

# TWO SAILORS

By Barbara Haskell

**C**harles Demuth's *Two Sailors Urinating* (fig. 1) seems at first glance to depict exactly what its posthumous title suggests--two sailors relieving themselves outside a café, illustrated in pencil on the composition's right. Closer inspection however reveals the work's subject to be male sexual intimacy, as evidenced by the close proximity of

the men's bodies, the hand of one sailor on the other's penis, and the pleasurable reaction that gesture is having on the recipient based on his facial expression. Close cropped and positioned in front of a shallow background, the men are monumental; their penises, located at the composition's center and bathed in light, are presented as objects of secular reverence. The watercolor's eroticism is undeniable. In giving centerstage to the men's oversized organs, *Two Sailors Urinating* joins a long lineage of sexually-charged art, some of which included close-up, graphic images of vaginas that Demuth likely would have seen in works by his friends Jules Pascin and Gaston Lachaise as well as by artists such as Egon Schiele and Gustave Klimt. Yet in contrast to these and most other fine art erotic images, *Two Sailors Urinating* was not intended for a heterosexual audience. Instead, the virile, lusty sailors and enlarged genitals in Demuth's watercolor are springboards for homosexual arousal, intended to be shared privately or not at all.



**Figure 1**  
Charles Demuth, *Two Sailors Urinating*, 1930,  
watercolor and graphite on paper, 10 3/4 x 8  
1/2 in., collection unknown

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**at the very  
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secret.**  
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Indeed, Demuth never exhibited *Two Sailors Urinating* publicly, as doing so would have violated the discretion about his sexual proclivities that he vigilantly maintained throughout his life. He was not alone in keeping his homosexuality clandestine. Camouflaging it was commonplace among members of the gay community during the first decades of the twentieth century when being homosexual carried enormous legal and social penalties. Demuth self-consciously stylized himself as a fin-de-siècle dandy, but he was sufficiently circumspect about his sexual orientation that even among his friends, there was a lack of consensus. Eugene O'Neill, for example, in modeling the character of Charles Marsden in *Strange Interlude* after Demuth, portrayed him as sexually ambivalent.<sup>1</sup> Marcel Duchamp opined that “[Demuth] never spilled over to his friends but kept a tightlipped and well-groomed appearance always,” while Stuart Davis claimed that “if he wasn't [homosexual], I don't know what he was.”<sup>2</sup> Friends who confirmed Demuth's homosexuality after his death never openly discussed the subject during his lifetime; at the very most, it was an open secret.

Throughout the teens, Demuth peppered his watercolors, especially those depicting dancing sailors, vaudeville acts and Turkish bathhouses, with veiled references to homosexuality while also being careful to keep them sufficiently ambiguous that they could be read by heterosexual audiences as sensuous depictions of popular culture. Only in his posthumously titled *Turkish Bath Scene with Self-Portrait*, with its inclusion of a probable self-portrait in a scene that depicted male genitals and incipient fellatio, did he identify himself with the homosexual milieu. Not surprisingly, he kept the watercolor private until the early 1930s, when he gave it to Darrel Larson, a theater director in Lancaster with whom he was spending several evenings a week.

More than a decade elapsed between Demuth's sexually allusive watercolors of the teens and the explicit depictions of same-sex encounters he made in 1930. He began the decade with *A Distinguished Air* (fig. 2), whose title referred to Robert McAlmon's 1925 eponymous short story concerning the decadent world of sex, alcohol and drugs in postwar Berlin. Taking liberties with the story's narrative, Demuth's watercolor describes a group of people at an art opening, among them a homosexual sailor-dandy couple, looking at a sculpture that resembles a phallus. Those details were considered sufficiently salacious to have the watercolor banned from several exhibitions; less suspect but more personally revealing was Demuth's inclusion of himself among the group, leaning on his cane and intently observing the sailor's crotch.

In what seems to be an increased sense of urgency, Demuth executed *Two Sailors Urinating* several months later, during his stay in Provincetown in the summer of 1930. The port town teemed with sailors attached to its Coast Guard Station. By 1930, diabetes had diminished Demuth's physical strength, thereby reducing the likelihood of his engaging sexually with the sailors, but their ubiquitous presence and the loose sexuality with which they were associated at the time seems to have inspired his fantasies, which he portrayed in a group of erotic watercolors of men engaged in suggestively homosexual acts. In place of the tongue-in-check innuendos of Demuth's watercolors of the teens, these works portray a world of muscular virility and sexual prowess. That Demuth knew they were not exhibitable suggests that he made them for himself alone, as fragments of imaginary narratives about which he likely could only daydream. Brimming with the dramatic expectancy of an imminent sex act, watercolors such as *Two Sailors Urinating* had little in common with the humorous illustrations of male figures with massive erections that Demuth's aesthetic hero Aubrey Beardsley made for Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*. In contrast to Beardsley's satirical illustrations, Demuth's erotic watercolors exude an emotional honesty, as if he had concluded that he no longer need dissemble about his sexual desires but could instead use them as a source of artistic invention and creative freedom. That he did so in *Two Sailors Urinating* is irrefutable. Using his characteristic stains of richly modulated, high-intensity color and animate, atmospheric surfaces, he created a powerful, incandescent image of homosexual desire and male sexual intimacy.

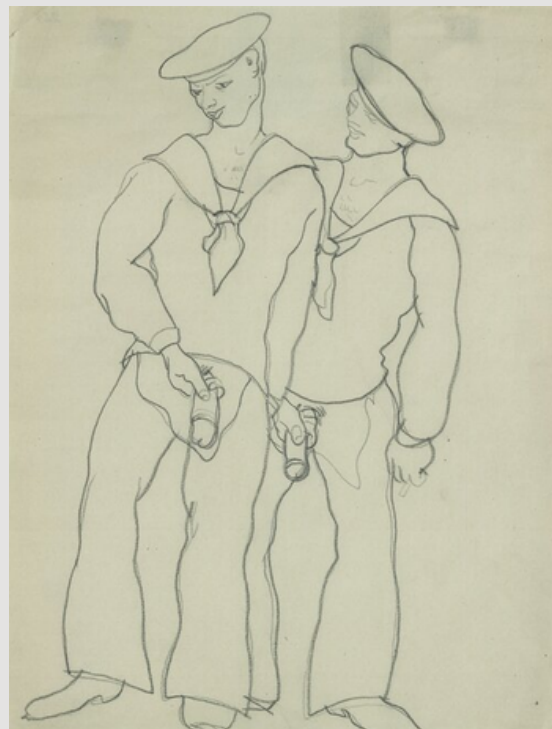
#### Notes

1. See Louis Sheaffer, *O'Neill: Son and Artist* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971), p. 242.

2. Duchamp, quoted in Emily Farnham, *Charles Demuth: His life, Psychology and Works*, 3 vols. (PhD dissertation, Ohio State University, Columbus, 1959), III, p 973. Davis, quoted in Jonathan Weinberg, *Speaking for Vice: Homosexuality in the Art of Charles Demuth, Marsden Hartley, and the First American Avant-Garde* (New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 46



**Figure 2**  
Charles Demuth, *Distinguished Air*, 1930, watercolor and graphite on paper, 16 1/4 x 12 3/16 in., Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase, with funds from the Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art and Charles Simon



Charles Demuth, *Two Sailors Urinating (Study)*, 1930, graphite on paper, 11 x 8 1/2 in., Demuth Foundation, Lancaster, PA; gift of Henry Libhart



# ON "THAT" STREET

By Jonathan Katz



**Figure 1**  
Charles Demuth, *On "That" Street*, 1932,  
watercolor and graphite on paper, 11 × 8 9/16 in.,  
Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL; Alfred  
Stieglitz Collection

