

The Queer Life of Charles Demuth

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Charles Demuth was a notably versatile American painter of the early twentieth century. His early work spanned numerous artistic styles before coalescing in his later years around Cubist Realism, also known as Precisionism.¹ His body of work includes florals, industrial landscapes, and depictions of daily life in New York City and Paris. Examples of his work are included in the collections of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the Chicago Art Institute, the New York City Museum of Modern Art, and the Whitney Museum of American Art.² The Barnes Foundation, in Philadelphia, contains a significant number of Demuth paintings, as does the Demuth Foundation, in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, which also owns and interprets the artist's family home.

Scholars generally recognize that Demuth was primarily attracted to men; however, to date, only limited effort has been made to place the artist within the wider context of LGBTQ history.³ In 2022, the Demuth Foundation sought to rectify this situation by commissioning this report, which considers the artist within the current scholarship on early-twentieth-century

¹ "Demuth, Charles," *Benezit Dictionary of Artists*, Oxford Art Online, 2011, <https://doi.org/10.1093/benz/9780199773787.article.B00049315>.

² "Demuth, Charles."

³ On Demuth's sexuality, see, for example, Emily Farnham, *Charles Demuth: Behind a Laughing Mask* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), 3; Alvord L. Eiseman, *Charles Demuth* (New York: Watson-Guption Publications, 1982), 11; Barbara Haskell, *Charles Demuth* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art in association with H.N. Abrams, 1987), 57–58; On Demuth within the larger context of LGBTQ history, see Adrian Gillan, "A Brief History of Gay Porn," *AXM* (London, United Kingdom: Gay Times, Ltd., March 1, 2006), 58; Gerard Koskovich, "A Gay American Modernist: Homosexuality in the Life and Art of Charles Demuth," *The Advocate* (Los Angeles, United States: Pride Publishing Inc, June 25, 1985); Jonathan Edman Weinberg, *Speaking for Vice: Homosexuality in the Art of Charles Demuth, Marsden Hartley, and the First American Avant-Garde* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

homosexuality, as well as considering what evidence exists to support the claim that Demuth himself was gay.

No collection of Demuth's papers survives, although letters written by him appear in the papers of many of his contemporaries, including Muriel Draper, Henry McBride, and Alfred Stieglitz. Demuth letters contained in a variety of collections at the Beineke Rare Book and Manuscripts Library at Yale University have been consulted for this report. A full list of such holdings is included as an appendix.

Turn-of-the-Twentieth-Century Understandings of Same-Sex Love and Desire

Demuth's lifetime (1883-1935) parallels the development of the idea of the "homosexual" as a particular kind of person. Same-sex sexual activity certainly existed in previous periods, and many cultures and eras found such behavior troubling. But prior to the late nineteenth century, the emphasis was on the *behavior*, not the person doing the behavior. Same-sex sexual activity (similar to, say, marital infidelity) was condoned in some places and periods, tolerated in others, and the cause for moral panic in others. In western Europe and the United States (dominated before the twentieth century by descendants of western Europe), such activity was generally considered a sin, a crime, or an act that threatened the social order, but little time was spent classifying those who engaged in this behavior, beyond the act itself. (For instance, the term "sodomite" referred to "someone who has committed sodomy." It did not infer anything about the person beyond this particular action.)⁴

⁴ John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, 3rd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 30–31; Leila J. Rupp, *A Desired Past: A Short History of Same-Sex Love in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 27–35; Thomas A. Foster, ed., *Long before Stonewall: Histories of Same-Sex Sexuality in Early America* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 8–9; Richard Godbeer, "'The Cry of Sodom': Discourse, Intercourse, and Desire in Colonial New England," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 52, no. 2 (April 1, 1995): 259–86.

These understandings, however, began to change in the late nineteenth century. Beginning in the 1860s and 1870s, doctors and social commentators in western Europe began describing a particular type of person who physically desired their own sex. This idea—that people who desired their own sex were distinctly different than people who desired the opposite sex—was partly a result of the professionalization of medicine and the beginnings of the field of psychology; delineating the “normal” from the “abnormal” was arguably the very reason for these fields’ existence. It was also partly an effort to make sense of a phenomenon that was becoming increasingly visible in the largest European cities: groups of effeminate men gathering together in certain urban neighborhoods to socialize and engage in sexual encounters with each other.⁵

These ideas took longer to take hold in the United States, due to a combination of smaller cities, Civil War and Reconstruction, and stricter obscenity laws that limited the circulation of any material that referenced sexuality. Nevertheless, by the 1890s, doctors in the U.S. began not only discussing such ideas but building upon them to explain the unique circumstances in this country at the turn of the twentieth century.⁶

In that era, the United States was experiencing an unusually high degree of social flux. Internally, the population was in transit, as easterners sought better fortunes in the west, southerners fled the devastation of war, and rural residents migrated to urban areas in search of wage labor. European Americans in both the north and the south sought to reconcile with each other at the expense of African Americans, who were subjected to new forms of racial

⁵ Jennifer Terry, *An American Obsession: Science, Medicine, and Homosexuality in Modern Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 40–73; Jonathan Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (New York: Dutton and Company, 1995), 51–55; Vern L. Bullough, *Science in the Bedroom: A History of Sex Research* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 35–40.

⁶ Bullough, *Science in the Bedroom*, 92–96; Terry, *An American Obsession*, 55–60; Amy Beth Werbel, *Lust on Trial: Censorship and the Rise of American Obscenity in the Age of Anthony Comstock* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

oppression and violence. Immigrants were arriving from new parts of the world—such as China, Japan, and southern and eastern Europe, bringing with them not only unfamiliar languages and customs, but also darker complexions and non-Christian belief systems.⁷

In the minds of many native-born wealthy whites, the traditional social order of the country was quickly deteriorating. Their response was to rather obsessively classify and label both the wider natural world and the human race. As they sought to make sense of the changing world around them, the elite searched for classifiable differences between people, to shore up their own sense of superiority by delineating the various ways “others” deviated from their own standards and thus deserved the label of “abnormal.”⁸

There were many manifestations of these efforts in the turn-of-the-twentieth-century United States; they included scientific racism, eugenics, and even the belief that social scientific study (newly emerging in this era) could fix the problems of the urban poor.⁹ They are also evident in the early construction of homosexuality. Turn-of-the-century depictions of the “homosexual” carried distinct race and class components. As a symbol of moral disorder and deviance, the homosexual was almost always depicted in medical literature as foreign, poor, and/or dark-skinned.¹⁰

⁷ Jay Hatheway, *The Gilded Age Construction of Modern American Homophobia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 61–69.

⁸ Terry, *An American Obsession*, 27–29; Hatheway, *The Gilded Age Construction of Modern American Homophobia*, 62–69; Bullough, *Science in the Bedroom*, 50–52.

⁹ Wendy Kline, *Building a Better Race: Gender, Sexuality, and Eugenics from the Turn of the Century to the Baby Boom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Molly Ladd-Taylor, “Eugenics, Sterilisation and Modern Marriage in the USA: The Strange Career of Paul Popenoe,” *Gender & History* 13, no. 2 (August 2001): 298–327; Nancy Ordover, *American Eugenics: Race, Queer Anatomy, and the Science of Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Don S Kirschner, *The Paradox of Professionalism: Reform and Public Service in Urban America, 1900-1940* (Greenwood Press, 1986).

