THE CENSORED PAINTINGS OF PAUL CADMUS, 1934-1940:
THE BODY AS THE BOUNDARY BETWEEN THE DECENT AND OBSCENE

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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May 2010
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Table of Contents:

List of Figures

Acknowledgements

Abstract

Chapter I

Introduction: Censorship and the American Scene

Censorship of Sex: The Comstock Laws

Censorship of Hate Speech: Griffith’s “The Birth of a Nation”

Censorship of Political Ideology: Diego Rivera

Censorship and the New Deal Mural Program

Paul Cadmus and Other Painters of the American Scene

The Depiction of the Working Class

The Depiction of Women and Sexuality

The Depiction of Alcohol Following the Prohibition Era

Chapter II

Historiography of Paul Cadmus: The Gay Satirist

1930s: Repulsive Subjects and Garish Color

1941-1968: Near Silence

1968-1992: Re-emergence and Re-considered

1992-present: Queering Paul Cadmus
Chapter III

The Navy, The New Deal, and *The Fleet’s In!* Reconsidered 59.

- The National Exhibition of Art by the Public Works of Art Project 60.
- Scandal at the Corcoran! 66.
- Queer Interpretations of *The Fleet’s In!* Scandal 70.
- The Navy, Cheap Liquor, and Women 79.

Chapter IV

The Immigrant Working Class at Play: *Coney Island* 89.

- *Coney Island* at the Brooklyn Museum of Art 94.
- *Coney Island* as Carnival 99.

Chapter V

Critique of the American Bourgeoisie: *Aspects of Suburban Life* 111.

- *Aspects of Suburban Life*: Golf and Polo Spill 112.
- *Aspects of Suburban Life*: Main Street 119.

Chapter VI

Fascism, Gender, and the Navy: *Sailors and Floozies* 128.

- The Golden Gate International Exposition, 1939-40 129.
- Gendered Roles in *Sailors and Floozies* 137.
- Nazi and Communist Anxieties 144.
Chapter VII

Labor and Sadism: The Herrin Massacre 149.

A Massacre in Herrin, Illinois 150.


Cadmus and the NAACP Exhibition 158.

Corporeality and The Herrin Massacre 163.

Chapter VIII

Conclusion: Imaging the Homosexual at Cadmus’s 1937 Solo Exhibition 170.

Conclusion 186.

Figures 196.

Bibliography 259.
**List of Figures:**

1.1, Diego Rivera, *Man, Controller of the Universe*, 1934, Mural at the Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico. Image repainted in Mexico after *Man at the Crossroads with Hope and High Vision to the Choosing of a New and Better Future*, 1933 at Rockefeller Center was destroyed.


1.6, Reginald Marsh, *Holy Name Mission*, 1931. Tempera, 35.5 x 47.5 in. Private Collection.


1.9, Thomas Hart Benton, *Arts of the City*, 1933. Murals painted for the Whitney
Museum of Art Library in New York.


1.11, Reginald Marsh, *Hudson Bay Fur Company*, 1932. Egg tempera on muslin mounted on board, 30 x 40 in. Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, Ohio.


2.4, Paul Cadmus, *Playground*, 1948. Egg tempera on panel, 23.5 x 17.5 in. Georgia
Museum of Art.

2.5, Paul Cadmus, *Venus and Adonis*, 1936. Oil and tempera on panel, 28.6 x 32.5 in. Forbes.

3.1, Paul Cadmus, *The Fleet’s In!,* 1934. Oil and tempera on canvas, 30 x 60 in. Navy Historical Center, Washington, DC.


3.4, Munsingwear’s “Stretchy Seat” underwear advertisement found in *Life* (March 17, 1941).

3.5, Lucky Strike advertisement featuring Gary Cooper found in *Life* (July 26, 1937).


4.1, Paul Cadmus, *Coney Island*, 1934. Oil on canvas, 32.44 x 36.3 in. Los Angeles County Museum of Art.


4.5, Reginald Marsh, *Negroes on Rockaway Beach*, 1934. Egg tempera on composition


5.4, Paul Cadmus, *Aspects of Suburban Life: Main Street*, 1936. Oil and tempera on fiberboard, 31.8 x 73.4 in. The Regis Collection, Minneapolis.

5.5, Paul Cadmus, *Commuter Rush*, 1935. Oil and tempera on paper, 5.5 x 12 in. The Regis Collection, Minneapolis.

