

# The Life in Art - A Visual History

REVIEWED BY ERNIE MCLEOD

I can think of a number of people for whom James Saslow's *Pictures and Passions* would make an ideal gift: Jesse Helms, Charlton Heston, all the folks who have been testifying the past few months about how homosexuality is an unnatural choice lacking historical tradition.

Jesse could learn that the penis had a time-honored place in art history long before he passed dick pics by Robert Mapplethorpe and David Wojnarowicz around the Senate. Homophobe Charlton could learn that Michelangelo's "pictures and poetry remain the romantic as well as artistic high point of early modern homosexual self-expression," a point clearly lacking in his portrayal of the artist in *The Agony and the Ecstasy*. Vermont's more outspoken bigots could

learn that one of the most compelling arguments for the naturalness of same-sex love lies in the fact that it has been portrayed in the visual arts since the dawn of time.

Such knowledge is probably wasted on these people, however, so instead I'll highly recommend Saslow's amazingly ambitious and comprehensive book to all of you.

While *Pictures and Passions* is not the first book to look at artists and art history from a queer perspective, it is the first overview of homosexuality in the arts from the Stone Age to Stonewall, from pederastic pottery and the androgynous aesthetic to the AIDS quilt, Diva magazine and Gay Games T-shirts. Saslow, who's written several books about the Renaissance and was a cofounder of the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies at City University of New York, is a perfect match for such an exhaustively

broad undertaking.

Saslow's writing is neither dry nor drenched with academic jargon. He looks at positive and negative portrayals of homosexuality, high and low culture, private lives and public outings. Rarely does he appear to be pushing an agenda, straining to "queer" his subject matter (as sometimes seems the case with such scholarship). On the other hand, he doesn't shy away from queer lingo (a classical Greek sculpture is described as a "handsome hunk," for example) or amusingly knowing descriptions of queer sex. In other words, he doesn't clean it up for the masses.

Saslow introduces the book by asking what gay and lesbian art is exactly, and how it can be understood through the ages. While some of the images in the book (there are 150 photographs, 32 of them color plates) are bluntly sexual, he points out that if "homosexuality is more than

**Pictures and Passions:  
A History of Homosexuality  
in the Visual Arts**  
by James M. Saslow  
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sex, then homosexual art is more than images of sex." Much of the work of the art scholar is putting the artworks in historical context, and Saslow goes to great lengths to discuss the images in relation to the societal pressures in which they were created and viewed.

Not surprisingly, representations of homosexuality in the arts have often been discouraged (to put it mildly), suppressed, and denied throughout history. If depictions of male-male sexuality

were rarely seen during certain time periods, depictions of female-female sexuality were all but invisible.

For me, one of the most positive things about this book is that, unlike so many scholarly studies by gay men, it doesn't ignore lesbians. Granted, Saslow has limited material to work with, since, after Sappho, nearly all known art and literature was the product of men. The les-

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