

Hide/Seek: *Difference and Desire in American Portraiture* is the first major museum exhibition to focus on sexual difference in the making of modern American portraiture. The idea originated, with an exhibition called “Walt Whitman: a kosmos,” which I curated at the National Portrait Gallery, Washington, D.C., in 2006. I had labeled a photograph “Walt Whitman and his lover Peter Doyle,” which elicited the response from Jonathan Katz, director of the doctoral program in visual studies at the University of Buffalo, that it was the first time Whitman and Doyle’s relationship had been openly acknowledged in a major museum exhibition. We subsequently had a series of conversations about the unacknowledged role of sexual difference in art and the place of gay and lesbian artists in the making of modern American portraiture. Jonathan Katz had been attempting to interest a museum in mounting such an exhibition for many years and he was delighted to find a willing collaborator in the Portrait Gallery.

Portraits are a fascinating and enduringly popular art form because they can elicit a whole range of connections and responses from the viewer. Portraiture, like biography, permits us to enter into the lives of others and explore how identities and meanings were forged in past time in ways that resonate with our search for meaning. Through portraiture, by looking at others, across the course of history, ultimately we end up looking at ourselves.

Hide/Seek is a masterpiece show backed by a scholarly reinterpretation of the course of American portrait art for the last hundred years. Portraiture is an enduringly popular art form because of the range of connections and responses the images elicit from the viewer. Like biography, portraiture permits us to enter into the lives of others and explore how identities and meanings were forged in the past in ways that resonate with our search for meaning.

Portraiture’s appeal comes from its being simultaneously an intensely private consideration of personality and character and a public document that celebrates and commemorates the life of an individual. Frequently, concealing as much as they reveal; there is

really no such thing as a “true” likeness. Instead, it is through this gap between public and private spheres that some of the most successful and brilliant portraits are made, by artists attuned to the exploration of how lives are fashioned.

Above all, portraiture is intimate. It can, at times, feel like an intrusion—even a trespassing—into the lives of others. Great portraits can be disturbing precisely because they speak to the core of human identity and meaning, the messy reality that the poet WB Yeats called “the rag and bone shop of our heart.”

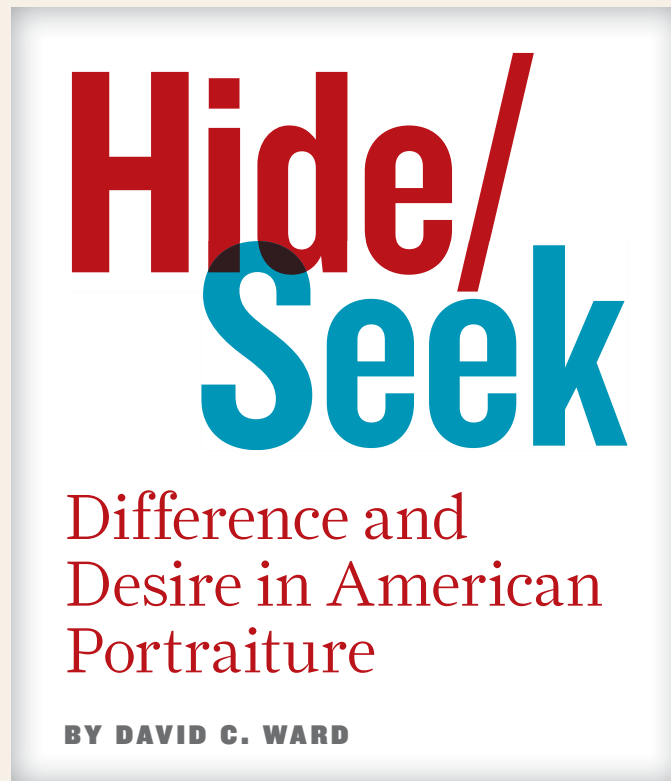
Of all of portraiture’s great themes, that of sexual identity and desire has been the one about which we are most reluctant to speak—a reticence that closes off a powerful dimension in our consideration of art and society. Long before the modern gay and lesbian movement there were many examples of art that acknowledged a variety of sexual identities. *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture* shows how artists from the late nineteenth through the twentieth century have explored the definition of sexuality and gender at certain points in our history. And it considers how major themes in modern art—especially abstraction—were influenced by the position of gay and lesbian artists in American society. By exhibiting over a hundred years of

portraiture, *Hide/Seek* also shows how art reflected society’s changing attitudes toward sexual identity.