¹⁰ Siobhan B. Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Heather Lee Miller, “Sexologists Examine Lesbians and Prostitutes in the United States, 1840-1940,” *NWSA Journal* 12, no. 3 (Fall 2000): 67–91; Hanne Blank, *Straight: The Surprisingly Short History of Heterosexuality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 41–66.

To be clear, homosexuality was a social construction, just as heterosexuality—also a new concept introduced in this era to delineate acceptable and “normal” sexuality—was a construction.¹¹ However, this particular construction created a strange space for members of the white middle and upper classes who happened to desire their own sex. Rapid urbanization and the publicity surrounding this newly defined type of person accelerated the creation of queer subcultures, as people both realized that there were others like themselves and were told what their defining characteristics should be. At the same time, by virtue of their race and class privilege, middle- and upper-class white people who desired their own sex remained free of the worst consequences of their now vilified identity. Because of the race and class connotations, they were, by definition, not the deviants described as homosexuals, but they were able to find community (should they choose) in the newly emerging queer enclaves. The result was a roughly thirty-year period (say, 1895-1925 for women, 1900-1930 for men) when homosexuality was vaguely recognized but not overtly condemned within the more privileged echelons of U.S. culture. This was precisely the era when Charles Demuth, an independently wealthy, native-born white man, lived and prospered.

Charles Demuth within the Context of Early-Twentieth-Century

Homosexuality

Early Life

Charles Henry Buckius Demuth was born in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, on November 8, 1883. His father, Ferdinand Andres Demuth was part of a well-established Lancaster family who for many generations ran a tobacco shop and snuff factory. His mother, Augusta Wills Buckius

¹¹ Blank, *Straight*; Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality*.

Demuth, was part of another Lancaster family that was not as wealthy as the Demuths but which enjoyed moderate wealth and civic respectability. Wealth from his father's side of the family ensured that Charles did not have to work for his living, thus enabling him to pursue painting (and for a brief time, writing) full time.¹²

Around the time he was four years old, Demuth suffered an infirmity that left him with a permanent limp and a "bad leg" that caused him periods of pain throughout his life. The precise cause of the infirmity is not clear, but was most likely the result of a fall, tuberculosis of the hip, or Perthes disease.¹³ At age thirty-eight, Demuth was also diagnosed with diabetes, the disease that would eventually kill him in 1935, at the age of fifty-one.¹⁴ Although the artist strove to limit the visible effects of these conditions, the experience of chronic disability likely contributed to Demuth's oft-noted trait of keen observation, as if he were observing the world as someone apart from it. Such outsider perspective, it is worth noting, is often found in the work of LGBTQ artists as well.¹⁵

Demuth's hometown of Lancaster is located in southeastern Pennsylvania, about seventy miles west of Philadelphia. In the 1880s, as it is today, the town was surrounded by an agricultural region populated with Amish and Mennonite communities. In 1880, the town itself had a population of over 25,000, qualifying it as a city of regional importance. The major employer was the Conestoga Steam Mills, indicating the presence of an industrial sector as well as an agricultural sector in the local economy. Telephone service came to the city in 1880, and electricity arrived in 1886, when Charles Demuth was still a toddler. Given his family's

¹² Farnham, *Charles Demuth*, 30–45; Haskell, *Charles Demuth*, 11–12; Eiseman, *Charles Demuth*, 10.

¹³ Haskell, *Charles Demuth*, 12–13.

¹⁴ Eiseman, *Charles Demuth*, 16–17; Farnham, *Charles Demuth*, 173–75.

¹⁵ Emily Farnham, "Charles Demuth: His Life, Psychology, and Works" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Columbus, Ohio State University, 1959), 954; Haskell, *Charles Demuth*, 20; Eiseman, *Charles Demuth*, 17; Weinberg, *Speaking for Vice*, xix.

economic position and their residence in the center of town, Charles likely had both luxuries in his home growing up.¹⁶

In October 1903, shortly before his twentieth birthday, Demuth moved to Philadelphia to attend the Drexel Institute of Art, Science, and Industry.¹⁷ When Drexel terminated its department of fine and applied arts in 1905, Demuth transferred to the Pennsylvania Academy of the Arts, also in Philadelphia, where he continued to train until the 1911 school year. In addition, in his twenties, he made two trips to Paris in 1904 and 1907-1908.¹⁸

Philadelphia

Philadelphia is likely the place where Demuth first encountered any sizable community of gay men. After the Civil War, the United States experienced an unprecedented period of urbanization, as both immigrants and internal migrants from rural areas followed opportunities for wage labor. This rapid growth of urban environments created numerous conditions that made it easier for queer people to find each other and build community. To begin with, cities offered people a level of anonymity that was impossible in smaller towns. This was due both to cities' larger population numbers and to the fact that many new arrivals to the city came by themselves, unencumbered by family members monitoring one's behavior. Urban environments were also large enough that residents could find others like themselves and a critical mass of people with a particular desire could form for support and friendship. Finally, with larger populations, commercial leisure venues could gain a foothold, in turn providing opportunities to socialize

¹⁶ "Lancaster in the 1800s," City of Lancaster, PA, accessed November 14, 2022, <https://cityoflancasterpa.com/lancaster-in-the-1800s-2/>; "Lancaster, Pennsylvania Population History, 1840-2021," Biggest U.S. Cities, accessed November 14, 2022, <https://www.biggestuscities.com/city/lancaster-pennsylvania>.

¹⁷ Although Farnham and Eiseman both state that Demuth entered Drexel in 1901, Haskell states that it was in fact 1903. Given that Haskell's claim came later than the other two publications, I have chosen to go with her date. See Farnham, *Charles Demuth*, 47; Eiseman, *Charles Demuth*, 6; Haskell, *Charles Demuth*, 15.

¹⁸ Haskell, *Charles Demuth*, 16–17.

outside of a residential environment. Whole neighborhoods became dedicated to “night life,” and often facilitated access to illicit activities such as homosexual and interracial socializing, prostitution, and drug use. Areas where such controversial activities thrived were known at the turn of the twentieth century as “vice districts.”¹⁹

Historian Clare Lyons has convincingly argued that most Philadelphians would have been aware of same-sex sexual activity as early as the eighteenth century.²⁰ However, evidence suggests that a well-formed gay subculture in Philadelphia began in the early decades of the twentieth century. While such a community would have been in its nascent stages at the time of Demuth’s 1903 arrival in the city, presumably an unattached young man with an interest in finding others like himself would have succeeded in locating the appropriate social outlets.

