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*"This Above All... To Thine Own Self Be True. And it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man."*

• Shakespeare / Hamlet / I / III



## The Man Who Made Us Macho



A lot of us stayed in the closet longer than we should have, in part because we were so scared of the images society painted of gay people.

If gay men weren't portrayed talking with a lisp they were pictured walking with one.

What a lot of us needed were strong, masculine images of gay men. And we got it with an obscure artist by the name of Touko Laaksonen. Otherwise known as Tom of Finland.

Yes, the man who introduced hyper-masculinity to gay culture took the name of a pretentious hairdresser.

Tom of Finland's pornographic drawings of hunky, fuck-booted, bubble-butt beefcakes banging the booty in door-busting swells of watercolor machismo took the world by storm.

His characters were so masculine they make straight men look like girlie-boys.

Tom had a profound influence on gay culture because he was the first to connect words everyone assumed were oxymorons: Masculinity and homosexuality. In a world that insisted gay men were sissies, Tom did the unthinkable, portraying them as confident, macho and aggressive.

Every one of Tom's characters has a squarish face, firm chin, thin lips, snub nose, short hair and sideburns. And just about every character is either a lumberjack, cop, construction

worker, cowboy, biker, sailor or soldier. Not a florist in the bunch. Squeeze any of his characters and they'd fart testosterone.

Tom skewered the notion that gay men were nelly queens charring the floor with the flame of their effeminacy. Tom himself said his characters were prototypes, his own idealized version of how a gay man should look like and act. He drew what he saw as the ultimate masculinity.

By co-opting all the symbols of masculinity (uniforms, motorcycles, aggressiveness) he implied something greater than the presence of masculinity in gay men. He inverted the proposition altogether: You couldn't be masculine unless (italicize) you were gay.

Some historians credit Tom's work with making millions of men more comfortable about their stigmatized sexuality. To see two blue-collar men laying hands upon their wonderment was a revelation, especially to working class gays.

But one man's sweet spot is another man's sore spot. For every grin in the gay community there's a grimace. Tom's characters are handsome and sexy but they're also grotesque and outlandish. He combines hyperrealism with garish flights of fancy, making his men ruggedly handsome but radically out of proportion. The Ford Taurus should have headlights

as big as their nipples. And the National League should have bats the size of Tom of Finland penises. Every other hit would have been a home run.

There's only a consonant separating leather from feather, and in many ways Tom's work blurred the distinction. He turned masculinity into burlesque and in some ways burdened gay men the way fashion burdens straight women—by idealizing a body physically impossible to attain waists, and perfect hair.

The "masculinization" of gay identity came at a price. There's hard-core sex but not a twinge of tenderness. It's rare to find a Tom of Finland drawing where men kiss, hold hands or show any kind of affection. Hell, even in business there's an expectation of being kissed before you get fucked. Not in Tomland. It's strictly meat and potatoes sex. Emphasis on meat.

They say women look for a reason to make love and men look for a place. In Tomland, the only place men don't have sex is in their homes. Almost every drawing shows men pawing each other in public settings sites, bars, warehouses, and the outdoors. Talk about out and proud. It was as if Tom wanted to show that gay sex was so natural it shouldn't be depicted with the shades drawn and the doors locked.

Tom is also credited with starting macho gay porn. Even he saw it that way. "But is it Art?" is a question he did not burden himself with. "My motive is lower than art," he once told his biographer, Micha Ramakers. "If I don't have an erection when I'm doing a drawing, I know it's no good."

I feel that way about my work, too. If I can't get a rise out of my audience when I write, I know it's no good.

Masculinity is gaining on effeminacy in the public's perception of gay men. It earns about 65 cents to effeminacy's dollar. It used to earn nothing. We've come a long, long way, baby. And we can thank Tom of Finland and his bubble-bottomed macho boys of Company Dick.

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## The Express Stylebook Policy

For the sake of readable newswriting, the word "gay" in The Express should, when relevant, be interpreted to be inclusive of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transexuals, transvestites, transgendered people, two-spirited people, intersexed people, men-who-have-sex-with-men, women-who-have-sex-with-women, queers, homosexuals, sexual minorities, and people who are unsure of their sexual orientation, but think they might be gay. Here is an example: "Toronto's gay-pride parade is bigger than Vancouver's."