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Charles Demuth's *On "That" Street* (1932) (fig. 1) augments its considerable aesthetic value with a penetrating, albeit subtle, form of social history, transforming the watercolor into something like a Rosetta Stone for the subculture of homosexuality at the time—and the artist's often fraught self-understanding within it. In this regard, Demuth offers us something of great scarcity in the historical

record, not only an account of what could happen, but of what it meant to its participants as it was happening, that subjective dimension that only a period eye can provide. The street in question was Sands Street (fig. 2), so infamous as a queer pick up spot bordering the Brooklyn Naval Yard that Demuth could simply call it "that" street, and those familiar with queer subcultural codes—the intended audience for this work—would understand exactly what he meant.<sup>1</sup>

Two sailors and a civilian—the civilian is Demuth in fact—are huddled together in an unusual rhythm, their glances directed solely at the figure who is *not* looking at them. This fraught round-robin of gazes suggests something is awry in the smooth functioning of the social order. Demuth stares unhappily at the shorter young sailor on his left, who in turn is ignoring Demuth and eagerly chatting up the more masculine sailor to the right. In this period, sailors on shore leave would often make themselves available (quite literally on "that" street) to queer men. This exchange of sexual services garnered them money, a roof over their heads, good meals and some sexual release—something only older men could provide. But in this image, the young effeminate sailor on the left is obviously competing with Demuth for the attention of the masculine sailor, 'trade' in the argot of the time. That figure in turn is looking at Demuth, knowing he alone has the wherewithal to give him what he needs.<sup>2</sup>

Importantly, as this image was being made, the social construction of the "queer" was in the midst of systematic change, one in which a longstanding historical account of who was and who wasn't queer was undergoing a seismic shift. In the 19th century and into the first decades of the 20th, a queer was someone who contravened their own gender in the sexual act, i.e., a male who was sexually penetrated. This meant that the man penetrating him was actually not queer, for the definition of sexual difference turned not on one's sexual partner's gender, but the construction of one's own gender in the sexual act.<sup>3</sup> Thus an active male was doing what men do without regard to the biological sex of his partner. In fact, as we know from the historical record, gay men regularly offered themselves to straight men and it was perceived not as a diminishment of their hetero-masculinity, but as tribute to it. To have sex with another man, if you were in the dominant position, was to reap the benefits of their submission—and that is something the trade intended to do.



**Figure 2**  
Brooklyn Navy Yard Buildings at the Intersection of Sands Street and Navy Street, 1908, Brooklyn Daily Eagle photographs; Brooklyn Public Library, Center for Brooklyn History

But as this image was painted, that historical model was increasingly giving way to our more familiar definition of queerness, one that turned merely on the fact of same-sex relations. The young sailor, perhaps party to this newer model, assumes that if the butch sailor is interested in the older Demuth, he surely must be interested in a younger, prettier lad. But both Demuth and the trade are annoyed by this unwarranted intrusion into a familiar, longstanding socio-sexual pact, one that moreover threatens to cast the trade's exclusively pecuniary interest in Demuth into a different, and notably unflattering light—i.e., that he, too, may be queer. Since the young sailor surely can't compete with Demuth in material terms, he is implicitly suggesting that the trade must like men too, and that was a claim that was often met with violence—as it remains to this day.

In short, Demuth offers us, with great subtlety, an image of a culture in transition, of what it felt like to be party to a wholesale shift in sexual self-definition at the time. A rare early image of a gay male subculture decades before gay liberation, it does double-duty to register the shocks and discontinuities of a paradigm shift. Whereas once queers required the erotic participation of non-queers in order to be who they truly were, increasingly, queers were now looking at each other as sexual objects. This not only meant that older men were now less attractive than they once were, it also entailed a thinning of the ranks of the sexually available, and the coterminous depopulation of "that" street. To sleep with a queer now increasingly implied you were queer too, the very message Demuth's image defined itself against.

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#### Notes

1. See Hugh Ryan, *When Brooklyn Was Queer*, (NY: St. Martin's Press, 2019)

2. On the terminology and construction of same-sex relationships before the 1930s, see George Chauncey "Christian Brotherhood or Sexual Perversion? Homosexual Identities and the Construction of Social Boundaries in the World War I Era," in *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey eds. (New York: New American Library, 1989), 294–317.

3. See my own *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture* (New York: Smithsonian Books, 2010), 24-26.

# CHARLES DEMUTH AND LANCASTER VICE

By M. Alison Kibler

with Jayden Lacoë ('24), Franklin and Marshall College

C

harles Demuth's Lancaster was known as a "wide-open" city, which meant that local officials tolerated and even encouraged a thriving commercial sex trade as well as other related "vices," such as gambling and drinking.<sup>1</sup> Beginning in 1913, Lancaster clergy and business leaders joined together to "put the lid" on vice. The Law and Order Society, under the leadership of Reverend Clifford Twombly (fig. 1), the rector of St. James Episcopal Church, pressured city officials to crack down on vice for several decades.

One of Demuth's friends reflected on a time when she ran into Demuth on his way back to Lancaster and he stated that Lancaster was having "a crusade against vice" and that he was "going home to speak for vice."<sup>2</sup> This essay helps explain Demuth's allegiance to his hometown's open secret of vice, which encouraged new definitions of sexual morality, provided opportunities for sexual exploration outside of marriage and heterosexuality, and challenged traditional gender definitions. No wonder Demuth cheered for vice.

Commercial vice flourished in full view of the police and elected officials. Commercial sex was not marginalized in a single "red light" district in Lancaster; although a string of houses on North Water Street did indeed have red lights shining through the transom windows. Rather, commercial sex permeated the business district in the city center, as well as residential neighborhoods, wealthy and poor, all-white and racially-integrated. Police officers knew all the locations for commercial sex and socialized with and shared meals with sex workers.<sup>3</sup> One of the local newspapers published an expose revealing that police officers did not patrol the streets at night; they let themselves into the firehouses and enjoyed a good night's sleep.<sup>4</sup>

The business of vice depended on the support of home owners, who rented to brothel keepers, and lawyers who facilitated real estate transactions and bailed clients out of jail. Hotels also supported the commercial sex trade by referring travelers to the "sporting houses" and offering space to prostitutes. At least six doctors in town provided medical care, including abortions, to sex workers, who often displayed certificates declaring that they were free of diseases. One of these doctors had an office directly across from Demuth's residence on East King Street.<sup>5</sup> Brothel keepers declared that their clientele came from "the cream of the city" as well as businessmen from other cities, large and small, along the east coast. Other clients, in cheaper brothels, were "hard working class."<sup>6</sup> Students from Franklin & Marshall College were regular patrons.<sup>7</sup> Other "immoral" activity was spread throughout the city. Four gambling games were within a "stone's throw" of the mayor's office in 1913, and one was just a four-minute walk from Demuth's home.<sup>8</sup> The mayor did not care about the gambling or the commercial sex. Indeed, he was known as a "live wire" who chased "chickens" [young women]; his approach to vice was "live and let live."<sup>9</sup>

Around the turn of the twentieth century, Lancaster's nightlife, as in other cities, expanded to include dance halls, movie theaters, vaudeville theaters, saloons and beer gardens. The number of theaters in Lancaster, for example, increased from 3 in 1899 to 15 in 1913; many of the new theaters were movie theaters, a novel technology around this time. Downtown Lancaster thus attracted crowds to "go out" in the evening. This is an important context for commercial sex in the city for several reasons: the shows on stage and screen often depicted steamy romances and sexual innuendo and the spaces invited young men and women to interact together in the audience, without supervision.



**Figure 1**  
The Rev. Clifford G. Twombly, from "History of St. James' Church," 1944

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**No wonder Demuth  
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Figure 2  
Demuth Tobacco Shop Façade,

In addition, these spaces attracted a new spectator—the charity girl (also known as a treating girl), young women who exchanged sexual favors for movie or theater tickets or a restaurant meal. These women were part of a growing group of wage-earning women, who were out in public alone for their employment. In Lancaster some worked as clerks in drug stores, candy stores, and department stores; others worked as strippers in the city's tobacco industry, which included Demuth's tobacco shop on King Street (fig. 2).<sup>10</sup> Young working women wanted to “go out” at night, but, with their low wages, they couldn't afford it without a date. Thus, they looked for men to treat them. These working-class women “forged a new category of sexual identity that allowed them to profit from sex without completely abandoning their particular culture's conceptions of female respectability.”<sup>11</sup> Their practices increased the popularity of premarital sex and mixed-gender socializing among strangers in commercial leisure; they pioneered sexual exchange as a basic element of dating.