In the early twentieth century, Locust Street between 12th and Broad Streets in center city Philadelphia operated as one of the city’s vice districts, with numerous bars offering gambling, drugs, and illegal sexual activity. As was often the case with vice districts, the area was popular with artists and other “bohemians,” who were skeptical of mainstream society’s rules and moral strictures. Interestingly, this area of Philadelphia in the early twenty-first century is known as the Gayborhood. It is the traditional heart of the LGBTQ community in the city, and although historians generally locate its origins in the era immediately following World War II, this area’s previous life as a vice district is unlikely to be entirely coincidental.²¹

¹⁹ D’Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 226–28; Michael Bronski, *A Queer History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), 104–13; John D’Emilio, “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Barr Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 100–113; Joanne Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

²⁰ Clare A. Lyons, “Mapping an Atlantic Sexual Culture: Homoeroticism in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (January 1, 2003): 119–54; See also her later work, Clare A. Lyons, *Sex among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender and Power in the Age of Revolution, Philadelphia, 1730-1830* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia, by University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

²¹ Grey Pierce, “Throwing Open the Door: Preserving Philadelphia’s Gay Bathhouses” (Masters Thesis, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania, 2015), 37–40, http://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1586&context=hp_theses.; For more on the history of

After completing his Philadelphia training around 1911, Demuth continued to visit Philadelphia somewhat regularly, although he became a more frequent visitor to other locales such as New York City and Provincetown, Massachusetts.²² In his later visits to Philadelphia, the artist would have experienced the further development of the Locust Street neighborhood into an area catering to artists, bohemians, and homosexuals. A bar called Maxine's, located at 243 S. Camac Street (just off Locust, in the alleyway between 12th and 13th Streets), opened as a speakeasy during Prohibition (1920-1933). By the post-prohibition 1930s, when it was again legal for bars to advertise, it was explicitly billing itself as a "gentleman's bar." Maxine's would go on to be a longstanding fixture of Philadelphia's LGBTQ community, operating as a gay bar (under different owners and names, but at the same location) until at least the early 2020s.²³

The neighborhood also contained multiple bathhouses beginning in the 1890s. At that time, bathhouses served a general population of bathers who lacked indoor plumbing in their homes or were performing cultural or religious rituals related to bathing; they did not specifically cater to men desiring sex with other men. Nevertheless, preservationist Grey Pierce argues that, even while primarily serving a larger clientele, bathhouses' design and function did enable sexual encounters between men, and thus often drew customers who were seeking such activities. Pierce even cites a 1939 journal entry by gay British author Christopher Isherwood describing Philadelphia's Camac Baths—located in the modern-day Gayborhood—as a "favorite haunt."²⁴

Philadelphia's LGBTQ community in the period after World War II, see Marc Stein, *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves: Lesbian and Gay Philadelphia, 1945-1972* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004).

²² Farnham, *Charles Demuth*, 57–58.

²³ Bob Skiba, "So, What's the Oldest Gay Bar in Philadelphia?," *The Philadelphia Gayborhood Guru* (blog), July 15, 2012, <https://thegayborhoodguru.wordpress.com/tag/maxines/>.

²⁴ Pierce, "Throwing Open the Door," 47–56, 103; A list of early-twentieth-century bathhouses, with addresses, appears on p. 56; see also, Weinberg, *Speaking for Vice*, 19.

Paris

Charles Demuth's father died in 1911, and he returned to Lancaster to provide emotional support to his mother and assist her in settling her husband's affairs. After the appropriate period of mourning, Demuth left the United States on an extended trip to Europe. He would remain there, primarily in Paris, from December 1912 until spring 1914. Curator Alvord Eiseman described this as "probably [Demuth's] most important trip to Europe."²⁵

This trip's impact on Demuth's art has been well documented; Paris at this time was at a distinct moment of creative innovation.²⁶ It was also a city with a sophisticated queer subculture delineated by class and urban geography. Scholar William Peniston has documented that as early as the 1870s (fully forty years before Demuth's 1912 trip to the city), the city possessed an extensive network of men who engaged in sex with other men. Beyond simply engaging in similar sexual behavior, these men knew each other and interacted socially.²⁷ While working-class men conducted most of their sexual encounters and socializing in the city's public spaces—boulevards, parks, commercial arcades—bourgeois men like Demuth had a greater sexual geography at their disposal, engaging with both the public queer life of the city and more private encounters in hotels and residences.²⁸

Provincetown

Demuth returned from Europe in the spring of 1914, as the political situation on the continent was growing increasingly tense, circumstances that would lead to the start of World War I that summer. Safely back in the United States, he and numerous other returned expatriate

²⁵ Farnham, *Charles Demuth*, 65; Eiseman, *Charles Demuth*, 6.

²⁶ See, for example, Farnham, *Charles Demuth*, 65–77.

²⁷ William A. Peniston, *Pederasts and Others: Urban Culture and Sexual Identity in Nineteenth Century Paris* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2004).

²⁸ Peniston, 7–9.

artists found their way to Greenwich Village, in New York City, only to move on to Provincetown for the summer.²⁹

The remoteness and natural beauty of Provincetown, Massachusetts, at the end of Cape Cod, had been luring visual artists since at least the mid-nineteenth century. However, the town's reputation as an artistic retreat grew in 1899, when the painter Charles Webster Hawthorne founded the Cape Cod School of Art there. The local community, seeing the economic potential of becoming known as an arts colony, encouraged this development, and by 1916, this small town boasted six art schools, and an estimated six hundred artists (established and aspiring) were spending summers there.³⁰

While the initial turn-of-the-twentieth-century wave of artists was comprised mostly of traditionalists, more avant-garde practitioners began arriving a few years later. The novelist Mary Heaton Vorse “discovered” Provincetown around 1906 and began spreading the word among other writers based in Greenwich Village. By the summer of 1914, the town was resembling a summer outpost of the Village, with a wave of modernist artists and writers seeking refuge from the anxieties of war in Europe.³¹ The specific mix of famous Greenwich Village artists—Jig Cook, Susan Glaspell, Hutchins Hapgood, Eugene O’Neill, Marsden Hartley, Marguerite Zorach, William Zorach, and Charles Demuth—was at its height from 1914-1916. The Provincetown Players, credited with launching Eugene O’Neill’s playwriting career, began there in 1915 and also staged plays the following summer before relocating to Greenwich Village. Even after this heyday, Provincetown continued to draw individual artists throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century; Demuth returned multiple times throughout his life.³²

²⁹ Farnham, *Charles Demuth*, 76–78.

³⁰ Karen Christel Kraulik, *Provincetown: From Pilgrim Landing to Gay Resort* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 67–71.

³¹ Kraulik, 73–75; Ross Wetzsteon, *Republic of Dreams: Greenwich Village, the American Bohemia, 1910-1960* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 97–98; Farnham, *Charles Demuth*, 78.

³² Kraulik, *Provincetown*, 74–75; Wetzsteon, *Republic of Dreams*, 92–127.