The exhibition surveys more than one hundred years of American portraiture, revealing how those with different sexual identities—who were of, but not fully part of, the society they portrayed—occupied a position of influential marginality in modern society and how society’s attempt to proscribe them forced them into creative acts of resistance in order to express their subjects’ identities—and also their own. From a position as outsiders, they crafted innovative and revolutionary ways of painting portraits.

Beginning with late nineteenth-century works by Thomas Eakins and John Singer Sargent, the exhibition charts major works by such early twentieth-century masters as Romaine Brooks, George Bellows, Marsden Hartley and Georgia O’Keeffe, and continues through the postwar period and up to the present with works by

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Marsden Hartley (1877-1943)
Painting No. 47, Berlin, 1914-1915
 Oil on canvas, 39⁷/₁₆ x 32 inches
 Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden,
 Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Marsden Hartley spent his life and career in search of a style to express the restless, contradictory aspects of his character and personality. The one time when Hartley seemed to find peace was, ironically, just before World War I. He traveled to Germany, fell in love with a German officer named Karl von Freyburg, and became entranced with the country's speed, efficiency, and vibrant colors. Reacting to Berlin and its culture—including German militarism, which he adored—Hartley developed an original style of abstraction that incorporated the signs and emblems of German life. In this memorial portrait, Hartley encodes his emotions through the use of von Freyburg's initials, age at death, iron cross, and other signs—in the process creating one of the earliest abstractions in American art.

George Platt Lynes (1907-1955)
Marsden Hartley (1877-1943), 1942
 Gelatin silver print, 9¹/₄ x 7¹/₂ inches
 Bates College Museum of Art, Lewiston, Maine
 Marsden Hartley Memorial Collection

Marsden Hartley died the year after this photograph was taken, and this portrait of the artist is full of abstract themes of death and loss, both for the subject and the photographer, George Platt Lynes. Hartley sits slumped and exhausted, a condition heightened by his mourning the recent death of a young man to whom he was attracted in Maine. But Lynes alludes to Hartley's earlier loss of Karl von Freyburg in World War I in the shadowy figure of the young man in uniform projected on the back wall. This memorial to lost youth had a poignant double meaning, since Lynes's assistant, George Tichenor, to whom he was deeply and unsuccessfully attracted, had just been killed in World War II. Lynes posed an assistant—quite possibly Tichenor's brother Jonathan—in George's uniform as an abstract representation of the losses that shadowed both his and the aged Hartley's lives.





Georgia O'Keeffe (1887–1986)

***Goat's Horn with Red*, 1945**

Pastel on paperboard, 27¹³/₁₆ x 31⁵/₁₆ inches

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1972.

Sexuality was a complicated issue for Georgia O'Keeffe, both in her life and in her art. She famously denied that her landscapes or flower paintings were allegories of the female form, yet their lineage is obviously physical. While these paintings lushly anthropomorphized women, O'Keeffe also worked in a style that was dry, austere, and forbidding: she filled her landscapes of the desert Southwest with an abundance of horns and antlers. In both cases, she was intent on asserting her own vision of the female body—camouflaged in a way that provides protective coloration. In *Goat's Horn with Red*, the phallic horn is viewed from within, making a void that wraps protectively around the lake of blue in the middle. The blue is a life-giving sanctuary in the midst of a forbidding landscape. But, considered as the amniotic fluid of the womb, it represents womanhood, protected from the world of men.

