

## **“Erotic Art and Why It Matters” by Rich Yap**

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At the last Queer Studies Conference, held here on campus, I attended a workshop on preserving queer history. One of the main points of the presentations was the Tom of Finland Foundation, and with them the presenters brought a giant book of Tom of Finland's work titled *Tom of Finland XXL*. As I glanced through the pages of the book, I was brought back to memories of my adolescence. Tom's drawings served as reminders of my earliest memories of my queer awakening—before I discovered video porn I used to masturbate to his sexually charged artwork. Meanwhile, the presenters emphasized that the foundation was always looking for volunteers, and is conveniently based here in Los Angeles.

In spite of the foundation's convenient proximity, it took me months before I made my way out there. The experience would forever change my understanding of art and its role in queer history.

On my first visit, I felt like I had walked into another dimension. The foundation is located in the actual house that Tom bought when he moved to LA. Situated in Echo Park atop a hill with a fantastic view of the downtown skyline, the house itself is a piece of art. The lawn surrounding the house is decorated with interesting and unique ornaments, including a cage and some contraptions that indicate they serve an S&M purpose. There is even a dungeon in the basement that I was not allowed to see because I hadn't "earned the right."

The inhabitants of the house inspire the same awe and amazement as the house itself. On my first visit there I was invited to stay for dinner with Durk Dehner, the president and cofounder of the foundation, Sharp, the curator and vice-president of the foundation and the other volunteers that were there that day. While I was somewhat familiar with Tom's work, I didn't know too much about the man other than the fact that he was from Finland. Sharp and Durk were more than happy to enlighten me on the man and his impact on queer American history.

Durk saw his first Tom of Finland drawing at a bar in New York and was so struck by the image that he tracked down Tom's address and wrote him a fan letter. The two kept in touch, and a year after Durk relocated to LA, Tom had his first exhibition in America right here in LA where the two finally met in person.

“So he stayed at the house where I was living then and he was here for 3 weeks and we got to know each other,” he recalled. Durk learned that Tom was having some issues with making money from his work and having his art protected. One of the major problems Tom encountered in his early days was piracy.

“It was poor piracy because the quality was so bad—they were taking his magazines from Europe which he was getting paid for and they just reproduced them on copy machines and they were just poorly done,” Durk explained. “So I first started to take care of issues like PR and booking him into other galleries.” In addition to booking gigs for Tom, Durk would on occasion model for Tom and he set up the Tom of Finland Company to protect and license Tom’s artwork.

“We became business partners and so I was his confidante and his liaison and his best friend. I started a lot of American things for him even though he was actually already in America extremely deep.”

At the time, Tom was already gaining notoriety in the gay community because he was contracted by Athletic Model Guild (AMG) to do the covers for their quarterly magazine, *Physique Pictorial*. “They did 4 magazines a year and he always did covers or he did different little scenarios inside the little Physique Pictorials and he was doing that on a regular basis,” recalls Durk. “He gave the magazine obviously great art but what he also gave over decades was a kind of sensibility about being homosexual and how important he felt it was to feel proud about being whoever you were. He didn’t like the shame that society had given and he wanted to make a difference with all the younger kids growing up who were homosexual to give them something that they could be proud about.”

To understand the profound impact of Tom, there needs to be an understanding of what it meant to be queer during his time, and what the depictions of queerness were back in the day. In America we had just come out of an age of Victorian repression, and prior to World War II people did not have open discussions about sex and sexuality. American society was very homophobic and most gay men remained closeted. Anything that dealt with sex and sexuality in general had to be done creatively through innuendo. This is most evident in the early days of American motion pictures and the Hollywood Code, where gay men were portrayed as effeminate men who often participated in an artistic endeavor of some sort. This code resulted in negative depictions of homosexuals right from the get go. The years of derogative gay stereotypes in film produced such terms as “sissy”, “pansy” and “pouf” to describe gay

men. Other regulations also forbade the sale of pornography, which led to the establishment of magazines like *Physique Pictorial*. These magazines contained photographs of male models in g-strings demonstrating exercise, and they were marketed as pieces to promote exercise and good health. Since law prohibited explicitly nude images, these magazines provided the closest alternative. With erotic art, however, there was more freedom to show what photographs couldn't, and the arrival of Tom's artwork was an act of liberation for gay men.

