

The New York Times Reprints

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytreprints.com for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

PRINTER-FRIENDLY FORMAT
SPONSORED BY

FROM
ACADEMY AWARD®
WINNER
DANNY BOYLE

September 9, 2010

Portraits Shed Light Through Gay Prism

By TED LOOS

ALTHOUGH museums are generally thought of as progressive, gay-theme shows are almost unheard of at the country's biggest art institutions. This fall a particularly unlikely one will break with that tradition: the august National Portrait Gallery, part of the [Smithsonian Institution](#).

"Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture," opening Oct. 29, brings together 100 works from the late 19th century to the present, examining how gender and sexual identity have altered the development of the genre.

"This show needs to be done now," said David C. Ward, a historian for the Gallery and an organizer of the show. "It's in the air, with the gay marriage debate and the mainstreaming of gay people on TV."

Name-brand artists include [Robert Mapplethorpe](#), [Andrew Wyeth](#) and [Thomas Eakins](#) — in other words, the openly gay, the openly straight and those whose sexualities are debated among historians.

"This is, in a certain sense, a masterpiece show," Mr. Ward said. "We're looking at the canon you thought you knew."

Among the well-known works are [Andy Warhol's](#) "Camouflage Self-Portrait (Red)" (1986) and Eakins's "Salutat" (1898), an image of a male boxer.

Jonathan D. Katz, another organizer of the show and the director of the visual studies doctoral program at the [State University of New York at Buffalo](#), said the concept for the exhibition was borne of frustration.

"I've been troubled by the fact that the main New York museums have been unwilling to talk about sexuality," Mr. Katz said. "I decided it was necessary to end what I consider a blacklisting."

Mr. Katz got the idea to stage it at the National Portrait Gallery when he saw its [Walt Whitman](#) exhibition, organized by Mr. Ward, in 2007. “Factually, with no fireworks, it articulated Whitman’s relationship with Peter Doyle,” Mr. Katz said, referring to Whitman’s great love.

One of the most telling works in “Hide/Seek,” Mr. Katz said, was George Bellows’s print “The Shower-Bath” (1917). In the work Bellows, known for his manly boxing pictures, depicts an assignation in a male bathhouse.

“To find an image from him with homoerotic content front and center — and in a print, which circulated to a mass audience — that’s compelling,” Mr. Katz said.

He said that the exhibition is the first directly to link the sexuality of artists like [Ellsworth Kelly](#), [Jasper Johns](#) and [Robert Rauschenberg](#) to the content of their work.

Mr. Ward added, “By being excluded, gay artists had a special vantage point,” one that often lent them “a more accurate view of society.”

“Hide/Seek” also explores links between sexual orientation and the development of abstraction in the 20th century. “So much of modern portraiture has been produced by the necessity of saying and not saying,” Mr. Katz said, citing the way the painter [Marsden Hartley](#) reduced his dead lover to an abstracted set of symbols in “Painting No. 47, Berlin” (1915), also in the show.

Any show with a gay theme, of course, has the potential to be controversial, especially one at a government-financed museum. “We haven’t gotten any internal opposition,” Mr. Ward said. “But there’s general concern, given the culture wars and the fact that’s it an election season.”

Mr. Katz said that corporate gifts had been scarce. And the Portrait Gallery held a series of fund-raisers this year soliciting money from individual contributors. (The Smithsonian raises money privately for each exhibition.)

Organizers are hoping that their surprising choice of theme will be noticed.

“We have really tried to modernize our physical plant, and we’re also trying to modernize our shows,” Mr. Ward said. “The Portrait Gallery is no longer just pictures of great white men on horseback winning the war against Mexico.”