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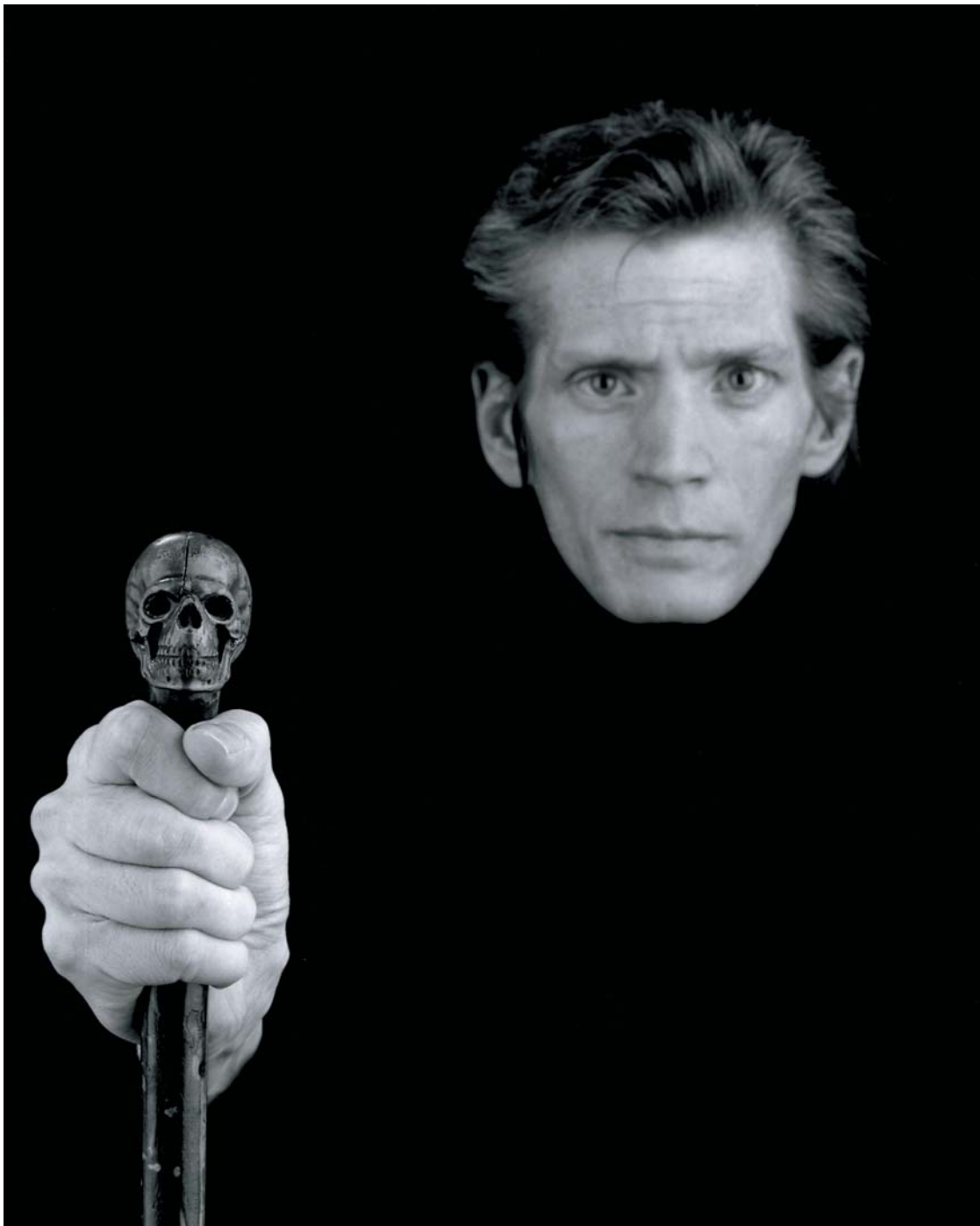
Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Agnes Martin and Andy Warhol. How portraiture continues to reflect the seismic shifts in

American culture and society, in particular the birth of the modern gay liberation movement, is demonstrated in the work of such artists as Keith Haring, Glenn Ligon,

Nan Goldin, Felix Gonzales-Torres, David Wojnarowicz, and Catherine Opie.

In charting how these identities were

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Robert Mapplethorpe (1946–1989)
Self-Portrait, 1988
Gelatin silver print, 24 x 20 inches
Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation, New York City

Photographer Robert Mapplethorpe died of AIDS in 1989. Although this image serves as a memorial and *memento mori*, Mapplethorpe is playful and rebellious to the last. Knowing how AIDS victims were demonized—not least because of the homoeroticism that Mapplethorpe celebrated in his work and life—Mapplethorpe poses as death in order to defy his critics. Here, he says, I will take on everything you accuse me of and turn it back to you in a work of art. Formally, the picture has the gravity of Mapplethorpe's portrait style while it also flirts with the dark side of his reputation: Mapplethorpe as devil, a legend that has only grown since his death.

Alice Neel (1900–1984)

Frank O'Hara (1926–1966), 1960

Oil on canvas, 33¾ x 16 inches

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, D.C.; gift of Hartley S. Neel.

One of the most important poets of postwar America, Frank O'Hara was a leader in making American verse more intimate and personal. His style was direct and immediate, and his topics were generated from his day-to-day encounters with people and places. (O'Hara was a curator at the Museum of Modern Art and wrote poetry during his lunch hour.) His relaxed, humorous, and offhand style hid the deep seriousness with which he took his art and his subjects. His irony was instead a defensive mechanism, a tendency toward obliqueness that provided cover in a society that was threatening to gay men. O'Hara also kept much of his life hidden from his closest friends, while at the same time he allowed himself to become the subject of many of America's leading artists. The American realist Alice Neel captured O'Hara's distinctive profile, which she described as "a romantic falconlike profile with a bunch of lilacs."