5.6, Paul Cadmus, *Regatta*, 1935. Oil and tempera on paper, 5.1 x 8.8 in. Collection of John P. Axelrod, Boston.


5.8, Edward Hopper, *Office at Night*, 1940. Oil on canvas, 22.25 x 25 in. Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota.


6.2, Paul Cadmus, *Seeing the New Year In*, 1939. Oil and tempera on linen laid on panel, 30 x 38 in. Private Collection.

6.3, Peter Paul Rubens, *Venus and Adonis*, middle to late 1630s. Oil on canvas, 77.75 x
95.5 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

6.4, Photo of artists at the costume party closing “Art in Action” at the San Francisco World’s Fair dressed as Sailors and Floozies, found in Life (October 14, 1940) 67.

6.5, Barberini Faun, late 3rd or early 2nd century BCE. Marble, 84.6 in. tall. Glyptothek, Munich.

6.6, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, Odalisque with a Slave, 1842. Oil on canvas 29.9 x 41.3 in. Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore.


7.1, Paul Cadmus, The Herrin Massacre, 1940. Tempera and oil on panel, 30.5 x 26.8 in. Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio.

7.2, John Steuart Curry, Hoover and the Flood, 1940. Oil on panel, 37.5 x 63 in. Morris Museum of Art, Augusta, Georgia.

7.3, Alexandre Hogue, Spindletop, 1940.


7.6, George Bellows, The Law Is Too Slow, 1923. Lithograph, 17.9 x 14.6 in. The Art Institute of Chicago.

7.7, Isamu Noguchi, Death, (Lynched Figure), 1934. Monel metal, 39 x 29.3 x 21 in. Isamu Noguchi Foundation, New York.
7.8, Photograph of George Hughes, 1930, Sherman, Texas. Bettman/CORBIS.

7.9, Reginald Marsh, *This Is Her First Lynching*, 1934. Drawing, Wayne State University, Detroit.


8.2, Paul Cadmus, *Gilding the Acrobats*, 1935. Oil and tempera on wood panel, 36.5 x 18.5 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

8.3, Paul Cadmus, *Two Boys on a Beach*, 1936. Oil and tempera on linen on panel, 5 x 7 in. Collection unknown.

8.4, Luca Signorelli, *Damned Consigned to Hell*, 1499-1502. Fresco cycle for the Chapel of San Brizio in Orvieto, Italy.


8.6, Paul Cadmus, preliminary drawings for *Gilding the Acrobats*, 1935. Ink with white chalk on paper, 5.9 x 12 in. D.C. Moore Gallery, New York.


Acknowledgements:

This dissertation would not have been possible without the advice, feedback, input, and enthusiasm of my committee, Henry Adams, Ellen G. Landau, T. Kenny Fountain, and Renée M. Sentilles. Additionally, I am grateful to the many conversations with Mark Cole, American Art curator at the Cleveland Museum of Art. His insight into the historical background of Paul Cadmus was a tremendous resource.

I would like to specially thank Dr. Adams for helping me develop my voice as a scholar, and for encouraging me to explore this topic in a forthright manner. He has been sensitive to the larger issues of professional development. While working on this project I have taught classes and worked as a curatorial assistant. Dr. Adams’s encouragement and flexibility with deadlines made this possible.

Dr. Landau was also a strong influence. She initially suggested that I write on queer theory, and has provided wonderful guidance in working through the literature in this area, and the interpretive challenges it presents. She carefully read through early drafts of this manuscript, making acute observations, and identifying those sections that needed more work.

I am grateful as well to the helpful and considerate staff of the D.C. Moore Galleries, the Archives of American Art, and the U.S. Navy Historical Center. The primary source material gathered from these archives was critical to this dissertation. Other institutions that were helpful and accommodating to my research are the Mary Lago Collection at the University of Missouri, the Library of the Department of the Navy,
the Smithsonian Institute of American Art, the Columbus Museum of Art, and The
Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction.

I would also like to thank my parents for their encouragement and support. My
mother encouraged me to “trust the system” and allow coursework and advising to help
mold me as an academic. Many years ago when I decided to study art, it was my father
who insisted that I be permitted to make that decision over the more profitable fields of
engineering or nursing. His assertion was based on the fact that I am passionate about art
and if I could not make the degree work for me, I “could always do something I hate
later.”

