

For Immediate Release

Role of Art in the Modern Construction of Same-Sex Desire Explored for First Time in Groundbreaking Two-Part Exhibition at Wrightwood 659 in Chicago

The First Homosexuals: Global Depictions of a New Identity, 1869-1930

- Part I: October 1— January 28, 2023
- Part II: Fall 2025



Louise Abbéma, *Sarah Bernhardt et Louise Abbéma sur un lac*, 1883

(CHICAGO, IL, October 4, 2022) — *The First Homosexuals: Global Depictions of a New Identity, 1869-1930*, begins in the year 1869, when the word “homosexual” was coined in Europe, inaugurating the idea of same-sex desire as the basis for a new identity category. With more than 100 paintings, drawings, prints, photographs, and film clips—drawn from public and private collections around the globe and including works which have never before been allowed to travel outside their countries—this large-scale international exhibition offers the first multi-media survey of some of the founding works of queer art. *The First Homosexuals* explores what the earliest homosexuals understood themselves to be, how

dominant culture understood them, and how the codes of representation they employed offer previously unknown glimpses into the social and cultural meanings of same-sex desire.

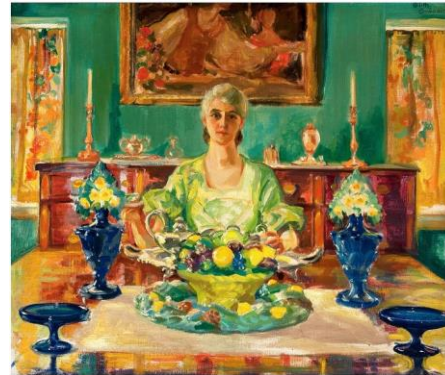
The First Homosexuals is organized in two parts, due to Covid-related delays, with Part I on view only at Wrightwood 659 in Chicago from October 1 through January 28, 2023. Three years from now, in 2025, 250 masterworks will be gathered at Wrightwood 659 for Part II, in a major exhibition that will travel internationally, accompanied by a comprehensive catalogue.

Already three years in the making, the exhibition is being developed by a team of 23 international scholars, led by art historian Jonathan D. Katz, Professor of Practice in the History of Art and Gender, Sexuality and Women’s Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, with associate curator Johnny Willis.

The First Homosexuals: Global Depictions of a New Identity, 1869-1930 is presented by Alphawood Exhibitions.

The First Homosexuals rewrites conventional art history, in part by deepening the reading of works of art by familiar artists—whether it be Henry Fuseli, Thomas Eakins, or George Bellows—and in part by lifting the cover off works that previously have not been widely understood as declarations of same-sex attachment. The exhibition also introduces American museumgoers to a number of artists who are little known in the United States but revered in their own countries, including Gerda Wegener (Denmark); Eugène Jansson (Sweden); and Frances Hodgkins (New Zealand).

The First Homosexuals explores the cohesion of a new global identity at a liminal moment, one that art can tell uniquely well. While the written archive of the period must necessarily use accepted words to describe ideas, art is notably free of such consensus, allowing for the emergence of more idiosyncratic, contested, and exploratory forms.



Edith Emerson, *Portrait of Violet Oakley*, date unknown

“*The First Homosexuals* is an international project of an incredible scale. It perfectly fulfills our mission of presenting novel, socially engaged exhibitions,” says Chirag G. Badlani, Executive Director of Alphawood Foundation Chicago, which is presenting *The First Homosexuals* through Alphawood Exhibitions. “We are thrilled that the community can experience an important exhibition like this at Wrightwood 659—given the content, it otherwise might not be seen.” He added, “We are particularly proud to show a collection of early Russian queer works borrowed from the Odesa Fine Arts Museum in Ukraine, amidst the ongoing war, helping to safeguard these important pieces of queer history from potential damage or destruction.”

Dr. Katz, notes, “*The First Homosexuals* demonstrates that as the language used to name same-sex desire narrowed into a simple binary of homosexual/heterosexual, art went the opposite direction, giving form to a range of sexualities and genders that can best be described as queer. Art became the place where the simplistic sexual binary could be nuanced and particularized, evoking emotions and responses that language couldn’t yet express.”

Dr. Katz continues, “The reality is that current-day conceptions about homosexuality are only roughly as old as the oldest living Americans. Our goal in this exhibition is to read queer desire as it manifested itself in this not-so-long-ago past, while being alert to the very different forms it took globally.”

The Exhibition

Part I of *The First Homosexuals* is installed in nine sections, occupying the entire second floor of the Tadao Ando-designed galleries of Wrightwood 659. The first section, entitled ***Before Homosexuality***, features 19th-century works that suggest how unself-consciously same-sex eroticism was portrayed before the coinage of the word homosexual. A highlight is a print depicting a sexual act between two men by Hokusai, the ukiyo-e master of Japan’s Edo period. Hokusai’s image would have been entirely uncontroversial in its day.