Beauford Delaney (1901–1979)

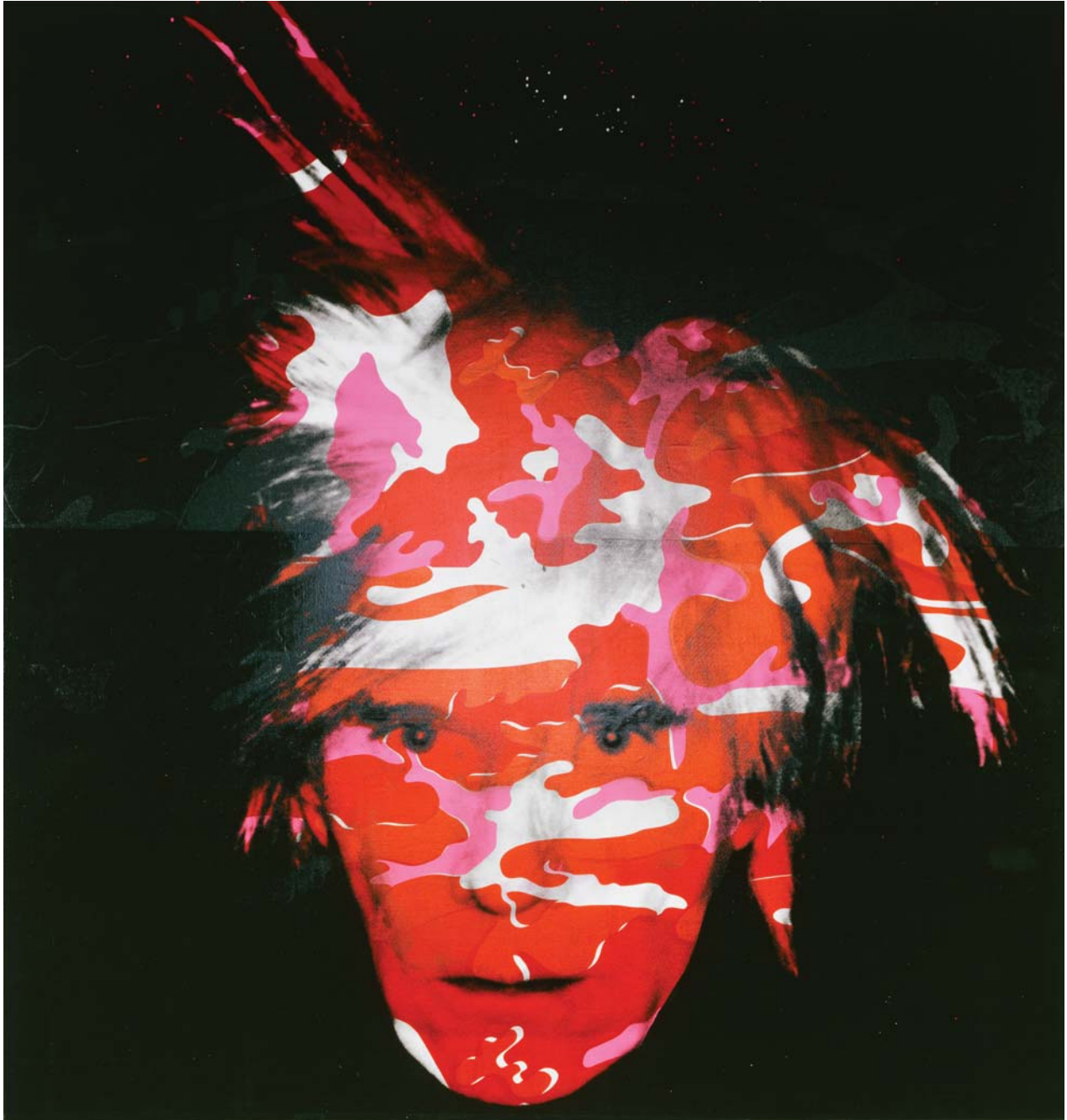
James Baldwin (1924–1987), 1963.