My friends and colleagues have also made this dissertation possible. Kimberly
Hyde, Rachel Geschwind, Tami Miller, Shannon Masterson, Rachel Duszenski, Christina
Larson, and Amber Stitt have all provided academic soundboards. Conversations with
these colleagues often enabled me to think of my topic in new ways.
American painter Paul Cadmus was censored five times between 1934 and 1940. His most famous censored painting is *The Fleet’s In!* which the Assistant Secretary of the Navy removed from an exhibition in Washington, DC, but four other paintings were censored in some fashion as well: *Coney Island, Aspects of Suburban Life, Sailors and Floozies*, and *The Herrin Massacre*. While there is much scholarship written about *The Fleet’s In!*, the remaining censored paintings have received only cursory attention. This dissertation examines not only *The Fleet’s In!* but also these under-researched paintings to more completely define what angered people at the time.

Because Cadmus was a homosexual and he often represented gay characters, in recent decades his work has appealed to queer historians and theorists, who have focused on the homosexual aspect of his work. These historians have argued a causal relationship between Cadmus’s censorship and his representation of homosexual figures. But this dissertation questions the completeness of such a history. Because homosexuality could not be openly discussed in this period, contemporary viewers may well have missed many of the homosexual references in Cadmus’s work. Studying *The Fleet’s In!* in
conjunction with the other paintings in their broader cultural contexts demonstrates that homosexuality was largely invisible at the time. Viewers clearly recognized that something was amiss, but focused on the artist’s representation of alcohol, promiscuous women, and what seemed to be unsympathetic depictions of the working class.

Overall, what seemed to disturb viewers was the unconventional social critique found in Cadmus’s paintings. As opposed to traditional satire in which unpalatable figures face terrible consequences, Cadmus employed what Mikhail Bakhtin called the “carnivalesque.” This controversial form of satire was based on Medieval festivals in which the conventions of society were temporarily halted. Cadmus’s compositions stand in opposition to traditional morality, without consequence and were therefore scandalous in the 1930s.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: CENSORSHIP AND THE AMERICAN SCENE

Paul Cadmus was possibly the most controversial and provocative American painter of the 1930s. To be sure, there are some other candidates for this title, but Cadmus set a record for the number of his paintings that raised the subject of censorship. Between 1934 and 1940, the acceptability of five of his paintings was debated and in most of these cases his work was permanently or temporarily removed from public display. The most famous of these battles was the controversy over his depiction of drunken sailors with apparent prostitutes in The Fleet’s In!. Admiral Hugh Rodman of the U.S. Navy denounced the painting, abruptly pulled it off the walls of a major exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, and it disappeared from public view for nearly half a century. Four additional paintings by Cadmus were also censored, rejected, or withdrawn from exhibition, as well as denounced by self-appointed moralists: Coney Island (1934), Aspects of Suburban Life: Main Street (1936), Sailors and Floozies (1938) and The Herrin Massacre (1940). While these scandals were less public than the dispute over The Fleet’s In! (which received national headlines), these controversies document the moral fault-lines of the 1930s. In other words, they raise issues about “good” and “bad” behavior as well as about what subjects were acceptable and unacceptable for galleries and museums to show—and to what audience.

This dissertation will focus on the controversies surrounding these five paintings and it will make an original contribution to the scholarship in two respects. First, while there is a substantial scholarly literature on the first of these controversies, The Fleet’s
In!, the other four disputes received only cursory attention--essentially perfunctory mention in standard biographical accounts, without any serious attempt at analysis. It is natural to ask how these controversies relate to each other, both in terms of the artist’s intent and in terms of the reactions they stirred up, but so far they have not been examined as a group.

Second, the interpretive approach I take differs from that of previous scholars. Because Cadmus was openly homosexual, his work has naturally attracted the interest of those interested in gay studies. The most distinguished critical treatments of his work, by Jonathan Weinberg and Richard Meyer, focus on the homosexual undercurrents in his compositions, and largely on *The Fleet’s In!*. Yet the issue of homosexuality was never directly raised in the contemporary controversy over Cadmus’s paintings, and in fact many viewers may not have grasped Cadmus’s homosexual innuendos. For example, Thomas Hart Benton, who made many homophobic public statements regarding other artists and critics supported *The Fleet’s In!*.

Contemporary viewers, in short, seemed not to have been offended by homosexual themes per se. Indeed, both before and after these controversies, Cadmus made paintings which are overtly homoerotic in their subject matter and manner of presentation, but did not stir up any public controversy, and in many cases were received well by critics.