These theaters were sites of solicitation for prostitutes and flirtation and pickups for charity girls. One of these Queen Street theatres, The Colonial Theatre, was particularly associated with vice. The local Law and Order Society agent, John Kline, checked on the Colonial about twice a week and sometimes commented on suggestive dancers or vulgar jokes (he would then talk to the manager about getting material cut from an act). In addition, charity girls and sex workers would solicit men here and even flirt outwardly during shows or laugh loudly to draw attention of possible men in the crowd. In 1913 an usher removed four young women from the theater when they became too loud and rambunctious and investigators observed prostitutes in the lobby.<sup>12</sup>

Why did Demuth gravitate to the Colonial Theatre? It presented vaudeville, a mixture of rapid-fire live acts ranging from comedians and acrobats, to opera singers and trained animals. This variety included elements that would have appealed to his affinity with “vice.” Some of the comedy was sexually suggestive; some costumes would have been revealing; some routines were peppered with slang. In particular, one genre of vaudeville performance was female impersonation, in which performers regularly addressed a gay male audience, though often in coded terms. Bert Savoy (fig. 3), a famous female impersonator in New York City, referred to himself with female pronouns and reviews noted that his jokes were particularly directed at gay men.<sup>13</sup> Female impersonators who specialized in an effeminate persona became popular in nightclubs in New York City in the 1920s and 1930s; reporters called this the “pansy craze.” The drag balls moved from the outskirts of New York City (Bowery, Harlem, and Greenwich) into Times Square. Thousands of spectators would attend the drag balls, creating the pansy craze term. Gay men were increasingly visible in these affirming public spaces.<sup>14</sup>

Demuth was part of this world, in Lancaster and in New York City. Female impersonators came to Lancaster's vaudeville theaters, including the Colonial, and Demuth actually met Savoy in New York City, when Robert Locher, identified by some scholars as one of Demuth's lovers, introduced Demuth and Savoy. Locher was an interior designer who grew up in Lancaster and moved to New York City. Demuth visited him and his wife in New York City often. Demuth's enjoyment of these performances in New York City and at the Colonial in Lancaster reveal a growing gay male subculture that was not simply defined by medicalization and criminalization. In other words, although Demuth reportedly identified with vice, he rejected the stigmatization of vice.

Hotels, including the Hotel Brunswick (fig. 4) which was one of Demuth's destinations on his evening stroll, became important sites of vice, including commercial sex, male prostitution, and consensual same-sex activity which was defined as deviant at the time, even though it was not a commercial transaction. Boys and men were arrested and imprisoned for same-sex crimes, even if they did not involve prostitution. Anti-vice reformers were concerned about same-sex sexual activity because they were trying to combat what they defined as perversion, they wanted to help boys avoid delinquency to preserve the social order, and, in some cities (though not Lancaster) they sought to protect boys from Asian and Southern European immigrants, whom they stereotyped as sexually deviant.<sup>15</sup> This aspect of “vice” is even more difficult to document, however, as reformers were reluctant to publicly discuss it. The first vice report, for example, refers only briefly to same-sex activity, which reformers labeled perversion among “fairies,” stating the full scope of the problem was “impossible to print.”<sup>16</sup>



Figure 3  
Bert Savoy and John Brennan in  
“Greenwich Village Follies of 1922”

Hotels attracted men interested in having sex with other men. Investigator Paul Kinsie, for example, reported on a salesman from Easton, Pennsylvania who approached him in the lobby of the Brunswick and asked him to spend the night with him: "Suppose you give up the ladies for one night and come up to my room, I'm sure we'll both have a splendid time."<sup>17</sup> Another example is the scandal surrounding a preacher named "Sunny Jim" or James T. Lowe. Reverend Lowe made multiple advances towards sixteen-year-old George Herschok, a barber at the Wheatland Hotel. When Herschok's father intercepted one of their letters, he turned it into the police. The police caught Lowe in a trap at the Brunswick, charging him with "Soliciting to commit sodomy." Sodomy (or any sexual act that did not include vaginal intercourse) was a popular charge for gay men at the time. He was sentenced to nine months in jail, fined \$100 in addition to covering the costs of the trial.<sup>18</sup> In the Wheatland Hotel, near the Brunswick on Queen Street, a group of bell boys engaged in commercial sexual activity. Men staying at the hotel would proposition the bell boys by "ordering drinks late at night, and having them come to their rooms during their leisure hours."<sup>19</sup> These bell boys also provided sex to hotel guests in exchange for meals and consumer goods, which suggests that they might also have been "charity boys." Kennedy Eckert, a bell boy who led reformers on a tour of Lancaster vice (to pool halls, brothels, cafes and theaters), explained that he had "perversion practiced on him for money and for pleasure."<sup>20</sup> Eckert added that bell boys would steal from these men and threaten to blackmail them if they went to the police. Thus, although many historical studies of prostitution have focused on women, it is clear from Lancaster's history along with accounts of other cities, that boys and men were also sex workers in the early twentieth century. News boys in Chicago, who sometimes sold pamphlets about the red-light districts, would also sell sexual services for some extra money.<sup>21</sup>



Figure 4  
Hotel New Brunswick, Lancaster, PA

The reformers who campaigned against vice in the early twentieth century included women's rights proponents and critics of industrial capitalism. We should not caricature them as censorious busy-bodies. The leader of the Law and Order Society, Reverend Twombly, preached that vice was primarily a "man's problem," calling on men to conform to the standard of sexual morality expected of women. He supported voting rights for women and attacked the starvation wages that led women into commercial sex. Twombly advocated the "social gospel"—the idea that Christians needed to ameliorate the degrading conditions of industrial capitalism in order to cultivate personal morality.<sup>22</sup>

I have not found any evidence in newspapers or in the unpublished records of the Law and Order Society that Charles Demuth participated in the criminal world of vice. It is, of course, possible that he was involved but was never arrested or reported. He likely would have seen vice or heard about it as he strolled through the city, when he went to the Colonial Theatre, and when he stopped in to his family's tobacco store. Those workers who were immersed in vice would have beckoned Demuth from doorways, alleys, bars and lobbies. Demuth chafed against the religious strictures of his family and was, according to friends, "bored to death by Lancaster and the Pennsylvania Dutch"; he escaped Lancaster for more freedom in New York City and Provincetown.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, it is important to see how Lancaster's vice—widespread and accessible—might have been a haven and a source of inspiration for Demuth.

#### Notes

1. Philip Jenkins, "A Wide-Open City: Prostitution in Progressive Era Lancaster," *Pennsylvania History* 65, no. 4 (Autumn 1998), 509-526.

2. Helen Henderson, "Charles Demuth," paper, Junior League, Lancaster, Pa., November 10, 1947; copy in the archives of the Whitney Museum of American Art. As quoted in Jonathan 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).

3. Investigator Reports (1913), folder 66, p. 38, Law and Order Society Collection, Lancaster History, Lancaster, Pennsylvania (hereafter LOS).

4. "Policemen Bunking in House Houses Leave City Unprotected at Night," *Examiner*, February 7, 1912, 1 and 3. Reporters identified the person who became local agent for the Law and Order Society, John Kline, as the source who uncovered the police misdeeds ("Law and Order Officer Selected," *Morning Journal*, March 6, 1913, 4).

5. "Houses, Abortions," Investigator Reports (1913), 8, Indiana University Library, Bloomington, Indiana.

6. *A Report on Vice Conditions in the City of Lancaster, Pa.* (Lancaster, Pa, 1913), 38, 21.

