

books

For the One-Fisted Reader

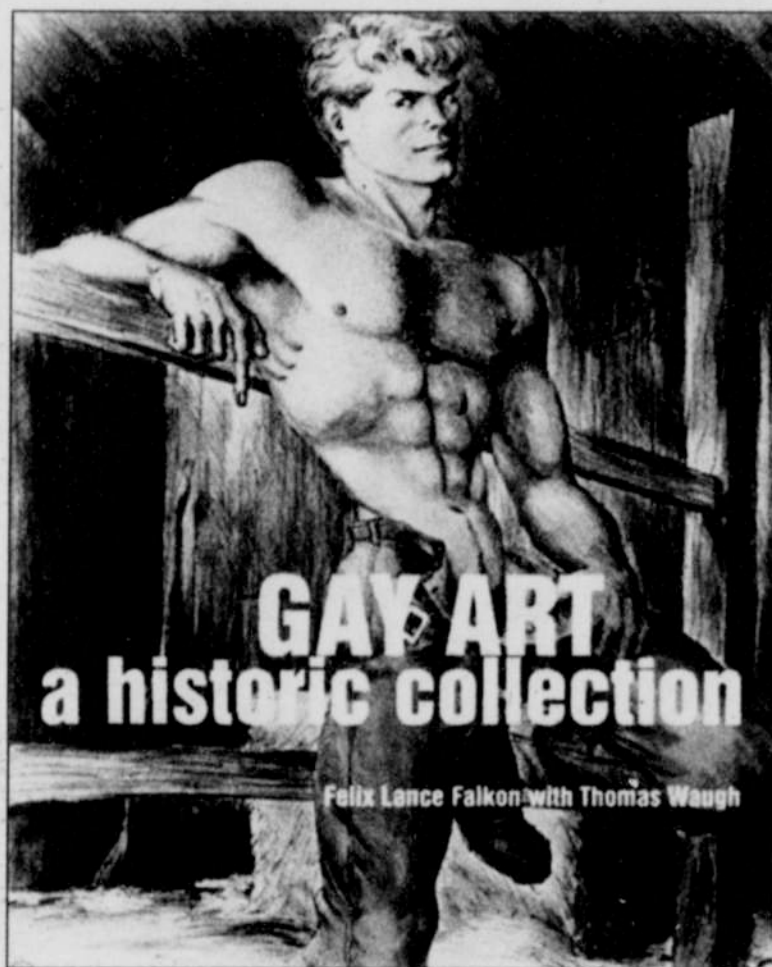
Gay art history collection shows how far we haven't come as a culture
by Gary Morris

Felix Lance Falkon's 1972 book *A Historic Collection of Gay Art* was a best seller (250,000 copies printed) and a breakthrough. Gay men who had previously sought stimulation by drooling over postcards of Michelangelo's David or the underwear pages of the Sears catalog or, for the more adventuresome, the "physique" mags featuring hunks in posing straps or less could now get their jollies along with their affirmation in one place.

Falkon's book combined hardcore gay art by some of the notables in the field—Tom of Finland, Etienne, Rip Colt, Quaintance—with biographical info and commentary. Published when the closet was still a common hangout for gay men, the book was coy about identifying some of the artists—protective pseudonyms abound. But the art itself was anything but coy. It featured all the icons historically associated with homo lust—cowboys, sailors, farmhands, Marines, masters/slaves, daddies/boys—getting down and dirty in just about every way imaginable. *A Historic Collection of Gay Art* has become a highly prized, and expensive, collector's item.

Thirty-five years later comes a new edition of the book, renamed as *Gay Art: A Historic Collection* (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2006; \$24.95 softcover), that features much of the original art along with some additions—and subtractions. Thomas Waugh, a Montreal professor who's done several important books on gay art (including *Out/Lines* and *Lust Unearthed*), collaborated with Falkon on this revised version. The book retains Falkon's witty profiles and commentary, updating it with the artists' real name whenever possible, and adds a long introduction by Waugh along with some clever interpretive captions.

The art itself is a mixed bag to the modern eye. Some of these artists possess little more than rudimentary technique, although technique wasn't necessarily a must for the one-fisted reader. A 1950s artist named Blade contributes "Sperm Sundae," a laughably lame image of a soda jerk adding "special sauce" to an ice cream sundae. Many of the figures are stiff (literally and figuratively) and more silly than sexy. A little higher on the aesthetic scale are artists like Etienne and Tom of Finland, who at least had some style, although some readers might wince at the rampant