Historian Karen Kraulik, author of the definitive history of Provincetown, argues that the arrival of avant-garde artists to the resort lent the town the reputation of being open to unconventional lifestyles.³³ Indeed, Kraulik credits Charles Demuth specifically—along with fellow artist Marsden Hartley—with playing a part in creating a welcoming environment for sexual and gender minorities in Provincetown.³⁴ In her words:

Demuth mobilized a homoerotically charged and elegant sensibility at Land's End. Indeed, by dressing as he pleased and refusing to abide by contemporary gender conventions, Demuth helped make Provincetown safe for and even accepting of affected bachelors... Rather than serving as a barrier, his effeminacy signaled to others that he had a different sexual and gender orientation and alerted men who might be interested in a homoerotic engagement that he was game.³⁵

She continues:

Hartley and Demuth exhibited unconventional desires at a time when most people, including some bohemians and artists, believed the homosexuality was 'inverted' if not 'perverted.' But by appearing publicly and proudly as elegant bachelors, Hartley and Demuth challenged contemporary beliefs that condemned homosexuality. With the support of bohemians and natives, they made an elegant form of masculinity into an acceptable alternative, and they fashioned Provincetown into an outpost for outlandish characters, desires, and relationships.³⁶

Thus, Provincetown holds a special significance in Demuth's biography. In many of the other places he lived, he would have been able to tap into existing queer communities. He would have found a nascent queer subculture during his student days in Philadelphia and well-developed queer subcultures in Paris and New York City. In Provincetown, however, he seems to have found an accepting environment where he could be himself, and by seizing that

³³ Kraulik, *Provincetown*, 72.

³⁴ Kraulik, 82–85.

³⁵ Kraulik, 84.

³⁶ Kraulik, 85.

opportunity for self-expression, he in turn provided an example to others. Beginning in the 1910s, when Demuth and his associates first arrived on Cape Cod, Provincetown gained a reputation for being a safe place for people who elsewhere were considered social outcasts.

New York City

Between 1914 and 1920, Demuth split his time between New York City, the center of the U.S. art world, and his hometown of Lancaster.³⁷ Beginning in 1922, when he became severely ill and was diagnosed with diabetes, he made Lancaster his home base. He continued to visit New York City regularly, however, sometimes weekly when his health allowed. Many of his paintings depict scenes from the city—the jazz clubs of Harlem, vaudeville artists, Turkish baths. This content gives an indication of how he spent his time while in New York and allows us to glean that he was active in what in the early twentieth century was the most sizable and well-developed queer subculture in the United States.

While in New York, he stayed in the Greenwich Village neighborhood, known as a haven for free thinkers, artists, and other bohemians. He rented an apartment on Washington Square South during 1915-1916 and spent extended (and later, shorter) periods at the Hotel Brevoort.³⁸ The Village teemed with new ideas, including new ideas about sex; the neighborhood was the U.S. center of middle-class sexual radicalism, known at the time as free love. In the words of historian Christine Stansell, “Free love was the raffish accomplice to free speech and free expression, a variant of the new played out in flirtations, seductions, fallings-in-love,

³⁷ Haskell, *Charles Demuth*, 49.

³⁸ Haskell, 55–56.

fallings-out, carnal delight, and despair.” Polyamory, an acknowledgement of women’s sexual desire, and an acceptance of birth control were all common facets of Village life.³⁹

Homosexuality, however, remained relatively taboo. As Stansell puts it, “While not exactly closeted, homosexual preferences had little place in semipublic life. Later the Village’s reputation for unconventionality and sexual experimentation made it a mecca for gay people across the country. But in the teens, mentions of gay and lesbian sexuality were heavily coded.”⁴⁰ Historian George Chauncey agrees, stating that neither Greenwich Village nor Harlem could be called a gay neighborhood in the 1910s and 1920s; heterosexual culture dominated. Nevertheless, both neighborhoods permitted a degree of openness about same-sex desire that was quite rare. Indeed, Chauncey claims that the Village was the largest gay enclave in the U.S. in the 1920s, and the first to exist outside of a working-class neighborhood.⁴¹

According to Chauncey, prior to World War I, the gay men and lesbians of the Village had been drawn there primarily as bohemians, but in a phenomenon that was repeated internationally, their presence made the area desirable to others with similar desires.⁴² This trajectory provides some of the explanation for the frequent overlap of bohemian and gay enclaves, a circumstance as true in Philadelphia, Paris, and Provincetown as it was in New York. For the Village, the creation of subway routes into and out of the neighborhood coupled with the widening of many streets made the area increasingly accessible beginning in 1917. The neighborhood’s general flaunting of Prohibition, enacted in 1920, added to its allure.⁴³ By the early 1920s, a distinctly queer presence was visible; a 1925 magazine article claimed the

³⁹ Christine Stansell, *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000), 273–79.

⁴⁰ Stansell, 250–51, quotation from 250.

⁴¹ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of a Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 227–28.

⁴² Chauncey, 232–35.

⁴³ Chauncey, 232–35.

neighborhood had at least twenty businesses “catering to the ‘temperamental’ element.”⁴⁴ And by 1930, homosexual activity was so common that one sociologist went so far as to claim that it had become fashionable. She argued that many in the Village were people “for whom sex was merely a symbol and who turned to promiscuity or homosexuality to express the completeness of their defiance.”⁴⁵

In addition to living, socializing, and selling his art in Greenwich Village, Demuth also spent time at nightclubs, such as Barron Wilkin’s, in the predominantly African American New York City neighborhood of Harlem.⁴⁶ Harlem was a national center of African American cultural production, and in the 1920s, it sparked a flowering of African American art, primarily music and literature, known as the New Negro or Harlem Renaissance. Much of this art was either performed in or depicted the vibrant nightclubs of the neighborhood. The area’s cabarets became popular places for local residents and visitors alike, and in the minds of many European Americans, represented illicit activity and primitivism.⁴⁷

Harlem, like Greenwich Village, was an artistic enclave within the city, and like the Village, the presence of a significant number of people who were challenging social norms led to the area becoming a relatively accepting space for same-sex sexual expression. In Harlem, however, the presence of people of different races occupying the same space created some unique characteristics. African American neighborhoods in New York City and elsewhere in the U.S. were rare places where African Americans and European Americans could socialize together, because whites were generally far more invested in maintaining racial segregation than were blacks. Interracial public space was enough of a novelty in the U.S. in the 1910s and 1920s

⁴⁴ “Village ‘Joints’ Out or Tame,” *Variety*, May 6, 1925, 19, quoted in Chauncey, 237.

⁴⁵ Caroline F. Ware, *Greenwich Village, 1920-1930: A Comment on American Civilization in the Post-War Years* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin company, 1935), 240.

⁴⁶ Haskell, *Charles Demuth*, 56.

⁴⁷ Shane Vogel, *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, Performance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 1–5.

that African American neighborhoods gained an association with illicit activity in the white imagination. This association was further enforced by the fact that these areas were also the only places where gay and lesbian African Americans had a chance of meeting each other and creating social networks.⁴⁸

Lancaster

Demuth became increasingly ill from diabetes beginning about 1920, and began spending most of his time in Lancaster, where he had grown up, so that he could be cared for by his mother. He visited Paris in August-November 1921 and spent much of 1922 at the Psychiatric Institute in Morristown, New Jersey, receiving medical treatment. He occasionally visited Provincetown and continued to frequent New York and Philadelphia to the extent he was able to, but most of the last fifteen years of his life was spent in his hometown, in the companionship of his mother.⁴⁹

Lancaster had nowhere near the established queer subculture of New York or Paris—or even of Philadelphia or Provincetown. Referring to the 1990s, fully seventy-five years after Demuth returned to Lancaster, authors William Burton and Barry Loveland have said, “The struggle to form a gay community in central Pennsylvania would face many hurdles that had long since been cleared for gay citizens in large urban centers.”⁵⁰ The first known bar in the region that allowed homosexual customers was Johnny Kobler, in downtown Harrisburg, which opened in 1937, two years after Demuth’s death. In Lancaster, the basement of the Village Night

⁴⁸ Vogel, 1–22; Kevin J. Mumford, *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 73–92.