Pastel on paper, 25½ x 19½ inches

National Portrait Gallery,
Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Beauford Delaney came to New York City in 1929 from Tennessee by way of Boston—where he attended art school—and was immediately enthralled by the city. An heir to the Ashcan School of social realists, Delaney produced a series that showed the realities of the Great Depression. Very private, Delaney divided his life among his African American friends in Harlem, his gay white acquaintances in Greenwich Village (where he lived), and modernist art circles revolving around Alfred Stieglitz. Delaney was of, but not in these communities, and he felt the weight of his isolation from each of them.

A figurative painter in the age of abstraction, he left many brilliant likenesses, including this one of novelist James Baldwin, who had described Delaney as his "spiritual father." Baldwin, although much more honored and materially successful than Delaney, also confronted the dilemma of being black and gay in his fiction and in his life.



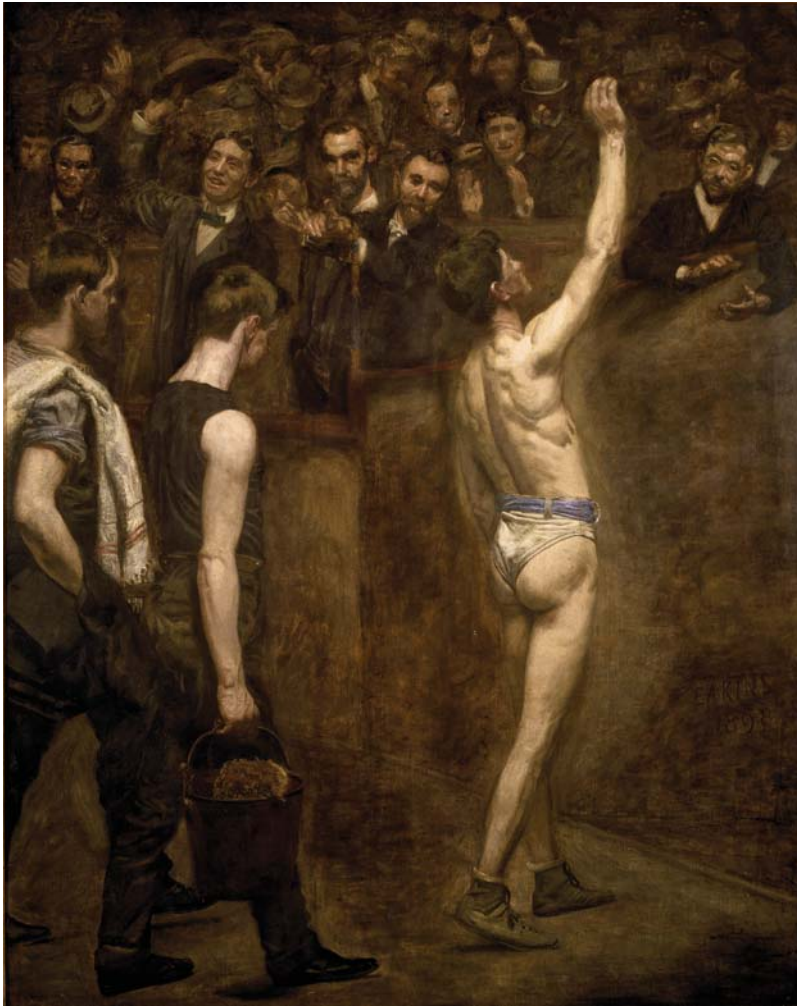
Andy Warhol (1928–1987)

Camouflage Self-Portrait, 1986

Synthetic polymer paint and silkscreen on canvas, 80½ x 76 inches

Philadelphia Museum of Art, Pennsylvania; acquired with funds contributed by the Committee on Twentieth-Century Art and as a partial gift of the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc., 1993.

Andy Warhol was famous for much longer than the fifteen minutes of fame that he predicted for everyone in his 1968 quote. Indeed, Warhol became so famous for being famous that his art tended to take second place to his personality. Warhol had a peculiar kind of fame: he posed himself as a blank against the aggressive celebrity culture of the 1960s. His pale features, deadpan expression, obscure utterances, and famous wig created a persona that resisted questions or connections, let alone intimacy. In his series of Camouflage Self-Portraits, each of which had a different color of camouflage pattern superimposed on the artist's face, Warhol built on the idea that portraits are a mask. Warhol hides in plain sight, not camouflaged at all, instantly recognizable yet hidden behind the facade of his own making.



Thomas Cowperthwaite Eakins (1844-1916)
Salutat, 1898
 Oil on canvas, 50 x 40 inches
 Addison Gallery of American Art,
 Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts
 Gift of an anonymous donor

An emphasis on physical vigor gained prominence among late nineteenth-century reformers, who saw a moral and cultural crisis in America. College football, rowing, and especially boxing became the means of masculine revitalization. Yet this celebration of the male body became an opportunity for homoerotic admiration as well.