7. "Houses, Typical," Investigator Reports (1913), 301-302, Indiana University Library, Bloomington, Indiana

8. Investigators found a "big craps game:" at 24 West King Street, across from the mayor's office, which had big days on Saturdays and Sunday, with "no fear of the police" (Investigator Reports, folder 66, p. 15, LOS).

9. Investigator Reports, Affidavit 52, p. 27, folder 66, LOS; Investigator Reports Affidavit 87, p. 80, Indiana University Library.

10. For examples of charity girls who were tobacco strippers, see folder 67, pp. 48, 58, and 152, LOS.

11. Elizabeth Clement, *Love for Sale: Courting, Treating, and Prostitution in New York City, 1900-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 3. See also Kathy Peiss, "Charity Girls and City Pleasures," *OAH Magazine of History* 18, no. 4 (January 2004): 14-16, <https://doi.org/10.1093/maghis/18.4.14>.

12. See Investigator Reports, Affidavit 144, folder 67, LOS. John Kline Agent Book, No. 5., Law and Order Society Collection. On January 26, 1913, John Kline wrote that when he visited the Colonial Theatre, he "found some of the songs of the colored comedian very suggestive but we could get no hold on him. In the act called The Bell Boy and The Belles a male member asked the female member what she could do and she replied she was a Baré Back rider he replied you must put clothes on in this Town or be arrested" (Agent Book 5, p. 3, LOS).

13. M. Alison Kibler, *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 168.

14. George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1994)

15. Peter Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs: Constructing and Controlling Homosexuality in the Pacific Northwest* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003).

16. *A Report on Vice Conditions in the City of Lancaster, Pa.* (Lancaster, Pa, 1913).

17. Investigator Reports Affidavit 150, folder 18, p. 39, LOS.

18. "'Sunny Jim' Pleads Guilty to Serious Crime and Gets a Nine Months' Term," *Lancaster New Era*, September 12, 1916, p. 1. See also Katie Hemphill, "'Pastor Was Trapped': Queer Scandal and Contestation Over Christian Anti-Vice Reform," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* (2022): 1-19.

19. Investigator Reports, Affidavit 13, folder 66, p. 34, LOS.

20. Investigator Reports, Affidavit 13, folder 66, p. 34, LOS.

21. Don Romesburg, "'Wouldn't a Boy Do?': Placing Early-Twentieth-Century Male Youth Sex Work into Histories of Sexuality," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 18, no. 3 (2009): pp. 367-392. Girls faced many more punishments for promiscuous heterosexual sex than boys did; and reformers did not make saving innocent boys the centerpiece of their campaign in the same way that they focused on rescuing women and girls.

22. Twombly criticized "starvation wages." See "Minister's Plea for Wage Earners," *Lancaster Intelligencer*, January 28, 1914. See also, "Regulation of Dance Halls Next Move in Vice Campaign," *Morning Journal*, March 18, 1914. He spoke out against the sexual double standard in "Double Standard of Morality," *Lancaster Intelligencer*, May 25, 1914. He argued that if women got the right to vote the brothel would disappear. "Woman Suffrage," *News Journal*, April 11, 1914.

23. Emily Farnham, *Charles Demuth: His Life, Psychology, and Works* (Ohio State University Press, 1959), vol. 3, p. 952.



# THE AVIARISTE

By Erin Pauwels

C

harles Demuth's painting, *Aviariste (Woman with Parrots)* (fig. 1), depicts a curvy performer in a red dress on stage with five colorful birds. Made in 1912, the watercolor is an early example of the vaudevillian subject matter to which Demuth would return repeatedly throughout his career. The artist's passion for popular entertainment forms new to

The early 20th-century United States, including vaudeville, avant-garde realist theater, jazz, circus acts, and early film, has conventionally been discussed as part of his search for distinctly modern and American themes to feature in his painting. This is a connection Demuth drew himself in an unfinished play he authored when one character remarks to the other: "Couldn't we talk about American musical shows, revues,—the people who act in them...and dance: they really are our 'stuff.' They are our time."<sup>1</sup>

Another feature of Demuth's time, however, was that bodily difference or disability, homosexuality, and non-normative gender expressions were rarely discussed openly, except in negative, pathologized terms. This may be why the artist gravitated toward depicting spaces and subcultures that offered sanctuary from the social restrictions that typically governed public behavior during the early 20th century, where everyday expectations for social and bodily comportment were suspended or simply not observed

His watercolor paintings frequently represent scenes in bars, beaches, bathhouses, and theaters—spaces on the margins where it was allowable for people of diverse genders to congregate in varying states of undress, to cross-dress or dance, embrace, and interact in ways that would be unthinkable in other contexts. Considering the myriad ways in which Demuth's own life was shaped by personal and physical difference, it is easy to imagine that the modernity he celebrated with vibrant paintings of performers like the *Aviariste* involved his excitement at seeing people with unconventional talents and extraordinary bodily capabilities seize the spotlight rather than lingering in the shadows.



**Figure 1**  
Charles Demuth, *Aviariste (Woman with Parrots)*, 1912, watercolor on paper, 11 x 8 1/2 in., Demuth Foundation, Lancaster, PA; purchased with funds from Caroline Steinman Nunan and the acquisition fund



**Figure 2**  
Charles Demuth, *In Vaudeville: Acrobatic Male Dancer with Top Hat*, 1920. Watercolor, graphite, and charcoal on paper, Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia, PA

“ where everyday expectations for social and bodily comportment were suspended or simply not observed ”

Light is a special feature in *Aviariste* and many other examples of Demuth's vaudeville paintings, including *Two Acrobats in Red Tights* [1917, Barnes Foundation], *In Vaudeville: Acrobatic Male Dancer with Top Hat* [1920, Barnes Foundation] (fig. 2), and *The Green Dancer* [1916, Philadelphia Museum of Art]. The artist often depicts spotlights, stage lights, and foot lights as abstracted wavy lines or radiating concentric circles that evoke a spectacular synesthesia of sound and electricity. Rather than functioning as organic symbols of light, as they do in work by contemporary painters such as Georgia O'Keeffe and Arthur Dove, the stage light in Demuth's paintings is used to demarcate stage space as a realm of special possibility, setting boundaries between the realm of performance and the everyday world of audience members.



The compositional space of the *Aviariste* emphasizes a performer's power to cross these boundaries. The painting's background is defined by dark clouds of inky color that are divided by bands of light grey and grounded by the yellow plane of the stage. Demuth scholar Barbara Haskell has compared the atmospheric effect conjured in the painting to the "all-over rhythms" deployed in landscapes by contemporary watercolorist John Marin.<sup>2</sup> The zones of dark color that surround Demuth's central figure do not recede into deep pictorial space, but instead dominate the surface of the composition to compete visually with the primary subject matter. Though the bird trainer and her parrots can be easily distinguished from their surroundings, their forms blend and blur with the background in imitation of the dazzling lights and immersive spectacle of witnessing a theatrical performance and leaving unsure which parts were real and which were magical stagecraft.

Vaudeville acrobatic shows commonly emphasized the spatial and perceptual confusions of performance by using set-pieces that added to it complications. Such physical comedy, similar to what Demuth might have seen on stage at The Colonial Theatre in Lancaster (fig. 3), is preserved in Thomas Edison's 1899 film, *Three Acrobats*. This comic short depicts vaudeville performers chasing one another through a specially constructed set made with "break-away" walls and spring-hinged windows and doors that allowed clowns and a dancer to appear and disappear from the stage in a manic, unpredictable loop.<sup>3</sup> Late 19th- and early 20th-century advertising posters for circus acts and acrobats, like the Brothers Lowell (fig. 4), replicated the wild animation of live vaudeville performance by representing dynamic repeated figures in framed vignettes scattered across divided panes of compositional space – graphic effects that Demuth mimics in the tumbling figures and props depicted in paintings such as *Three Acrobats* [1916, Amon Carter] (fig. 5) and *Jugglers with Indian Clubs* [1917, Barnes Foundation].