⁴⁹ Farnham, *Charles Demuth*, 131–40; Farnham, “Charles Demuth: His Life,” 911.

⁵⁰ William Burton and Barry Loveland, *Out in Central Pennsylvania: The History of an LGBTQ Community* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2020), 10.

Club tolerated LGBTQ customers in the 1960s, but the first known welcoming LGBTQ space was the Tally Ho Tavern at 201 West Orange Street, which opened in 1968.⁵¹

Demuth's New York friends had the impression that Lancaster was something of an exile for the artist. Artist George Biddle claimed, "He loathed and was bored to death with Lancaster and the Pennsylvania Dutch."⁵² And his friend Susan Watts Street stated, "In Lancaster Demuth didn't mix with people much. He would shut himself off, especially after the diabetes came, and work...he would return to Lancaster, closet himself in his monk's cell upstairs there in the house with the garden and just paint and paint."⁵³ Demuth himself seems to have encouraged this idea, referring to Lancaster as "the province" in letters to friends outside the town.⁵⁴

However, although his social life may have been far tamer than it was in other locales and although Lancaster lacked any discernible queer subculture in the 1920s, Demuth did find some level of LGBTQ community there. As a young man, he became friends with Robert Locher, another queer artist from Lancaster.⁵⁵ Locher (1888-1956) was five years younger than Demuth. Curator Alvord Eiseman claims that the two met as children; the Locher family farm was located next to the Buckius family farm (Demuth's maternal line). In contrast, former Demuth Foundation Director Anne Lampe places the date of their meeting at approximately 1909. Either way, their friendship grew more intense in the summer of 1910, when both men spent the summer on Monhegan Island, in Maine.⁵⁶ Eiseman claims the two were lovers, but Barbara Haskell argues that the only evidence of a sexual relationship between the two is a hand-painted

⁵¹ Burton and Loveland, 27–28.

⁵² Farnham, "Charles Demuth: His Life," 952.

⁵³ Farnham, 981.

⁵⁴ See, for example, Charles Demuth, "Letter to Shane, Agie, Gene" (December 1919), folder 1, box 35, Agnes Boulton Collection of Eugene O'Neill, Beineke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

⁵⁵ Locher was married for a time to Beatrice Locher, indicating that he was either bisexual or that, as Haskell claims, the marriage was only "a social convenience." Haskell, *Charles Demuth*, 24–26.

⁵⁶ Eiseman, *Charles Demuth*, 11; Anne M. Lampe, *Robert E. Locher: A Modern Classic* (Lancaster, PA: Demuth Museum, 2017), director's forward; Farnham, "Charles Demuth: His Life," 906.

Valentine from 1920, attributed to Demuth, that shows two men engaging in oral sex. She argues, however, that the watercolor “bears no stylistic similarity to his work.”⁵⁷

Whether or not they were also lovers at one time, Demuth and Locher maintained a strong friendship throughout their lives. Locher did not live in Lancaster during Demuth’s final fifteen years there, but he wrote Demuth and his mother regularly and sometimes visited. Upon Demuth’s death, Locher inherited all his unsold watercolors, and when Augusta Demuth died in 1943, Locher inherited the Demuth home as well. He returned to Lancaster and opened an antique store there with his life partner, Richard Weyand, to whom he bequeathed the Demuth building.⁵⁸

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, Demuth also befriended Lancaster resident Darrell Larsen, whom evidence suggests was also gay. Larsen (1897-1965) moved to Lancaster in 1927 to direct the non-credit theater program at Franklin and Marshall College. Larsen never married and rented an apartment at 523 King Street.⁵⁹ Demuth and Larsen became friends and socialized “at least twice a week.” On at least one occasion, the two vacationed in Provincetown together. Author Gerald Lestz claims there were multiple trips, while Farnham lists only one. She describes a trip in the summer of 1930, when Demuth and Larsen first visited Lancaster friends Jack and Blanche Steinman on Nantucket, then went to Provincetown.⁶⁰ Demuth also gave Larsen his watercolor *Turkish Baths with Self-Portrait* (1918) and included an inscription to his friend.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Eiseman, *Charles Demuth*, 11; Haskell, *Charles Demuth*, 24–26.

⁵⁸ Haskell, *Charles Demuth*, 24–26; Farnham, *Charles Demuth*, 42n14.

⁵⁹ Gerald S. Lestz, *Charles Demuth and Friends* (Lancaster, PA: John Baer’s Sons, 2003), 40; Darrell Larson, Biographical Materials, Ancestry.com Library Edition; Farnham, “Charles Demuth: His Life,” 543. Larsen’s address is listed as King Street in the 1940 census; the 1930 census has him living at 445 Nevin Street. Lestz states that Larsen arrived in Lancaster in 1927; Farnham gives the date as 1930. I’ve chosen to go with the 1927 date, because it appears that Farnham was relying on Larsen’s memory and Lestz was relying on historical documents.

⁶⁰ Lestz, *Charles Demuth and Friends*, 40–41; Farnham, “Charles Demuth: His Life,” 214–15.

⁶¹ Farnham, “Charles Demuth: His Life,” 543; Lestz, *Charles Demuth and Friends*, 41.

Thus, although any sexual expression would have been more conscribed in Lancaster than in other places Demuth lived, through regular visits to larger cities and a few key friends, he was not entirely isolated from queer peers while living in “the province.” Indeed, historically, many LGBTQ-identified people have survived in precisely this manner: living discreetly in one’s community and traveling elsewhere to more freely express oneself and access queer subcultures.

Evidence of Same-Sex Desire in Demuth’s Life

Although scholars rarely go into much detail about Demuth’s attraction to other men, the unanimity with which they agree that he did, indeed, have primarily homosexual tendencies is striking. This assessment is all the more noteworthy given that Demuth left very little written record of his sexual desire. No known collection of his papers survives, and letters written by him that exist in other people’s collections do not revealed anything substantial to support the idea that he desired men.

However, written sources are not the only material a person leaves behind, particularly when that person is a visual artist. The homoerotic themes in Demuth’s paintings are undeniable.⁶² His depictions of the male form often exaggerate the body parts that produce sexual desire in others—the penises in *Two Sailors* and the shapely rear ends and thighs in *Dancing Sailors*, for example. These images are tantalizing enough for Demuth to be included in a history of gay pornography.⁶³ In addition, the subjects of many of his paintings would have been understood by his contemporaries as referencing places and things that were meaningful to people we would today describe as LGBTQ. These include:

⁶² The following discussion should not be seen as an in-depth analysis of Demuth’s work. To delve deeper into this topic, see Weinberg, *Speaking for Vice*.

⁶³ Gillan, “A Brief History of GAY PORN.” Note that AXM was a lifestyle magazine, not an academic journal.

