British Art 1861-1967’ at Tate Britain, Review: a Tame Take on Gay Art History,” *Telegraph*, April 3, 2017: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/art/what-to-see/queer-british-art-1861-1967-tate-britain-review-tame-take-gay>, accessed August 15, 2017.
- ¹² Michael Petry, “‘Queer British Art,’” *HuffPost United Kingdom*, blog, April 6, 2017: http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/dr-michael-petry/queer-british-art_b_15799378.html, accessed August 15, 2017.
- ¹³ Barlow, *Queer British Art*, 12.
- ¹⁴ Jack Halberstam, “Framing: Queer British Art,” in Barlow, *Queer British Art*, 19-23, at 21-22.
- ¹⁵ Jackie Wullschlager, “Queer Art at Tate Britain,” *Financial Times*, April 7, 2017: <https://www.ft.com/content/efbd2a4e-193c-11e7-9c35-0dd2cb31823a>, accessed August 15, 2017.
- ¹⁶ Dominic Janes, “Cecil Beaton, Richard Hamilton and the Queer, Transatlantic Origins of Pop Art,” *Visual Culture in Britain* 16.3 (2015): 308-30.
- ¹⁷ Barlow, *Queer British Art*, 12.
- ¹⁸ Hudson, “‘Queer British Art 1861-1967.’”
- ¹⁹ Brian Dillon, “At Tate Britain,” *London Review of Books*, September 7, 2017, 27.

²⁰ Dominic Janes, "The Rites of Man: the British Museum and the Sexual Imagination in Victorian Britain," *Journal of the History of Collections* 20.1 (2007): 101-112.

²¹ Edmund Browne, "Chairman's Foreword," in ed. Barlow, *Queer British Art*, 6.

²² Harry Mount, "'Queer British Art' at Tate Britain Throws such a Broad, Clumsy Net over the Subject that You're Never Quite Clear what It's Trying to Say," *Mail Online*, April 29, 2017: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/event/article-4448014/Queer-British-Art-review-Clumsy-great-exhibits.html>, accessed August 15, 2017.