

Major International Loan Exhibition Explores Emergence of “Homosexual” as a New Identity

**With over 300 works by more than 125 artists from 40 countries,
The First Homosexuals illustrates how the 1869 invention of the word “homosexual”
impacted representation and culture**

Following COVID-related delays, unprecedented exhibition will open after six years in the making

WHAT *The First Homosexuals: The Birth of a New Identity, 1869-1939*
WHEN May 2 – July 26, 2025
WHERE Wrightwood 659, 659 W. Wrightwood Avenue, Chicago, IL 60614

Overview

The product of six years of scholarship and a global collaboration among leading art historians, *The First Homosexuals: The Birth of a New Identity, 1869-1939* opens this spring at Wrightwood 659 in Lincoln Park, Chicago, on view from May 2 to July 26, 2025.

The First Homosexuals explores a sea change in how society regarded homosexuality in the wake of the coining of the term “homosexual” in 1869. Before this watershed moment, same-sex desire marked something you did, not necessarily something you were. *The First Homosexuals* examines how, for the first time, homosexuals were cleaved from the rest of the population and given an identity which turned on their sexuality. Since the invention of the “homosexual,” sexuality has become totalizing, determining who you are at your core. A little over two years ago while still in the midst of the global pandemic, Wrightwood 659 offered a taste of this upcoming exhibition’s approach and scope in a small preview entitled *The First Homosexuals: Global Depictions of a New Identity, 1869-1930*.

The forthcoming exhibition is unprecedented with more than 300 works by more than 125 artists from 40 countries, on loan from over 100 museums and private collections across the world, including the Musée d’Orsay, The Tate, The Courtauld, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Kunsthaus Zürich, National Museum of Denmark, Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Pinacoteca de São Paulo, Slovak National Gallery, and the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction, among others. A number of works are national treasures which have never before been allowed to travel outside their countries.

Because images were capable of representing nuances for which there was literally no language, this innovative exhibition is able to describe one of the great ironies of the moment: while language was

constricted to only two options—hetero- or homosexuality—art picked up the slack and came to represent an enormous range of identities, sexualities, and genders. The massive research program underpinning the exhibition has underscored how the advent of the “homosexual” followed the same route as colonial conquest, with the same destructive consequences. The project has also uncovered a number of firsts, including the earliest known representation of a homosexual couple in the history of European art, the first modern trans representations, and a number of other discoveries by celebrated artists never before exhibited in this context. More than a third of the works on view were produced by women and artists of color.

The First Homosexuals: The Birth of a New Identity, 1869-1939 is presented by Alphawood Exhibitions.

Organization

An international team of 22 scholars led by art historian Jonathan D. Katz and associate curator Johnny Willis organized *The First Homosexuals* project. Katz is Professor of Practice in the History of Art and Gender, Sexuality, and Women’s Studies at the University of Pennsylvania and a founding figure in Queer Studies in Art History.

Publication and Symposium

The First Homosexuals: The Birth of a New Identity, 1869-1939 will be accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue of more than 350 pages with 22 essays, published by Monacelli Press, a Phaidon imprint. A two-day scholarly symposium will take place in early summer 2025.

About Wrightwood 659

Wrightwood 659 presents exhibitions on socially engaged art and architecture, on issues facing LGBTQ+ communities, and on Asian art and architecture. Located in Chicago’s Lincoln Park neighborhood in a building transformed by Pritzker Prize winner Tadao Ando, Wrightwood 659 encourages visitors to engage with pressing issues of our time in an intimate and beautiful space. For additional information, please visit wrightwood659.org.

About Alphawood Exhibitions

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

Hours of Operation and Tickets

Fridays 12 noon-7 pm; Saturdays 10 am-5 pm. Admission is \$15 and is available online only at <https://tickets.wrightwood659.org/events>. Tickets go on sale early spring. Please note, admission is by advance ticket only. Walk-ups are not permitted.

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The First Homosexuals: The Birth of a New Identity, 1869-1939
Preliminary Approved Press Images



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Image Credits

1. George Catlin, *Dance to the Berdash*, 1835-1837, Oil on canvas, 49.6 x 70 cm, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mrs. Joseph Harrison, Jr., 1985.66.442.
2. Alice Austen, *The Darned Club*, 1891, Original glass plate negative, 4 x 5 in, Collection of Historic Richmond Town.
3. Ida Matton, *La Confidance (The Secret)*, 1902, Plaster, 65 x 56 cm, Photo: Joel Bergroth / Hälsinglands Museum.
4. Tomioka Eisen, kuchi-e (frontispiece) with artist's seal Shisen, c. 1906, Woodblock print, 23.2 x 31.6 cm, Tirey-van Lohuizen Collection.
5. Félix Vallotton, *Gertrude Stein*, 1907, Oil on canvas, 108.6 x 91.4 cm (framed), The Baltimore Museum of Art: The Cone Collection, formed by Dr. Claribel Cone and Miss Etta Cone of Baltimore, Maryland, BMA 1950.300. Photography By: Mitro Hood.
6. Saturnino Herrán, *Nuestros dioses antiguos*, 1916, Oil on canvas, 101 x 112 cm, Colección Andrés Blaisten, México.
7. Elisàr von Kupffer, *La danza*, 1918, Oil on canvas with painted frame, 197 x 99 cm (framed). © Municipality of Minusio - Centro Elisarion; Claudio Berger – photographer.
8. Gerda Wegener, *Lili with a feather fan*, 1920, Oil on canvas, Oil on canvas, 79 x 59 cm, Private collection. Reproduction by Morten Pors Nielsen / © MORTEN PORS FOTOGRAFI. All Rights Reserved.
9. Tamara de Lempicka, *Nu assis de profil*, 1923, Oil on canvas, 81.2 x 54 cm, Döpfner Collection, Germany. Image courtesy of Sotheby's.
10. Gabriel Morcillo, *Slaves*, 1926, Oil on canvas, 174 x 135 cm, Casa Ajsaris Collection, Granada, Spain.
11. Glyn Philpot, *Profile of a Man with Hibiscus Flower (Félix)*, 1932, Oil on canvas, 44.5 x 34.3 cm, Private collection. Photo: Daniel Katz Gallery, London.
12. Beauford Delaney, *Portrait of James Baldwin*, 1944, Pastel on paper, 24 x 18 ¾ inches. Image: Knoxville Museum of Art, 2017 purchase with funds provided by the Rachael Patterson Young Art Acquisition Reserve; © Estate of Beauford Delaney, by permission of Derek L. Spratley, Esquire, Court Appointed Administrator, Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY.

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