Figure 3  
Colonial Theater - Lancaster, PA



Figure 4  
Phil Sheridan's New City Sports Company, c. 1899,  
Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division



Figure 5  
Charles Demuth, *Three Acrobats*, 1916, watercolor and graphite on paper, 12 15/16 x 7 7/8 in., Amon Carter Museum of American Art; Fort Worth, TX

Bird acts like the one pictured in the *Aviariste* were equally common features on the Vaudeville stage, as were trained animal shows in general. During Demuth's time, troupes of parrots toured with trainers named Bartholdi, Merle, Lamont, and Wallace. There were also trained pigeons and so-called "Educated Roosters" that solved mathematical equations by pecking numbers with the aid of discretely placed corn. Lady animal trainers presented a special draw since their glamorous dress and refined comportment seemed to give them special owners of mastery over the wild beasts in their command. In 1914, Madame Olympia Desvall introduced the original dog and pony show to American audiences as part of the Barnum and Bailey Circus, and Mademoiselle Marzella became well known for her host of trained cockatoos. Cockatoos apparently were favored avian performers on the vaudeville stage, because they could easily be trained to perform complex tricks such as walking high wires, ringing bells, riding miniature bicycles, or putting out fires in doll houses.<sup>4</sup>





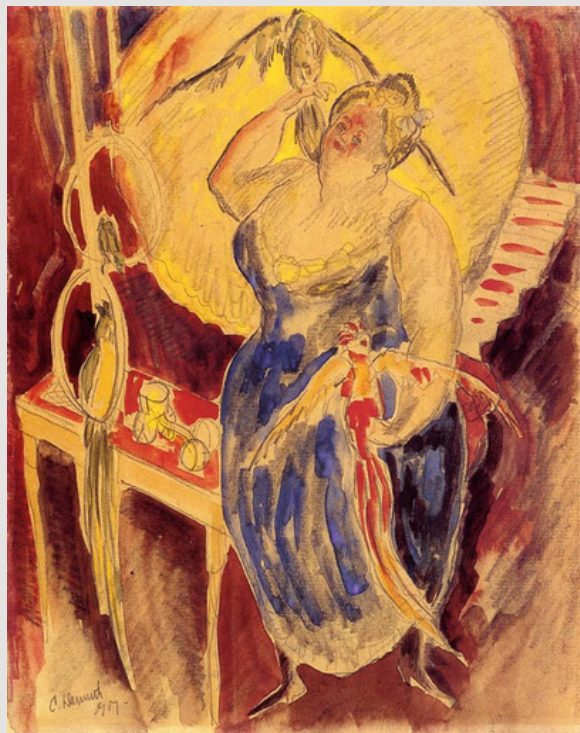
**Figure 6**  
Rosa Naynon, Vaudeville Bird Act, 1907, J. Willis Sayre Collection of Theatrical Photographs, University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections

Demuth may have conceived his *Aviariste* as an amalgamation of performers rather than a single individual, but his voluptuous subject with upswept hair and a low-cut, corseted stage costume bears striking resemblance to Rosa Naynon (1868-1913), the star in one of vaudeville's most celebrated bird acts. During her 30-year career, Naynon toured widely with her troupe of "Trained Tropical Birds" and helped establish the popularity of similar acts by performing with the Forepaugh and Barnum and Bailey circuses as well as in smaller theaters.<sup>5</sup> A 1907 promotional illustration for Naynon (fig. 6) uses photo-collage to depict the glamorous bird trainer perched on the edge of a crescent moon wearing an evening gown that accentuates her hour-glass figure. With her outstretched arms and regal demeanor, Naynon's public image—crowned with a bird—shares many attributes with Demuth's *Aviariste* and his later, watercolor, *Vaudeville Bird Woman* (1917) (fig. 7) that appears to celebrate the same performing subject.

Part of the public's fascination with trained animal shows, in Demuth's time and today, stems from the fantasy of bringing the untamed forces of natural world temporarily under human control. The audience understands that at any moment, the trainer's hold could slip and suddenly return the creatures to a savage state. In the *Aviariste* the divide between civilized behavior and wild abandon is deliberately pictured as something precarious. Faint pencil lines beneath the paint divide the paper's surface into asymmetrical quadrants. One line runs upward from the stage floor through the parrot crowning the bird trainer's head, while another echoes the shape of her outstretched arms. This has the effect of emphasizing how the performer's body pulls and stretches across the page, crossing boundaries as it blends with the soft shadows of the background and the animals sharing the spotlight. Indeed, the feathery brushstrokes of the birds' trailing tails merge with the paint that defines the *Aviariste*'s arms, so the birds appear to be part of the woman and vice versa. Strengthening this impression, Demuth placed a dark shadow beneath the bird trainer's feet, making her appear almost to hover above the stage, as if lifted by her flock of feathered co-stars or imitatively flapping her arms in order to join them in the skies. In this way, Demuth presents the wildness of the animals and the wildness of the human body as barely constrained—an instant of recklessness and all could be unleashed. Only in moments of modern theatrical expression could such a liberatory state be held in tolerable suspension. In Demuth's painting, the vaudeville stage of the early 20th century represents a rare space of exception where natural impulses and the untamable idiosyncrasy of human existence could be visible and applauded.

#### Notes

1. Charles Demuth, "'You Must Come Over,' A Painting: A Play," reprinted in "Selected Writings," 41-47, Barbara Haskell. *Charles Demuth* (New York: Abrams, 1987), 41.
2. Haskell, 27. See also: Patricia McDonnell, "Artists, Vaudeville, and Film," 3-44, and Laural Weintraub, "Charles Demuth's Vaudeville Watercolors and the Rhythm and Spectacle of Modern Life," 123-136, in *On the Edge of Your Seat: Popular Theater and Film in Early Twentieth-Century American Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).
3. "Summary: Three Acrobats – Vaudeville Film," Library of Congress Public Domain Archive, <https://loc.getarchive.net/media/three-acrobats-2e7348>
4. Joe Laurie, Jr. *Vaudeville: From the Honky Tonks to the Palace*. (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1953), 163.
5. "Rosa Naynon Dead," *The Player* 8:16 (19 September 1913), 18.



**Figure 7**  
Charles Demuth, *Vaudeville Bird Woman*, 1917, watercolor and graphite on paper, 11 1/2 x 9 3/8 in., collection unknown



# SINGING THE BLUES

## Charles Demuth & the Queer Color of Love

By Jonathan Walz

“  
One must say every thing, —  
then no one will know.  
”

from the poem, “For Richard Mutt,”  
by Charles Demuth, published in *The Blind Man*, 1917

In 1915 American modernist Charles Demuth commenced what was to become one of his largest, most developed, and most popular series: watercolors of vaudeville comedians and circus performers, café-cabaret interiors and bathhouse scenes.

Entertainments at the Colonial Theatre and the Fulton Opera House in his hometown of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, as well as at other establishments in the mecca of New York, provided inspiration. Some of the works from this group, such as *Negro Jazz Band* (1916; private collection) corroborate accounts that Demuth frequented nightclubs like Marshall's, a midtown Manhattan African American-owned enterprise on Fifty-Third Street, as well as Barron Wilkins's at Seventh Avenue and 135th Street in Harlem. At these gathering spaces, Demuth and his avant-garde friends, like Marcel Duchamp and Edward Fisk, mixed with the many New Negro immigrants from the rural South.<sup>1</sup> Such clubs fostered a post-Victorian atmosphere of relaxed social and sexual attitudes, which queer historian of the Harlem Renaissance Eric Garber describes as best revealed in the cultural production of the blues:

[A] distinctly Afro-American folk music that had developed in rural southern black communities following the Civil War, ... the blues were immensely popular within American black communities throughout the 1920s. They told of loneliness, homesickness, and poverty, of love and good luck, and they provided a window into the difficult, often brutal world of the New Negro immigrant. ... Homosexuality was...part of this world... [and the] blues reflected a culture that accepted sexuality, including homosexual behavior and identities, as a natural part of life.<sup>2</sup>



Figure 1  
Charles Demuth, *In the Key of Blue*, c. 1919,  
tempera and graphite on composition board,  
19 3/4 x 16 in., Private collection

Within this milieu, author, photographer, and impresario Carl Van Vechten acted as an important cross-cultural ambassador.<sup>3</sup> Garber calls him

The Negrotarian journalist and novelist most visible in Harlem during the Renaissance.... [T]he tall, blond, Iowa-born Carl Van Vechten...introduced Gertrude Stein and Ronald Firbank to American audiences and rediscovered Herman Melville. Throughout the 1920s he produced a series of novels that were sparkling, frothy, and exceedingly camp, including *Peter Whiffle* [and] *The Blind Bow Boy*.... Though rarely overtly homosexual, Van Vechten's novels became popular with the gay set, who sensed a kindred spirit in his preciousness.<sup>4</sup>

It is against just such a richly woven background tapestry of people and performances that Demuth painted his image *In the Key of Blue* (fig. 1).