Among the works installed in **Couples**, the second section, is a leisurely boating scene by the French painter Louise Abbéma, showing herself in masculine garb with her lover, the celebrated actress Sarah Bernhardt. Two other paintings represent reverse homages, wherein the American artist Edith Emerson paints her lover Violet Oakley and Oakley returns the favor by producing an oil study of Emerson. Also on view in this section is an illustration by Oakley that ran in the December 1903 issue of the popular *The Century Magazine*, depicting heaven as populated entirely by lithe young women in flowing gold and white robes.



Gerda Wegener, *Reclining Nude (Lili Elbe)*, 1929

Especially notable in **Between Genders** is a seductive reclining nude, a painting of one of the first modern transgender women: Gerda Wegener's *Reclining Nude (Lili Elbe)*, 1929. Nearby, the Russian artist Konstantin Somov's delicate *Portrait of Cécile de Volanges*, 1917, appears to portray an 18th-century aristocratic beauty; however, the face is the artist's own.



Untitled [Two Black actors (Charles Gregory and Jack Brown), one in drag, dance together on stage] (France), c. 1903

Between Genders abounds with photographs documenting the social experiments of the time, including a postcard of the French chanteuse Josephine Baker in male evening attire; the Norwegian Marie Høeg dressed as a man in a variety of *carte de visite* poses, the calling cards of their day; the French surrealist Claude Cahun in a meditative position with a shaved head looking neither male nor female; and, from across the Atlantic, c.1890s sepia-toned photographs of an African American man, perhaps once enslaved, performing female drag on the vaudeville stage. A film segment featuring Loïe Fuller performing her legendary *Serpentine Dance*, 1905, contrasts with another film clip by the Frères Lumière of a male dancer performing the same dance and dressed like Fuller in flowing, billowing robes.

In the section **Pose** is a famous portrait by the Mexican artist Roberto Montenegro of his friend, the antique and antiquities dealer Chucho Reyes. The limp wrist, the tilted chin, and the amused smile are legible tropes of queer codes even today. As well as picturing Reyes ensconced proudly among his treasures, including an oval miniature of a woman, Montenegro included in the foreground a silver ball reflecting his own visage, thus bringing himself into the picture.



Roberto Montenegro, *Retrato de un anticuario o Retrato de Chucho Reyes y autorretrato*, 1926

A contrasting note is hit nearby where a recording of "Ma" Rainey's blues song, "*Prove It On Me*," will be played and a vintage advertisement for the vinyl record displayed. Rainey had been arrested for participating in a lesbian sex orgy, a notorious event that she shrewdly parlayed into the #1 best-selling record within the African American community in 1928.

Dr. Katz anchors the exhibition section called **Archetypes** around an acknowledged masterpiece of American painting, Thomas

Eakins's *Salutat*, 1898. The painting is shown in *The First Homosexuals* as an example of a scene engineered to focus attention on an erotic part of the young male body. Dr. Katz observes that the crowd appears to be not so much cheering a boxing victory as absorbing a perfect specimen of male beauty.

Throughout this section, the viewer can track the ideal of male beauty evolving beyond the 19th-century ephebic (youthful male beauty idealized in ancient times) to a more masculinized ideal of perfection. A defining work here is a study by Swedish artist Eugène Jansson for his most famous painting, *The Naval Bath House*, 1907. The custom of young men swimming nude in all-male settings was universal in the West—as seen elsewhere in *The First Homosexuals*. In this drawing, Jansson carefully employs Cezanne-like strokes to work out seven different poses for as many young men.

The section entitled ***Desire*** brings together works of art that are stylistically varied, according to the visual language of the artist's national culture and training, but alike in depicting same-gender sex or magnifying parts of the body for erotic effect. These include erotica from China, Japan, Iran, and India and a pair of seemingly sedate figure drawings by the French artist Jane Poupelet focusing on the rear view of female models, so as to eroticize women in a way that works to exclude the heterosexual male gaze.

In the section entitled ***Colonizing***, the art on view reflects a number of dynamics, including the Euro-centric definition of early homosexuality, which often clashed with more indigenous forms, and the Western presumption that the East was decadent. European interlopers employed the latter to excuse otherwise forbidden sexual alliances as well as to justify political domination. Here are works as disparate as the Sri Lankan painter David Paynter's modernist oil, *L'après midi*, 1935; F. Holland Day's haunting double exposure photograph, *The Vision, (Orpheus Scene)*, 1907; and a propaganda piece dropped by Japanese nationals into Russian territory to demoralize Russian troops during the Russo-Japanese War.