Of course it would be hard to deny that Cadmus’s sexual orientation affected the viewpoint of his work. But it is clear from the contemporary evidence that what stirred up the ire of contemporary viewers was often something different, and very often issues that

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are difficult to comprehend from the vantage point of today’s culture, such as a woman
with an abundance of make-up, or people eating and snoozing at the beach. The task of
this dissertation is to define how Cadmus’s paintings constituted a breach of social
decorum, and grasp why images which are not particularly shocking today were
explosive in the 1930s, while other themes, which seem provocative, passed without
contention.

Censorship of Sex: the Comstock Laws

Censorship in the United States has long been a controversial issue because of the
First Amendment to the Constitution, which protects “free speech.” Early efforts at
censorship, such as the Alien and Sedition Acts (1798-1802), focused on political
discourse. In the late 19th century, however, the terrain shifted primarily to issues of
public decency and sexual content. Anthony Comstock was the principal figure in this
development, a former U. S. Postal inspector. In 1873, Comstock founded the New York
Society for the Suppression of Vice and persuaded the U. S. Congress to pass what
became known as Comstock Laws. These laws prohibited the distribution of lewd and
obscene materials through the U.S. Postal Service. ² Defining what constituted lewd and
obscene was problematic from the inception of the federal Comstock Law. For example,
the Comstock Law specifically prohibited information regarding birth control, which
carried a prison sentence of six months and a $50 fine for each birth control pamphlet

² Heywood Broun and Margaret Leech, Anthony Comstock: Roundsman of the Lord (New York: The
Literary Guild of America, 1927), 132.
sent through federal mail. The Comstock Law was challenged frequently, and while it was not always supported by the courts, Comstock frequently bullied those he charged with obscenity and convicted them in the court of public opinion. He boasted that he was responsible for 4,000 arrests and 15 suicides, and that over the course of his career he brought about the destruction of 15 tons of books and 4 million pictures.

An example of the vitriolic extremes of what became known as “Comstockery” is the case of Edgar W. Jones, a prominent Massachusetts publisher of books who was arrested in 1877 for the distribution of a book titled *Marriage Guide*. When the manuscript came to his attention, he was wary about legal issues surrounding its distribution as it marginally addressed the subject of sex. To protect his business, he produced a copy of the book to the district attorney of the U.S. District Court in Boston for preview. The attorney found nothing lewd or obscene about the book, but suggested that a copy be taken to Anthony Comstock for approval. Jones acted on this advice, but after three attempts, received no response from Comstock. It was not until four years later, when the book became popular, that Jones was arrested, and his business shut down. While the federal judge agreed with Jones that the book was not obscene, Jones was still not permitted to ship his books through the U.S. Post Office, since Comstock was the acting United States Postal Inspector and there was no process in place for challenging his decisions. Under his instructions the United States Post Office refused to

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4 Hopkins, 36-37.
deliver any materials from Jones’s publishing company, which Comstock declared to be “fraudulent.”

The lengths to which the Comstock Laws were applied carried into the twentieth century. In February 1933, the *New York Times* reported that books containing rotogravure reproductions of Michelangelo’s Sistine Ceiling were confiscated by the United States customs authorities when they were deemed “obscene” because of the large number of nude figures. The books were ordered by the Weyhe Gallery in New York, but were intercepted at customs. Customs officials sent a letter of explanation to the Weyhe Gallery stating as follows:

> There is being detained at the Parcel Post Room . . . two packages, addressed to you, containing obscene photo books. “Ceiling Sistine Chapel,” filles Michael Angelo, the importation of which is held to be prohibited under the provisions of Section 305 of the tariff act. The package will therefore be seized and disposed of in due course as provided by law.

Fortunately, Assistant Solicitor Brewer of customs interceded on behalf of the Weyhe Gallery and ordered the books released to the gallery immediately. Nonetheless, it is apparent from this incident that the enforcement of Comstock Laws was so broad in scope that it was difficult to find images or printed word that did not fall under the constraints of “obscenity.”