What follows briefly addresses two works with the same title of “In the Key of Blue.” The first, both in terms of chronology and of influence, is the title essay of an anthology that Victorian English author, translator, critic, and historian John Addington Symonds published in 1893. This text is a self-conscious verbal exercise in intensely pictorial description. The second opus is Demuth's eponymous tempera on composition board, a kind of embodied visual *étude* with serious—if understated—literary ambitions. Both works engage with the concept of synesthesia, or the expression of one sensory experience in the terms of another, a phenomenon in which the late nineteenth-century Symbolists were particularly interested. This image-based text and this text-inspired image both touch upon not only cerulean of the oceans and the heavens, but also the themes of ports and sailors, of separation and longing.

Symonds was born in Bristol in 1840 to an upper-middle class family. As a child, Symonds was a mediocre student, but his academic star began to rise after he began undergraduate studies at Oxford, where he won several prizes for his literary output. His landmark achievement remains his monumental study, *The Renaissance in Italy*, issued in seven volumes over a period of eleven years (1875–86). But he also produced biographies of such figures as Ben Jonson and Percy Bysshe Shelley, as well as a translation of Benvenuto Cellini's *Autobiography*. Symonds is probably best known in queer studies circles today for his contributions to the corpus of literature that treats same-sex relationships. For example, Symonds's 1878 translation of Michelangelo's sonnets to his male lover Tomasso restored the masculine form to pronouns rendered feminine by previous editors. In the 1880s the Victorian author penned two homosexual apologetics, *A Problem in Greek Ethics* and *A Problem in Modern Ethics*, which were greatly appreciated by, and circulated among, the growing underground of gay and lesbian cognoscenti at the turn of the twentieth century. Even Symonds's last three books, according to scholar of homosexuality in Victorian literature Joseph Cady,

all for wider audiences and all published in 1893, contain degrees of homosexual assertiveness. Three essays in the collection *In the Key of Blue*—"The Dantesque and Platonic Ideals of Love," "Edward Cracroft Lefroy," and "Clifton and a Lad's Love"—raise the subjects of "Hellenic instincts" and "the affection of a man for a man."<sup>5</sup>

To Cady's list of Symonds's works with more overt homosexual content may be added the essay "In the Key of Blue." Symonds splits the text into two segments. Part I is a short, four-page reflection upon the imprecision that necessarily occurs when one endeavors to represent the material realm in verbal terms—and more specifically the "poverty of language" (Symonds's phrase) for describing, in English, the vast subtleties of the color spectrum. Having thus framed the problematic, in Part II the Symonds inquires into this conundrum via a series of seven poems of varying lengths and rhyme schemes, each with a brief prose introduction. Every one of the poems places the color blue in relation to a second hue. (Symonds's chose the color blue because, he believed, "Whether the flesh tints of the man be pale or sun-burned, his complexion dark or fair, blue is equally in sympathy with the model."<sup>6</sup>)

In order, then, verses about black, white, brown, pink, yellow, green, and red follow sequentially across the pages of the text. Here is the opening poem in its entirety:

*A symphony of black and blue—  
Venice asleep, vast night, and you.  
The skies were blurred with vapours dank:  
The long canal stretched inky-blank,  
With lights on heaving water shed  
From lamps that trembled overhead.  
Pitch-dark! You were the one thing blue;  
Four tints of pure celestial hue:  
The larkspur blouse by tones degraded  
Through silken sash of sapphire faded,  
The faintly floating violet tie,  
The hose of lapis-lazuli.  
How blue you were amid that black,  
Lighting the wave, the ebon wrack!  
The ivory pallor of your face  
Gleamed from those glowing azures back  
Against the golden gaslight; grapes  
Of dusky curls your brows embrace,  
And round you all the vast night gapes.<sup>7</sup>*

The alleged subject of Symonds's sequence of poems is a meticulously designed chromatic examination, which he casually describes as "a series of studies [that] might be termed 'blues and blouses.'"<sup>8</sup> The majority of the poems, however, focus on Augusto Zanon, a young and handsome Venetian porter with whom Symonds had been "long acquainted," obliquely revealing Symonds's status as a man of "Hellenic instincts," à la Walt Whitman, with whom Symonds conducted an extended correspondence.<sup>9</sup>

Charles Demuth was born in 1883 in Lancaster, Pennsylvania to an upper-middle class family who owned a long-established snuff manufactory and tobacco shop. As a juvenile, Demuth often struggled with poor health. His eyes did not align properly (divergent strabismus), a hip condition affected his posture and gait, and he developed a sensitive disposition. These circumstances heightened his experience of feeling "different." Demuth's mother Augusta engineered a relatively sheltered childhood for her son, during which he cultivated imagination and began drawing. As an undergraduate, he first pursued mechanical drawing and illustration, but later transferred to the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia,

where he studied painting and where he counted Charles Sheeler and Morton Schamberg among his classmates. He later experimented with impressionism, post-impressionism, Symbolism, and expressionism before settling on his mature style in the late 1910s, a cubist-derived mode dubbed "precisionism." He showed with gallerist Charles Daniel and subsequently with Alfred Stieglitz. Although Demuth is probably best known today for his oils of industrial landscapes, which now hang in museums across the country, he also produced a significant body of homoerotic watercolors that serve to document the emerging gay culture in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century.

From his years at the Pennsylvania Academy, where the students were enamored of the culture of "art for art's sake" and its proponents, such as the expatriate dandy painter James McNeill Whistler, Demuth became quite knowledgeable about *fin de siècle* British culture. A particular fan of "decadents" Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley, Demuth incorporated much of the Aesthetic movement's ideology into his own performed persona and studio output. According to Whitney Museum of American Art curator Barbara Haskell,

"[English author] Walter Pater's call for an art that transcended the limits of a specific discipline and passed into the realm of other arts...was also influential on Demuth.... Demuth had [previously] sought to achieve this as a writer through visually evocative texts; as a painter, he would eventually attempt to produce pictures that went beyond the static nature of painting and incorporated the temporal qualities more associated with literature. Such a synthesis had been implicit in Baudelaire's theories and in the equal prominence given illustration, format, and text in Demuth's model magazine, *The Yellow Book*, and in the would-be journal from his play *The Azure Adder*. 'All great art is one in its complete state,' as one of the play's characters stated."<sup>10</sup>

Demuth's painting *In the Key of Blue* is just such a manifestation of this synthesizing impulse. The panel, formerly owned by the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and now in a private collection, is part of a larger series of harbor scenes from 1919, including *A Sky after El Greco* (1919; Arizona State University) and *Box of Tricks* (1919; Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts). These images draw on early experiments in cubism, like George Braques's painting *Houses at L'Estaque* (1908; Kunstmuseum, Bern) in which the artist worked out the fragmentary, stream-of-consciousness aesthetic while inhabiting the liminal space of a harbor



town. Demuth's tempera, in fact, depicts two "in-between zones" through its triangulated expanse of cloudless atmosphere above a deserted maritime port: the places where the sky meets the earth and where the land meets the sea. Pillings, cranes, and ship masts crisscross ropes, tethers and ladders, all within a landscape dominated by a solitary verdant hill in the distance.