Marsden Hartley, *Berlin Ante War*, 1914

Following, in the section ***Public and Private***, comes Charles Demuth's 'morning after' scene of three young men in pajamas and underwear in a stylish domestic interior; lesbian genre scenes set in Eastern Europe; and Marsden Hartley's *Berlin Ante War*, 1914, a painting charting life, death, faith, sunrise, and sunset in symbolic forms and colors.

The centerpiece of the final thematic section, ***Past and Future***, is a little-known masterpiece by the Finnish artist, Magnus Enckell, an impressionist-styled painting that reverses the classical myth of Leda and the swan, illustrating a nude man strangling the rapacious figure of Zeus in the form of a swan. Other works here evidence what is likely the earliest use of the rainbow as a symbol of same-sex love; photographs by Wilhelm von Gloeden that combine classical ruins and Sicilian youth; and the desire to acknowledge same-sex

precedents in ancient history, as in the color lithograph, *Hadrian and Antinous*, 1906, by Paul Avril (Édouard-Henri Avril).

The First Homosexuals documents The Elisarion, a temple to the arts built by the same-sex cultist and visionary Elisar von Kupffer in 1926 in Minusio, a tiny principality in Switzerland. Paintings of scenes illustrating same-sex desire once covered the walls of von Kupffer's Sanctuary. A cache of these were

discovered recently in a municipal warehouse in Minusio by Dr. Katz and his team. This fall, the paintings will be seen for the first time in documentary photographs. In 2025, the actual large-scale paintings will be exhibited for the first time outside Switzerland in Part II of *The First Homosexuals: Depictions of a New Identity, 1869-1930*.

Also on View at Wrightwood 659

Running concurrently with *The First Homosexuals* is *Michiko Itatani: Celestial Stages*, an exhibition of 65 works surveying the Chicago artist's exuberant and densely filled large-scale paintings.

About Wrightwood 659

Wrightwood 659 is a private, non-collecting institution devoted to socially engaged art and to architecture. Located at 659 W. Wrightwood Avenue, in Chicago's Lincoln Park neighborhood, the intimate space officially opened in late 2018 and hosts public exhibitions in the Fall/Winter and Spring/Summer. Wrightwood 659 was designed by Pritzker Prize-winning architect Tadao Ando, who transformed a 1920s building with his signature concrete forms and poetic treatment of natural light. For additional information, visit:

<https://wrightwood659.org>

About Alphawood Exhibitions

Alphawood Exhibitions is an affiliate of Alphawood Foundation, a Chicago-based, grant-making private foundation working for an equitable, just, and humane society.

Hours of Operation

Fridays 12–7pm

Saturdays 10am–5pm

Tickets

Exhibition tickets are \$15 and available online only <https://tickets.wrightwood659.org/events>. Please note, admission is by advance ticket only. Walk-ups are not permitted.

COVID-19 Response

We require all staff and guests to be fully vaccinated against COVID-19. Visitors will be required to show proof of vaccination and booster prior to admission to Wrightwood 659. Proof of vaccine and booster can be your official vaccine card or a photo of the card, along with a matching photo ID. Any individual who does not meet these requirements will not be permitted to enter the building. Children who are not fully vaccinated or who are ineligible for vaccination cannot be admitted to the building.

Masks are required throughout the gallery. <https://wrightwood659.org/terms-and-conditions/health-safety/>.

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Images

Louise Abbéma, *Sarah Bernhardt et Louise Abbéma sur un lac*, 1883, Oil on canvas, 63 x 82.7 x 1.2 in (framed), Collections Comédie-Française.

Edith Emerson, *Portrait of Violet Oakley*, date unknown, Oil on canvas, 25 x 30 in, Woodmere Art Museum, Philadelphia, PA: Gift of Jane and Noble Hall, 1998, Courtesy of Woodmere Art Museum.

Gerda Wegener, *Reclining Nude (Lili Elbe)*, 1929, Watercolor on paper, 20.8 x 26.9 in, The Shin Collection, New York, Image Courtesy of Shin Gallery, New York.

Untitled [Two Black actors (Charles Gregory and Jack Brown), one in drag, dance together on stage] (France), c. 1903, Print, 5.5 x 3.5 in, Wellcome Collection.

Roberto Montenegro, *Retrato de un anticuario o Retrato de Chucho Reyes y autorretrato*, 1926, Oil on canvas, 40.4 x 40.4 in (unframed), 41.7 x 41.6 x 1.6 in (framed), Colección Pérez Simón, Mexico, © Arturo Piera.

Marsden Hartley, *Berlin Ante War*, 1914, Oil on canvas with painted wood frame, 34 x 43 in, Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio: Gift of Ferdinand Howald.