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7 “Customs Censors Bar Vatican Art,” Michelangelo’s name was misspelled in the Customs letter. According to Section 305 of the Tariff Act of 1930, any “obscene” articles imported to the United States were to be seized by customs agents and disposed of according to customs procedures, according to Justice Laws, http://law.justia.com/us/cfr/title19/19-2.0.1.1.5.5.2.1.html (accessed August 7, 2009).
Interestingly, it was in the 1930s, right around the time of the controversy over Cadmus’s paintings, that a series of legal decisions were issued which successfully challenged the wholesale censorship of books and works of art, and proposed that the issue of artistic significance could over-ride narrowly defined criteria of the sort of description or behavior which was defined as “obscene.” The most famous of these cases was the dispute over the censorship of James Joyce’s novel *Ulysses* in the U.S. The novel was serialized in *The Little Review* from 1918 until 1921 when it caught the attention of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, and the magazine was taken to court. Comstock’s society was outraged at a passage in which Joyce describes one of his protagonists, Leopold Bloom, masturbating. The details of their objection were kept out of the court because the “description of which would be offensive to the court and improper to place them on the records.”8 Margaret C. Anderson and Jane Heap, the publishers of *The Little Review*, were both found guilty of distributing obscene material and ordered to each pay a $50 fine, and the book was henceforth banned in the U.S.9

The modest scale of the punishment in this instance provided a hint that the case for censorship was a relatively weak one, since it was hard to argue that Joyce’s writing sexually titillated or materially contributed to the corruption of the young. Over the next decade, scholars widely praised Joyce’s novel as a masterpiece of modern literature, and set the stage for a major challenge to the Comstock laws. In October 1933, Random House, Inc., one of the largest and most successful publishers in the United States, challenged the censorship of Joyce’s novel. Represented by Greenbaum, Wolff & Ernst,

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an argument was made with sufficient evidence to be heard in court. Their argument is comprised of the following six points:

I. The test of obscenity is a living standard, and *Ulysses* must be judged by the *mores* of the day.

II. *Ulysses* is not obscene as a matter of law.

III. *Ulysses* is a modern classic. The United States Government has officially acknowledged it as such. It cannot therefore be deemed obscene.

IV. The intrinsic features of *Ulysses*, as well as certain extrinsic facts, negate any implication of obscenity.

V. *Ulysses* has been generally accepted by the community, and hence cannot be held to be violative of the statute.

VI. *Ulysses* must be judged as a whole, and its general purpose and effect determined. On that basis it must be cleared.\(^{10}\)

The law firm argued that standards of decency are not fixed, but malleable, and that denying the public access to key cultural works based on brief passages of offensive material impeded progress.

Cadmus’s paintings were never the subject of a court case, and as a consequence, were never subject to the sort of carefully spelled out legal reasoning applied to Joyce’s novel. The debate about them was expressed through controversy in the newspapers and through largely behind-the-scenes bureaucratic maneuverings. Nonetheless, the case of Joyce’s book is interesting for providing insight into the social mores of the times and the

ways they were shifting. Several of the criteria applied are not particularly relevant to Cadmus’s paintings. Clearly the artistic fame garnered by the novel contributed largely to the outcome of the *Ulysses* trial, as spelled out explicitly in point III, and as echoed more obliquely in the following three points. The court protected it on its reputation as a great work of art. Relatively unknown in 1934, the year of his first censored painting, his artistic reputation was irrelevant in his defense. Points I and II, however, provided a framework for arguing against obscenity in his work, and interestingly, the popular controversy about Cadmus’s paintings, as reported in the newspapers, followed this general line of defense.

Perhaps most interesting is principle I, the argument that “the test of obscenity is a living standard”—in other words, obscenity is a relative term that needs to be looked at in a social context. Such an admission put the censor on the defensive, for it made it impossible to set clear-cut standards of what constitutes obscenity. Indeed, Greenbaum, Wolff & Ernst demonstrated that societal prudery of the 1910s and 1920s was breaking down by the 1930s. The scope of their evidence ran from more revealing contemporary dress, to comedic promiscuity in such films as Mae West’s *She Done Him Wrong* (1933), to the open discussions of adultery and rape described in detail by the press.11 As will be demonstrated throughout this dissertation, while Cadmus’s censored paintings violate the paradigms of earlier periods of American painting, similar forms of innuendo are found in the literature and films of the 1930s. Thus, their mode of expression is in line with other forms of artistic expression of their time period.