In *Salutat*, an adoring, all-male crowd roars its approval, celebrating the fighter not for his skill in the arena—Eakins’s picture shows no actual boxing—but for his physique. By making the object of desire an undraped male instead of the more usual nude female, Eakins forces us to consider the ambiguity of desire. The boxer’s status as a working-class lad was also an indication of the growing role of the middle class as spectators, not participants. The audience’s connection to the “manly” art of self-defense was limited to watching.

Thomas Cowperthwaite Eakins (1844-1916)
Walt Whitman (1818-1892), 1891 (printed 1979)
 Platinum print, 4 $\frac{1}{16}$ x 4 $\frac{13}{16}$ inches
 National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution,
 Washington, D.C.

“Through me forbidden voices; / Voice of sexes and lusts—voices veil’d / and I remove the veil; Voices indecent, by me clarified and transfigur’d.” —Leaves of Grass

When Walt Whitman first published *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, he found the source for American vitality in a democracy rooted in the connection between its people and nature. Whitman’s refusal to accept the existence of boundaries and limits on the body, as well as the mind, is the most radical statement ever of American individualism. Expansively omniseual in his writings, Whitman spent the Civil War years and after with his lover, Peter Doyle, a Confederate deserter. Daringly, inspired by the comradeship engendered between men under fire, Whitman celebrated love and affection between men in poems he collected under the titles “Drum Taps” and “Calamus.” Just as society’s attitudes were consolidating into a rigid division that outlawed the homosexual, Whitman’s poetry (and his life) proclaimed that the possibilities of desire were not so easily characterized and contained.





Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008)

***Canto XIV*, 1959–1969**

Offset lithograph (one of thirty-four), 14½ x 11½ inches

Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, California. Gift of Marcia Simon Weisman.

In the early 1950s, Robert Rauschenberg's work juxtaposed his famous emptiness against the overheated gestures of abstract expressionism; his most notorious work was to erase a drawing by Willem de Kooning. This erasure indicated Rauschenberg's awareness that silence was a prevailing reaction to the political and social repression of the 1950s. But by the end of the decade, a strategy of resistance allowed limited forms of protest to emerge, as it does in Rauschenberg's series illustrating Dante's *Inferno*. In *Canto XIV* of the series, Rauschenberg represents the circle of hell in which the "sodomites"—including Dante's own teacher—are forced to run barefoot on hot sand. The artist inserts the outline of his own foot, signaling the outcast status imposed on him by society. He invokes his then-romantic partner, Jasper Johns, through the image of a flag (Johns famously painted the American flag) on the left.



George Bellows (1882-1925)
River Front, No. 1, 1915
 Oil on canvas, 45 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 63 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches
 Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio; Howald Fund Purchase, 1951.011.

Young working-class males, from both the hinterland and abroad, flocked to American cities, seeking jobs, social mobility, and independence from the societies they had left behind. For the urban poor and working classes, the city had few amenities; during the sweltering summer heat, boys and men would throng the docklands to swim in the river and socialize. George Bellows captured these and other scenes of city life in paintings that were both celebrations of urban vitality and indictments of the conditions under which the poor lived. The excess population of young men (and the relative absence of eligible women) encouraged a fluidity in sexual behavior that would not have occurred otherwise. Note the well-dressed dandy watching the bathing youths—very much the odd man out. In this display of male flesh, Bellows was a scrupulous observer of the homosociality of city life as well as its class separations.

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pictured, it is important to note that a number of the artists represented in the exhibition are heterosexual. That so many of the names, from Eakins to Warhol, are touchstones of American art and their works masterpieces of portraiture, is clear evidence that communion among people of different sexualities has been the rule, not the exception, in American culture. *Hide/*

Seek tells the story of a powerful artistic and cultural legacy that has been hidden in plain sight for over a century. [AFA](#)

Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture is on view through February 13, 2011. For information visit www.npg.si.edu or call 202.633.8300. A fully illustrated exhibition catalogue accompanies the exhibition.

David C. Ward is historian/curator at the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., and the co-curator, along with Jonathan Katz, of *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture*. While at the Smithsonian, he has curated exhibitions on Walt Whitman and Abraham Lincoln; he is the author of *Charles Willson Peale. Art and Selfhood in the Early Republic* (Berkeley, CA, 2004).