Assigning titles that bear no direct descriptive connection to the ostensible subjects of the works in this group of paintings from 1919 allowed Demuth, Haskell posits, to explore the intersection between text and images:

By thus engaging the viewer conceptually, [Demuth] alluded to the nondescriptive and suggestive experience of poetry. *Box of Tricks*, with its church nestled among the waterfront buildings, concerns the artist's sleights of hand in visually transforming reality.... *Piano Mover's Holiday*, another architectural image, and *Sailboats (The Love Letter)*, recalled the poetic titles Duchamp and Picabia had given their works: Duchamp's shovel inscribed *In Advance of a Broken Arm...* and Picabia's spark plug called *American Girl in a State of Nudity*. The titles of some of Demuth's other architectural pieces from [1919]—*Rise of the Prism*, *A Sky after El Greco*, and *In the Key of Blue*—functioned essentially as commentaries on painting's formal vocabulary.<sup>11</sup>

While in a footnote to her essay Haskell does acknowledge a tangential relationship between Demuth's painting and what she calls Symonds's "essay on aesthetics," in her formalist rationale for the image's identifier she discounts the title's source and sidesteps its homoerotic associations. Demuth's "dubious titles" of the late 1910s and 1920s may seem arcane within a literalist reading, but they are never haphazard.<sup>12</sup> Without question, the artist very deliberately named his 1919 panel "In the Key of Blue" after Symonds's eponymous essay from twenty-five years prior. As a title, "In the Key of Blue" serves denotatively and connotatively as an important pivot point within the nexus of word and image that Demuth created. There is no denying that the image portrays the azure sky, which fills the uppermost three-fifths of the composition. But the borrowed title literally and figuratively links the twentieth-century visual artist with the nineteenth-century writer, revealing Demuth's own "Hellenic instincts"—as well as his appreciation of Symonds's texts—to those viewers who recognize the literary allusion. In this performative gesture that simultaneously reveals and obscures, the artist was, in a sense putting into practice the thought

behind this essay's epigram: "One must say every thing,— then no one will know." This conceptual foothold permits a much more in-depth, socio-contextual reading of Demuth's painting than it has heretofore received.<sup>13</sup>

That Charles Demuth's *In the Key of Blue* treats the thematics of concealment and disclosure is suggested by another image from the same 1919 series, a painting called *Backdrop of East Lynne* (1919; Sheldon Museum of Art). Once again Demuth's title refers to a literary work, this time the 1861 popular novel *East Lynne* by English author Mrs. Henry Wood.<sup>14</sup> The novel centers on the tragic character of Isabel Vane, an aristocratic wife and mother who, after succumbing to the sexual advances of the villain, abandons her husband and then nearly dies in a tragic railway accident. She somehow miraculously survives only to return to her former home, but this time as the governess to her children. A pale and damaged version of her earlier self, the heroine is able to walk, surreptitiously, among her blood relations and former employees without being recognized, thanks to physical disfigurement and a many-layered disguise, the most important element of which is a pair of *blue spectacles*.<sup>15</sup>

With a more substantive connection between Demuth's painting and Symonds's text—about a man who worked on the water and who wore blue clothes as a mark of his profession—it is difficult not to think of Demuth's own watercolors of sailors in navy blue uniforms: sailors dancing with other sailors, sailors at an art exhibition, sailors on the street, sailors urinating, sailors having sex on the beach. *In the Key of Blue* depicts the dock of a port, the natural place where one would imagine seeing sailors. But the scene is devoid of any people at all, creating a sense of solitude bordering on sadness.<sup>16</sup> With its absence of figures and far-off horizon (it's called "longing" for a reason) Demuth's painting thematically parallels yet another work from Symonds's *In the Key of Blue* anthology, "Clifton and a Lad's Love," in which the author roams the countryside around coastal town of Bristol, pining for, and reminiscing about, his absent lover: "The bright blue sky is cold to see; / The frosty ground lies hard and bare; / So cold is hope, so hard is care: / O who will bring my love to me?"

These melancholic overtones bring us full circle to the music of the blues. On the one hand, by appropriating Symonds's title, Demuth participates in the Aesthetic movement's own practice of assigning images such titles as "harmony," "capriccio," or "nocturne."<sup>17</sup> But given Demuth's patronage of Black nightclubs and his love of double entendres, the title also signals a modern subjectivity, one informed by the music and mores of African Americans in New York. As such, *In the Key of Blue* stands, like the artist himself, with one foot in the 1800s and one foot in the 1900s, a testament to rapidly changing social and sexual identity constructions in the United States of the early twentieth century.

#### Notes

1. In Harlem, racial mixing evoked the *frisson* that attracted openminded whites in the first place. Similarly, vaudeville, with its non-hierarchical seating and lowest-common-denominator appeal, encouraged the mixing of social classes, a poke in the eye to Victorian propriety.
2. Eric Garber, "A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem," in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey. New York: New American Library, 1989. A digitized version can be found here: <https://roads.virginia.edu/~ug97/blues/garber.html>
3. Demuth portrayed Van Vechten in *Cabaret Interior with Carl Van Vechten*, 1917, watercolor, pen, and pencil on paper, 7 3/4 × 10 3/4 in. Private collection. An image can be found here: <https://reynoldahouse.emuseum.com/objects/651/cabaret-interior-with-carl-van-vechten>
4. Eric Garber, "T'aint Nobody's Bizness: Homosexuality in 1920's Harlem" in *Black Men, White Men: Afro-American Gay Life and Culture*, ed. Michael J. Smith. San Francisco: Gay Sunshine Press, 1999. A digitized version can be found here: [http://www.leylandpublications.com/exc\\_black-white.html](http://www.leylandpublications.com/exc_black-white.html)
5. Joseph Cady, "John Addington Symonds," Claude J. Summers, ed. *Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge, 2014.
6. John Addington Symonds, "In the Key of Blue," in *In the Key of Blue, and Other Prose Essays*. London: Elkin Matthews & John Lane, 1893, 4. A digitized version can be found here: [https://www.google.com/books/edition/\\_/mVhbAAAAMAAJ](https://www.google.com/books/edition/_/mVhbAAAAMAAJ)
7. Symonds, "In the Key of Blue," 5–6.
8. Symonds, 4.
9. The same year that *In the Key of Blue* appeared, Symonds also published *Walt Whitman: A Study*. London: John C. Nimmo, 1893. For the importance of Whitman to the American modernists, see Ruth L. Bohan, *Looking into Walt Whitman: American Art, 1850–1920*. University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006.
10. Barbara Haskell, *Charles Demuth*. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art in assoc. with Harry N. Abrams, 1987, 52.
11. Haskell, 129–30.
12. For a longer discussion about Demuth's seemingly opaque identifiers, see Jonathan Frederick Walz, "Charles Demuth's Dubious Titles," *American Art* 2018 32:3, 96–103.
13. The painting was auctioned on December 4, 2013, and the catalogue entry that Christie's staff wrote for the sale remains the most focused treatment of the image. However, the text's primary concern is to place the panel within Demuth's artistic development. See <https://www.christies.com/lot/lot-charles-demuth-in-the-key-of-blue-5752392>
14. As a case study, "Charles Demuth's Dubious Titles" focuses on *Backdrop of East Lynne* and its relationship to the serialized Victorian novel *East Lynne*.
15. Among other analyses of Isabel Vane's disguise, see Megan Nash, "Isabel's Blue Spectacles: The Optics of Affect in *East Lynne*," *The Wilkie Collins Journal* 15 (2018). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26996119>
16. Queer scholar of modernism Christopher G. Reed pointed out to me that such "uninhabited" places are often where cruising for sex takes place. Conversation with the author, Georgia O'Keeffe Museum Research and Study Center, 2008.
17. Modernists were particularly interested in the relationship of music and visual art, because, among other reasons, they believed music's abstract qualities provided an important precedent for abstraction in visual art. Other Demuth titles that evoke sound include *Piano Mover's Holiday*, 1919 (keyboard); *The End of the Parade*, 1920 (calliope); and *...And the Home of the Brave*, 1931 (national anthem).