- **Sailors.** Associations between seafaring men and same-sex desire are longstanding and well documented. Prior to the mid-nineteenth century, seafaring meant global travel in eras when most people rarely traveled more than fifty miles from their birthplace, lending sailors a worldliness and familiarity with far-off cultures and practices. At the same time, months spent at sea with only other men for company led to both homoerotic shipboard customs and a reputation for randiness once ashore. The combination of these circumstances led to an association between sailors and homosexual activity, both in reality and in the gay male imagination, and that association carried well into the twentieth century.⁶⁴
- **Vaudeville.** As with other sites of artistic expression, traveling theatrical performances (including vaudeville, carnivals, and circuses) were often gathering places for people who understood themselves to be outsiders. This was true both of the performers and for a portion of the audiences. Indeed, the transitory nature of these performances and the rumored presence of sexual outsiders in the troupes made them common sites for anonymous sexual encounters among gay men.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Susan Ferentinos, “Maryland LGBTQ Historic Context Study” (Baltimore: Preservation Maryland, 2020), 136–40, <https://www.preservationmaryland.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/maryland-lgbtq-historic-context-study-september-2020-full-web.pdf>; Hans Turley, *Rum, Sodomy, and the Lash: Piracy, Sexuality, and Masculine Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 1999); B. R. Burg, *Sodomy and the Pirate Tradition: English Sea Rovers in the Seventeenth-Century Caribbean* (New York: New York University Press, 1995); Arthur N. Gilbert, “Buggery and the British Navy, 1700-1861,” *Journal of Social History* 10 (October 1976): 72–98; Paul Baker and Jo Stanley, *Hello Sailor! The Hidden History of Gay Life at Sea* (London; New York: Longman, 2003), 6–9; Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 65–97; Hugh Ryan, *When Brooklyn Was Queer* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2019), 21.

⁶⁵ Anna-Sophie Jürgens and Mirjam Hildbrand, eds., *Circus and the Avant-Gardes: History, Imaginary, Innovation* (New York: Routledge, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003163749>; James F. Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies: Performance, Race, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010).

Vaudeville and its related art forms also often included female impersonation acts, allowing uninitiated audience members a glimpse into gender-crossing and audience members in-the-know a public depiction of their world—an existent world for some, while only an inner world for others.⁶⁶

- **Jazz Clubs.** As discussed above, jazz clubs in the early twentieth century had a reputation, particularly in the white imagination, as liminal spaces where various categories of people intermingled—black and white; gay and straight; female, male, and those with less definitive gender expression. In this era, depictions of a jazz club would have referenced a demimonde where a range of sexual and gender identities were accepted.⁶⁷
- **Turkish Baths.** In the early twentieth century, bathhouses did not carry the exclusively gay connotations they carry in the early twenty-first century. Many urban dwellings in poorer neighborhoods did not yet have indoor plumbing, and many people used public baths simply to maintain basic hygiene. Turkish baths (as opposed to public bathhouses) served a wealthier clientele, serving more as what we would today call a spa. This would be the type of bathhouse that someone of Demuth’s background might visit with purely non-sexual intent. Nevertheless, because of their design and the acceptability of nudity within these spaces, bathhouses were places conducive to male sexual activity and by the early twentieth century, public or semipublic baths were a common place to meet men

⁶⁶ Haskell, *Charles Demuth*, 53.

⁶⁷ Vogel, *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret*; Mumford, *Interzones*.

in search of male sexual partners. Turkish baths are an example of homosexual code: references to such places (as in Demuth's paintings) would not seem unusual to most people in the 1910s, but people familiar with queer subcultures would have seen the depiction as a possible reference to this secret community.⁶⁸

During Demuth's adulthood, the dominant narrative claimed that people who desired those of their same sex were deviants, abnormal and depraved. Although there was more openness than there would be during the Cold War, same-sex desire was still a dangerous thing to admit to. It could lead to ostracism, medical scrutiny, and (if acted upon) jail time and public humiliation. Because of this, people in queer subcultures developed subtle ways of identifying themselves to each other. These coded messages—certain styles of dress, certain turns of phrase, certain topics mentioned—were innocuous enough to escape attention from mainstream society but served as signals for others who knew the code.⁶⁹

The subjects discussed above fall under the early-twentieth-century gay code. In addition, Demuth's style and mannerisms also coded him as a gay man, albeit in less subtle ways. He was reportedly an impeccable dresser with a distinctive gait developed as a means of making his mobility issues less obvious. He carried a cane to assist him with walking but gave the impression it was merely a signature accessory. While these affectations probably originated as a means of disguising his leg problem, they were effective because they fit into an overall impression of Demuth as something of a dandy, a term meaning, on the surface, a vaguely effeminate man overly concerned with his appearance, but often used as a code for someone who was gay.⁷⁰ In fact, in discussing his memories of Demuth with Emily Farnhum for her 1959

⁶⁸ Pierce, "Throwing Open the Door"; Weinberg, *Speaking for Vice*, 19–23, 33–34.

⁶⁹ Koskovich, "A Gay American Modernist."

⁷⁰ Haskell, *Charles Demuth*, 21–22; Weinberg, *Speaking for Vice*, 47–48.

dissertation, Demuth's friend William Carlos Williams declared, "He was a dandy who liked to appear in full dress."⁷¹ Art dealer Charles Daniels also described Demuth in terms that can be interpreted as coded references to his being gay:

Ah, Demuth. He was a rare one. I can tell you this right now—he wore the most beautiful neckties in New York. He must have the tie that he liked, and he liked the best. That was Demuth. It came out of his sensitivity. It had to be good. He was very vain; and wore unusual colors. And he had strong likes and dislikes. His hands were the most extraordinary hands that I have ever seen. They were alive. Yet he was never affected; was without any pose.⁷²

With regard to Demuth wearing ties in "unusual colors," it is worth noting that the colors pink and red were worn by gay men as part of the coded way they communicated their sexual desires to others who shared those desires.⁷³

Demuth was also known for his sardonic wit, another characteristic often employed by gay men, and this trait *is* apparent in the written record. For example, in response to Alfred Stieglitz's portrait of him, Demuth wrote, "You have me in a fix: shall I remain ill retaining that look, die, considering that moment the climax of my 'looks,' or live and change?"⁷⁴ He wrote to writer Agnes Boulton:

I'll try to leave February in New York, - for what reason I'm sure I don't know, - these days of wood-alcohol! I hope we who love drink, for itself, will sometime be together in a fair county full of the "true-bang"...Perhaps I'll go to England. I must have a drink on some street corner of the world soon, or bust.⁷⁵

⁷¹ Farnham, "Charles Demuth: His Life," 957.

⁷² Farnham, 990–91.

⁷³ Weinberg, *Speaking for Vice*, 47.

⁷⁴ Charles Demuth, "Letter to (Alfred) Stieglitz" (May 2, 1922), folder 12, box 302, Alfred Stieglitz Georgia O'Keefe Archive, Beineke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. Typescript version also available, see folder: Demuth 1928, box 82, Dorothy Norman Papers, Beineke.