"I got to see very soon after I started to work with Tom that he was not just an artist—I mean, he was an amazing artist—but he had done something that was very noticeable and I noticed it immediately when fellows started talking to him," Durk explained. "They were telling him that he was so important in their development—that he gave them a kind of image of who they could be and who they were and that was so encouraging for them." Durk would hear this story time after time from men across the country when he traveled with Tom across the nation for art exhibitions. It dawned on Durk that Tom's artwork was very profound, and so in 1984, the two friends established the Tom of Finland Foundation to archive Tom's artwork. But what began as a means of documenting and archiving pieces in Tom's repertoire evolved into a project to protect and archive all forms of erotic art. According to Durk, "right at the same time [the foundation was established] AIDS hit and we had not one but dozens of artists coming to us and asking us if we would actually take their art work or take their archives and protect them and make sure that they didn't just fall into just nothingness. And so, we felt like we had to open up our doors and we were happy to open up our doors even though we didn't really know how to do it. But we knew how to do Tom so we just started doing that same process with other artists and it just sort of blossomed."

It was through this kind of exchange that Sharp came into contact with Durk and the foundation. Sharp happened to be bringing by some things to donate to the archive that had been left behind after one of his friends had passed away. As a fellow artist himself (he worked in the film industry as a costume designer for over 20 years), Sharp was immediately drawn to the foundation and what it represented so he started to work there and is currently serving as the vice-president of the foundation. The foundation continues to this day to archive erotic art and publicize the work erotic artists, either living or dead and regardless of gender/sexual orientation. The efforts of the foundation have been instrumental in giving erotic art the recognition and acclaim it deserves, because it was not always recognized as a valid art

form in its early days. In this regard, Tom of Finland is also significant because his contributions to homoerotic art spearheaded the erotic art movement in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, paving the way for erotic art's current status as a recognized, though sometimes controversial, art form. But his influence stretches beyond visual art. As Durk explained to me, Tom's influence also touched musicians, apparel designers and it even infiltrated mainstream heterosexual culture.

"He's sort of held as being the one who was responsible for actually getting the homosexuals reputation of being a limp wrist queen sort of taken down some notches." Durk also claims that it was through Tom's influence on queer culture that brought gym culture to the rest of America. "I mean, we're the ones that were going to the gyms in such high numbers that the rest of the society sort of just woke up to it. And that's the beauty of it is that they should pay attention because we actually are not selfish; we're really generous in how we give out things that we think are beneficial. So there you have it, and you have him [Tom] actually right there in the grassroots of the gay culture and at the same time he's sort of being. He was very cool about it [though], he loved the idea of it and yet he was not high brow."

In spite of all the recognition that Tom's artwork has received and the legacy it has left behind, I worry that all these achievements are lost among the majority of my generation of queers. This concern is further exacerbated by the fact that I am always the youngest person at the house during my visits to the foundation. I find this to be a travesty, especially among my fellow queer Angelenos given that our city played such a significant role in Tom's rise to fame and recognition. But Durk disagrees with me.

"I don't actually see it receding completely away," he reassures. "Tom was an exception and still is—and why he was an exception is this: he was an expert artist and there was something magical about the man in his ability to actually speak through his drawings in that you could feel things coming through his drawings. And young men would feel like that drawing was talking to them specifically."

Those drawings definitely spoke to me, and I won't lie—Tom's drawings can still give me a hard on. And maybe Durk is right. So long as guys are still getting erections from Tom's pictures, his legacy lives on.