# GENDER, SEX, AND ABILITY IN CHARLES DEMUTH'S ACROBATS

By Keri Watson

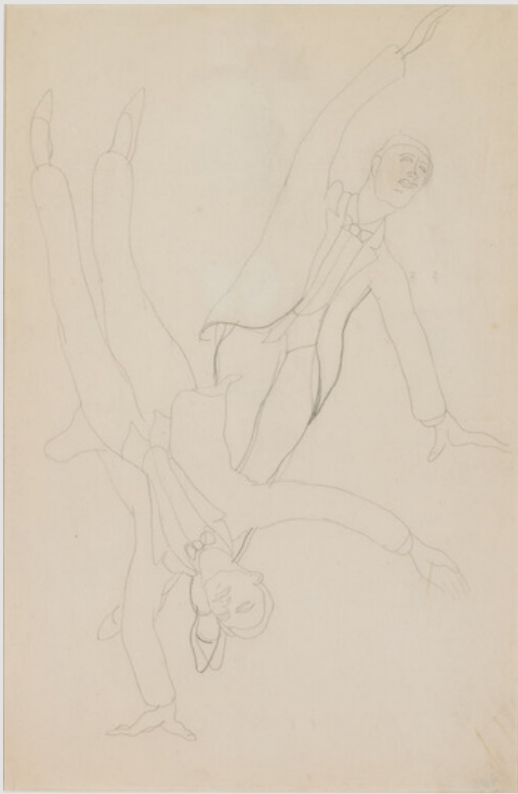


**Figure 1**  
Charles Demuth. *The Ladies Will Pardon My Mouth's Being Full*, 1918, watercolor and graphite on wove paper, 8 x 13 in., Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia, PA

**A** muscular acrobat in a low-cut black and turquoise leotard stands between two figures. He holds the hand of a red-headed woman to his left who is dressed in a gossamer white lace gown and ballet flats. He gestures toward the blonde to his right who wears a royal blue military-style jacket adorned with gold epaulets, a long navy skirt with orange trim, and high-heeled black boots. The blonde's gender is ambiguous, their chin is strong, build boxy, and chest flat. It appears that the strongman is reaching toward their nondescript genitalia (here the cream of the wove paper is exposed amid a wash of navy), an advance they simultaneously refuse and encourage, their ringed fingers clasped suggestively around his wrist. The wrestler's singlet is accented with white stars on a red background drawing attention to his hips and crotch. Speech bubbles inform the viewer that the man is saying, "The Ladies Will Pardon My Mouth's Being Full." The figure to the left is asking "How?"; and the figure to the right is responding, "Good night children." The content is humorous, gesturing to an inside joke or some unknown sexual frivolity happening offstage and just beyond the comprehension and grasp of the voyeuristic audience-viewer.

This is one of numerous watercolors of acrobats that Demuth made between 1916 and 1918 in which he employed fluid brushstrokes and translucent washes of color to emphasize the nubile bodies and energetic movements of circus performers. Popular from the 1890s through the 1950s, acrobats and circus sideshows were a primary draw at Coney Island's Dreamland Circus Side Show and Rosen's Palace of Wonders, as well as Times Square's Hubert's Flea Circus & Museum and Ripley's Odditorium, and Demuth was a regular, admitting, "I love Broadway."<sup>1</sup> In addition to acrobats, circus sideshows exhibited armless or legless people, conjoined twins, non-binary people, or people with dwarfism or gigantism; people who performed amazing acts such as sword swallowing and contortionism; and people who displayed excessively muscled, pierced, or tattooed bodies.<sup>2</sup> Regardless of the "oddities" on display, performers were enfreaked to enhance their exhibition value, which was gauged by their perceived distance from normality. Enfreakment, or the process by which people with physical anomalies or disabilities are constructed as extraordinary, deviant, or pitiable, is fluid, and as disability studies scholars including Rosemarie Garland-Thomson and Rachel Adams have illustrated, the circus sideshow simultaneously enfreaked its performers and presented an arena in which assumptions about people with bodily and cognitive differences were disrupted and sometimes upended.<sup>3</sup>





Charles Demuth, *Two Acrobats*, 1918, graphite on paper, 13 x 8 in., Demuth Foundation, Lancaster, PA; gift of Gerald Lestz

The Strongman, such as the acrobat featured in the center of this composition, was a particularly fraught character, an active participant in the period discourse on masculinity. Both sideshow “freak” and exemplar of human perfection, bodybuilders, such as Eugene Sandow, Bobby Pandour, and Charles Atlas embodied virility while performing feats of agility and exhibiting their well-developed bodies to a nation newly interested in physical and mental fitness.<sup>4</sup> For many, bodybuilding was a performance of masculinity that helped assuage social and economic fears, and the popularity of bodybuilding reflected the eugenic pressure men felt to take personal responsibility for the appearance and efficiency of their bodies. Demuth was familiar with the discourse of masculinity, but, as noted by Barbara Haskell, “Demuth’s lameness and recognition of his homosexuality sustained his early self-image as an outsider, a voyeur, never fully engaged with others.”<sup>5</sup> Perhaps because of this, he was attracted to “unconventional social types and situations,”<sup>6</sup> such as the one in which he placed his imagined strongman.

“  
***provided a venue for the safe  
exploration of alternative social  
relationships.***  
”

Though not as explicit as his later watercolors of sailors engaged in sexual acts,<sup>7</sup> Demuth’s strongman and the two figures accompanying him participate in the repudiation of normative sexual values and “compulsory able-bodiedness,” a term coined by disability and queer studies scholar Robert McRuer to describe the modern obsession with able-bodied heteronormativity.<sup>8</sup> In dress and comportment Demuth’s figures depart from expectations, and Demuth, as a gay man with physical disabilities, may have been particularly drawn to this subject because of his interest in socially marginalized figures. Existing on the edges of society, acrobats and other circus performers inhabited spaces where fantasies could be safely played out.<sup>9</sup> Potentially dangerous and often sexualized, these arenas—whether occupied by people with disabilities, unique talents, or unclear gender affinities—titillated viewers, including Demuth, and provided a venue for the safe exploration of alternative social relationships.<sup>10</sup> Demuth’s watercolors, sketchy and impermanent, loose and irreverent, subvert and destabilize gendered and abled identities and create spaces where difference is not just acknowledged but celebrated, and *The Ladies Will Pardon My Mouth’s Being Full* exposes the ways in which gendered and abled identities are always already performative.

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#### Notes

1. Quoted in Andrea O. Dean, “He was a acrobat on the leading edge of Jazz Age art; hedonistic and often debauched, Charles Demuth was nonetheless a pioneer Modernist who’s now being paid the attention he’s due,” *Smithsonian* 18 (October 1987), 58.

2. Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 8.

3. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York: New York University Press, 1996); and Rachel Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

4. Kenneth R. Dutton, *The Perfectible Body: The Western Ideal of Male Physical Development* (New York: Continuum, 1995).

5. Barbara Haskell, *Charles Demuth* (New York: Whitney Museum of Art and Harry N. Abrams, 1987), 20.

6. Haskell, *Demuth*, 21.

7. Jonathan Weinberg, *Male Desire: The Homoerotic in American Art* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 2004), 39.

8. Robert McRuer, “Compulsory Able-bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence,” in *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, eds. Sharon L. Snyder, Brenda Jo Brueggemann, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2002), 97.

9. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Monster Theory, Reading Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 17.

10. Linda Frost, *Never One Nation: Freaks, Savages, and Whiteness in U.S. Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 8-9.