⁷⁵

More telling, however, is a flirtatious, campy language occasionally apparent in letters between Demuth and certain friends. Robert Locher refers to him as “Charles Darling,”⁷⁶ and in thanking writer Carl Van Vechten for “the ‘flower’ article,” Demuth wrote, “Your very frisky and urban lines about me made me wish that I could really be as naughty as you imagine; perhaps, I can be after the ‘cure,’ dear Carl.”⁷⁷ Scholars identify both Locher and Van Vechten as gay (although it is possible they were bisexual), and so this distinctive style reflects the way two gay male friends would speak to each other in private.

The campiest example of all comes from Gerald Kelly. Little is known about Kelly. Bruce Kellner, the editor of the *Letters of Charles Demuth* identifies him as an “American bon vivant,” and notes that he was “first an art dealer with the Braun Gallery, later employed by the Metropolitan Museum of Art.”⁷⁸ Elsewhere, Kellner states that he was “Braun Art Gallery manager, later a curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, not to be confused with [Sir] Gerald [Festus] Kelly, the English artist.”⁷⁹ Demuth only refers to him once in his letters, telling Henry McBride that “Jerry” should direct *The Princess Zoubaroff*, a 1920 play by Ronald Firbank that featured gay and lesbian characters.⁸⁰ In an undated letter to Demuth, Kelly strikes an undeniably gay tone:

Demuth you slut you never meant to week-end with us. I[t] was I, not Henry, who called you up from Phoenixville and Mrs. Force who finished the conversation. That cursed spot was thirty-three miles from us and poor Mrs. Force and I did it in Saturday’s intolerable heat starting from Buckingham about nine and

⁷⁶ Robert Locher, “Postcard to Charles (Demuth)” (January 12, 1922), Locher to Demuth folder, Demuth Foundation, Lancaster, PA.

⁷⁷ Charles Demuth, “Letter to Carl Van Vechten” (March 26, 1922), folder 34, box 474, Carl Van Vechten Papers, Beineke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT; The article referenced was most likely the (not at all naughty) Carl Van Vechten, “Pastiches and Pastiches,” *The Reviewer*, February 1922, Hathi Trust.

⁷⁸ Charles Demuth, *Letters of Charles Demuth, American Artist, 1883-1935*, ed. Bruce Kellner (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 124n3.

⁷⁹ Carl Van Vechten, *The Splendid Drunken Twenties: Selections from the Daybooks, 1922-30*, ed. Bruce Kellner (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 62.

⁸⁰ Demuth to McBride, August 25, 1929, Demuth, *Letters of Charles Demuth, American Artist, 1883-1935*, 123–24.

breakfastless so as not to keep you both waiting. Arrived, we combed each station, the Penn. and the Reading and I was dressed pretty enough to attract all sorts of unseemly attention...but no McBride and no Charles... and just when we had given you up, and were dashing through the high street back home, I was fascinated by a tall person in a chalk-pink shirt who waved oddly and violently at me.....HENRY, who had been holding up the Piazza, Porch, Verandah, Stoop or whatever you call the projections of your local inns...well, we gathered him in and the party was a great success. We missed you of course, but you missed a very good time.....not hectic a bit, but indolent and pleasantly amusing.... And Henry was in jolly good form.....[signed] Gerald⁸¹

It was (and is) common for gay men to use traditionally feminine terms, such as “Slut,” to refer to each other; other examples include “darling” (as Locher used in the example above), “pretty” (as Kelly also uses in his letter), “her highness,” “queen,” and “Miss Thing.”⁸² It is also worth noting that pink clothing and accessories were part of the gay code, so the reference to the color of Henry McBride’s shirt is significant, along the lines of saying, “I, as a gay man, had my attention drawn to this person who was both wearing a pink shirt (thus, communicating his homosexuality) and waving at me.”

In addition, although they do not read as campy, Demuth wrote two letters to his friend, art critic Henry McBride (who is widely understood to have been gay), in which he refers to a “cousin” while at the same time making a bit of a show of this word being code. On June 21, 1925, after sharing a recipe for homemade wine, Demuth wrote:

This, my dear Mr. McBride, is all, it seems, that there is to it. I trust that you will be successful in your venture. If all this is unclear let me know and if you wish I will have my cousin (as you invented) [drive] me down....

⁸¹ Gerald Kelly, “Appendix 279: Undated Letter to Charles Demuth” (n.d.), folder 11, box 2, Richard W. C. Weyand Collection of Charles Demuth, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beineke Rare Book and Manuscript Library Digital Collections, Yale University, New Haven, CT, <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/16849908>; italics and ellipses in the original.

⁸² Weinberg, *Speaking for Vice*, 32–33.

My cousin thinks that you are grand. I am sorry we caused you that hour or was it only an half hour? Some time you must come up and see my real cousin, here,--there is one.⁸³

In another letter, undated, Demuth writes to McBride:

My dear Henry,
Are you still there? If you are and would like to see “my cousin” and myself, drop me a card, and we will come down, by Ford to see you.⁸⁴

As Kellner notes, in the 1920s, “cousin” was a common way to refer to a same-sex lover in front of strangers, yet another example of queer code. These references suggest that Demuth had at least one romantic relationship while living in Lancaster; they also seem to indicate that this person lived in or near Lancaster, given that both letters state that he and Demuth could easily travel together to visit McBride.⁸⁵

In addition, after his death, Demuth’s contemporaries were fairly open about his preference for men. As noted above, William Carlos Williams referred to him as a “dandy,” and Charles Daniels talks at length about Demuth’s lovely ties in unusual colors. In this, both men seem to be making veiled (but not too veiled) references to their understanding that Demuth was gay. As part of his recollections of Demuth, Williams also stated, “I don’t know why it is, but several of my old friends, it appears now, were homosexual.”⁸⁶ Likewise, artist Marcel Duchamp said of Demuth:

The little perverse tendency that he had was not important in Demuth’s life. After all, everybody has a little perverse tendency in him. That quality in him had nothing to do with the quality of his work. It had nothing to do with his art. There

⁸³ Demuth, *Letters of Charles Demuth, American Artist, 1883-1935*, 67–68.

⁸⁴ Demuth, 68–69.

⁸⁵ Demuth, 68n1.

⁸⁶ Farnham, “Charles Demuth: His Life,” 990.

have been other instances of important artists—Baudelaire, among others—whose work was not affected by perversion.⁸⁷

Artist George Biddle was the most direct of all, declaring, “He was a homosexual, ‘fin de siècle.’”⁸⁸

These assessments of Demuth by those who knew him led biographer Emily Farnham to state quite explicitly in her 1959 dissertation that Demuth “was a homosexual.”⁸⁹ Indeed, Farnham—whose PhD was in art history, not psychology—devotes an entire *volume* of her dissertation to a Freudian analysis of Demuth, in which she argues that he had an Oedipal fixation on his mother and contrasts same-sex desire to the sex drive of “a normal person.”⁹⁰ The mid-twentieth century was an era when claiming someone felt desire for their own sex was a serious accusation. It was not a claim that would have been made lightly in academic literature, as it ran the risk of ruining a person’s legacy, opening the accuser to legal complaints of libel, and—if proven to be a false claim—ruining the accuser’s own professional reputation. Thus, it is noteworthy that Farnham dealt so explicitly with Demuth’s homosexuality. Her decision likely grew out of a preponderance of evidence to back up her claim.