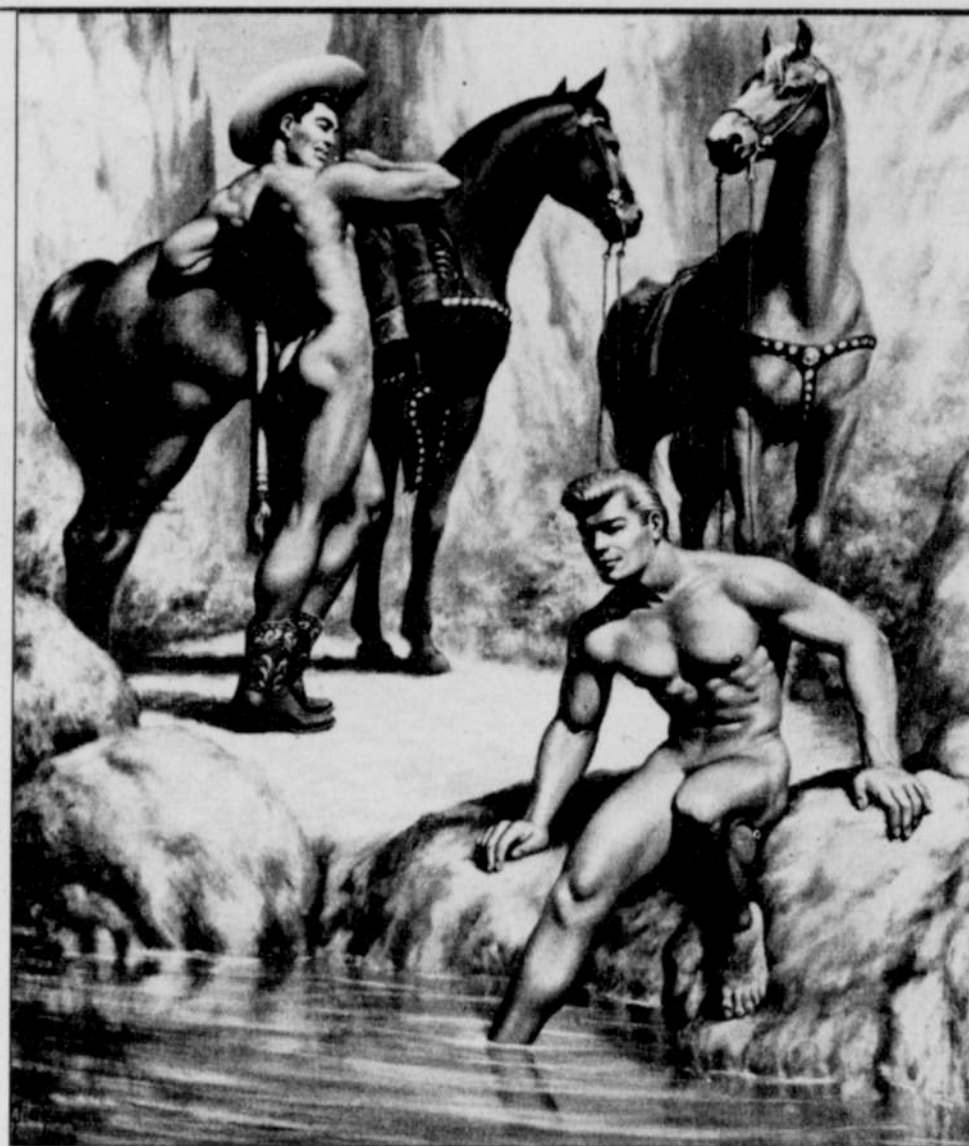


racial stereotyping and distinctly un-PC images that popped out of their sleazy unconscious. Etienne's "Arab Market," where a hapless naked soldier is penetrated by an evil, leering sheik, or the Nazi lust tableau of the same artist's "Supper Table," are typical examples.

The book has unquestionable value as a look into the fantasy life of gay men from the 1950s to the 1970s (with a smattering of fine art imagery by ancient Greek and pre-Colombian sculptors and brilliant draughtsmen like Aubrey Beardsley). Who knew S/M was so popular in the '50s and '60s? Quite a few of the book's drawings riff on bondage, torture chambers, rape and, in one inexplicably bizarre image, a small dragon that sets a chained prisoner's privates on fire with his magic breath. Some of the imagery clearly seems to come out of the kind of self-hate that afflicts any marginalized community. But there are also balancing works of more innocent, positive, sensual encounters here that lighten some of that darkness.

A quick glance through the pages of *Gay Art* reveals something curious and unexpected. Some of the images are reproduced only partially, with a rip blatantly calling attention to the fact that the drawing has been censored. In some cases, half the image is missing. In one especially strange one, the entire page is blank except for a tiny triangle at the bottom showing simply a foot, a hand and a cigarette. Thomas Waugh explains why in the introduction. Some of the original imagery was apparently too hot to handle; most of it involved "intergenerational" love or gay youth. Fears of censorship or getting the books impounded—particularly in the publisher's home country of Canada, which has a long history of such behavior—dictated this policy, regrettable for those interested in an accurate historical record but probably necessary. The fact that some of these images were apparently not even particularly sexual but had to be removed anyway is a disturbing reminder of how far we haven't come as a culture since that first edition. 10

GARY MORRIS edits and publishes Bright Lights Film Journal, located online at www.brightlightsfilm.com.



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