Conclusion

The early twentieth century represents a fascinating period of U.S. LGBTQ history, when queer subcultures were becoming firmly established but mainstream middle-class society was either naïve enough or accepting enough to turn a blind eye to suggestions that any of their peers had homosexual tendencies. In the dominant narrative of the day, homosexuals were deprived individuals from the “lower orders”—the poor, the foreign born, the non-white. We see in

⁸⁷ Farnham, 973.

⁸⁸ Farnham, 952.

⁸⁹ Farnham, 138.

⁹⁰ Farnham, 227–51, quotation from 231.

Charles Demuth all the characteristics of the era: a wealthy, native-born, white man—charming and vaguely effeminate—who retained his place in society while also regularly sending coded signals to other gay men. His signals include his references to queer tropes in his paintings, his personal style and sardonic wit, his presence in various locations known to have queer enclaves during his lifetime, and his flamboyant style of communicating with certain queer friends. All in all, despite the lack of an explicit long-term emotional partnership and the lack of openly gay references by Demuth in the surviving written record, it seems fair to argue that the ongoing scholarly assumption is correct: Charles Demuth experienced same-sex attraction and was familiar with the gay underworld of his time.

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Appendix: Primary Source Material

Most, if not all, of the Yale letters are compiled in Bruce Kellner, Letters of Charles Demuth, American Artist, 1883-1935 (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000). In addition Emily Farnham includes source material she collected (such as interviews with Demuth's contemporaries) in her dissertation, "Charles Demuth: His Life, Psychology, and Works" (PhD Dissertation, Ohio State University, 1959).

Demuth Records at Yale University

Florine and Ettie Stettheimer papers

From finding aid: "Robert Locher sent Christmas cards with drawings by Charles Demuth to the Stettheimer sisters for eight years and, enclosed in one of Locher's letters, is a manuscript about Florine in Demuth's hand."

Henry McBride papers

DIGITIZED: b. 3, f. 87 (Demuth Correspondence)

Dial/Scofield Thayer papers

From finding aid: "The papers document the life and activities of Scofield Thayer and the history of Dial Magazine under his ownership. "

B2.f59: Office Correspondence, Demuth

B.30.f799-801: Scofield Thayer

b. 188, f. 3173 Demuth, Charles Correspondence

Alfred Stieglitz / Georgia O'Keeffe archive

B12.f301: Personal and Business Correspondence, Demuth, Augusta

B12.f302-303: Personal and Business Correspondence, Demuth, Charles

B52.f1262: Personal and Business Correspondence, Williams, William Carlos: letter to Charles Demuth

b. 144, f. 2657 Charles Demuth (with Strand [?] photograph mounted on verso)

b. 146, f. 2711 Frame 27: three portraits of Charles Demuth

b. 150, f. 2807 Photographs (2 prints) of Charles Demuth removed from his letters in Series I

Four of Demuth's Portrait Posters used to be in collection; now at the Yale Art Museum

Series 7: Art Collection Notebooks, b. 162: Demuth (among others)

b. 188, f. 3173 Personal and Business Correspondence, Demuth, Charles

b. 188, f. 3174 Personal and Business Correspondence, Demuth Foundation

b. 199, f. 3431 Lestz, Gerald S. (See also Demuth Foundation)

b. 246, f. 4335 Documentary Ephemera: Demuth, Charles

DIGITIZED:

B98: Various Holographs and Typescripts by Demuth (doesn't seem relevant)

DIGITIZED:

Box 64, folder 1452-1458 Comes up in a Demuth Search

Box 67, f. 1480-1491

Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas papers

b. 104, f. 2029 General Correspondence, Demuth, Charles

William Carlos Williams papers

Carl Van Vechten Papers

- B. 34, F 474 Demuth, Charles: Includes one letter from Demuth to CVV (1922); third party letters regarding Demuth from Whitney Museum of American Art (1937-1938), Emily Farnam (1956), Jean Burkholder (1958), and Jeanne V. Halsey (1959)

Agnes Boulton Collection of Eugene O'Neill (<https://ead-pdfs.library.yale.edu/1408.pdf>)

b. 1, f. 35 General Correspondence, Demuth, Charles

Dorothy Norman Papers (<https://ead-pdfs.library.yale.edu/1808.pdf>)

b. 82 Alfred Sieglitz Correspondence, Demuth, Charles

b. 91 Sieglitz Admin Files: Demuth, Augusta 1933

b. 91 Sieglitz Admin Files: Demuth, Charles

Mabel Dodge Luhan Papers (<https://ead-pdfs.library.yale.edu/1447.pdf>)

b. 41, f. 1270 Hartley, Marsden to Charles Demuth

Monroe Wheeler Papers (<https://ead-pdfs.library.yale.edu/1415.pdf>)

b. 3, f. 76a General Correspondence: Demuth, [Charles?]

Yale Collection of American Literature Letter Collection

(<https://ead-pdfs.library.yale.edu/1599.pdf>)

b. 8, f. 297-298 DEMUTH, CHARLES, 1883-1935

2 Folders The Azure Adder [A Play]. Typescript (carbon). Typed copy made, presumably, by Richard Weyand 11 leaf Published in The Glebe, December 1913

Excerpts from the Writings of Charles Demuth. Typescript (carbon).

Selections made, presumably, by Richard Weyand. 15 leaves

"In Black and White", Typescript (original) 2 leaves

PEMBERTON, MURDOCK, 1888-1982

b. 49, f. GROUP 1001, F-1

Correspondence, 76 items

Pemberton, Murdock, 1888-1982

Stieglitz, Alfred, 1864-1946

O'Keeffe, Georgia, 1887-1986

Correspondence consists of three autograph letters, signed, to Pemberton from Alfred Stieglitz and four autograph letters, signed, from Georgia O'Keeffe. Stieglitz's letters, which date from 1926 and 1928, mention Charles Demuth, [Marsden] Hartley, and [John] Marin, among other topics. O'Keeffe's letters, which date from 1951 through 1960, concern personal matters, such as a visit.

Muriel Draper Papers (<https://ead-pdfs.library.yale.edu/1624.pdf>)

DIGITIZED:

Series 1: Correspondence. b. 2, f. 64 Demuth, Charles

Michael De Lisio and Irving Drutman Papers

<https://archives.yale.edu/repositories/11/resources/1786>

Subject files on some of Demuth's homoerotic paintings

B 5: Demuth, "Male in Bath House"

B 5: Demuth, "Beach Scene"

Henry Geldzahler papers

b. 4, f. 146: Museum Talk: "William Carlos Williams, Charles Demuth and Jasper Johns."

Approximately 70 pages drafts, typed, hand corrected, 1963 November

b. 16, f. 10.2 Museum Talk: 6 pages, carbon, on Demuth's "I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold" compared with Johns' Numbers

Katherine S. Dreier papers / Société Anonyme archive

<https://archives.yale.edu/repositories/11/resources/1398>

Series X: Société Anonyme: Subject Files about Artists: b. 100, f. 2471 Demuth, Charles

Edna Kenton Papers

DIGITIZED

B1.f6 to f9 Titled Carl Van Vechten, but comes up in Demuth search