11 Greenbaum, Wolff & Ernst, 244-249.
On the second point, to argue that “Ulysses is not obscene as a matter of law,” Greenbaum, Wolff & Ernst traced the development of the legal definition of “obscenity” in the U.S. Initially material could be deemed obscene if it could “deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences” if such people had access to the material.12 This definition was not sustainable because it forced writers, painters, filmmakers, etc. to anticipate the actions of those most easily corrupted (children, innocents, and criminals). By the 1920s, the legal application of “obscene” took into account the motives of the author. If the primary intent of the material is to excite immorality, then it was considered “obscene.”13 People v. Wendling decided that the play Frankie and Johnnie, about a country boy drinking, gambling, and soliciting prostitutes in a brothel, was not obscene in 1932. The court decision read:

The coarse realism is its dramatic offense. Perhaps in an age of innocence the facts of life should be withheld from the young, but a theatre goer could not give his approval to the modern stage as “spokesman of the thought and sentiment” of Broadway (Halsey v. New York Society for Suppression of Vice, 234 N.Y. 1) and at the same time silence this rough and profane representation of scenes which repel rather than seduce.14

Because Frankie and Johnny did not idealize Johnny’s behavior or encourage the audience to parrot his actions, the courts determined its immorality reinforced traditional American values. As will be argued throughout this dissertation, Cadmus’s figural

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12 Greenbaum, Wolff & Ernst, 249. Here, the law firm cited the 1868 British case of Regina v. Hicklin, L.R. 3 Q.B. 360.
13 Greenbaum, Wolff & Ernst, 250. Here, the law firm cites the case of People v. Muller, 96 N.Y. 408, 411.
14 People v. Wendling quoted in Greenbaum, Wolff & Ernst, 252.
compositions constructed a social critique, and were not intended to seduce the viewer by modeling appropriate behavior, and therefore would not be considered “obscene.”

The United States v. One Book Entitled *Ulysses* went on to be heard by Federal Judge John M. Woolsey, who determined that the book was not lewd or obscene. His decision was then challenged in the United States Court of Appeals. In a two-to-one decision, the appellate court agreed with Woolsey. Judge Learned Hand stated:

> It may be that ‘Ulysses’ will not last as a substantial contribution to literature, and it is certainly easy to believe that in spite of Joyce’s laudators immortals will still reign. . . Art certainly cannot advance under compulsion to the traditional forms, and nothing in such a field is more stifling to progress than limitation of the right to experiment with a new technique.\(^\text{15}\)

Judge Hand’s statement is indicative of the position many intellectuals took with regards to censorship—that even though he personally disliked the text, it was more productive to encourage progress than to punish those who attempt it. The final liberation of *Ulysses* came just months after the suppression of *The Fleet’s In!*, and the court proceedings were concurrent with the Cadmus scandal.

**Censorship of Hate Speech: Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation***

While the trial over Joyce’s *Ulysses* moved attitudes in a more liberal direction, throughout the late 19\(^{\text{th}}\) and early 20\(^{\text{th}}\) century, censorship of representations of nudity and sex was surprisingly successful, and in the 1930s this area remained a hotly contested legal battleground. By contrast, attempts to censor hate speech and racial stereotypes,\(^{\text{15}}\)

\(^{\text{15}}\) “Ulysses is Upheld by Appeals Court,” *New York Times* (August 8, 1934).
even when there was a good argument that they might cause violence, were far less successful, no doubt because they impinged on political issues, and seemed to impinge on “free speech.”

The most striking case of this sort was the attempt in 1915 to censor D. W. Griffith’s film, *Birth of a Nation*. Originally titled *The Clansman*, Griffith portrayed the humiliating defeat of the old South by the Union Army—a defeat which (according to Griffith’s fantasy version of history) led to a period of rampant lawlessness, in which white women were attacked by animal-like black men. To counteract this threat, the defeated southerners founded the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). In the final sequence of the film, heroic clan riders disperse a mob of lawless blacks. Notably, Griffith reinforced his message with a series of innovative film techniques. It was the first feature film of such length—running nearly three hours at a time when most films were less than an hour—it made use of what is now known as “classic cutting,” in which long distant and close-up shots were interspersed in an abrupt fashion with an accelerating rhythm to create an effect of dramatic suspense. Indeed, modern scholars have been torn in their judgments about the film, at once hailing it as an artistic masterpiece, which introduced modern movie techniques, and deploring its racist political message.16

Prior to its opening, the National Board of Censorship of Motion Pictures deemed the film acceptable for release. However, when challenged by May Childs Nerney of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the board decided that the film would need further editing before it could be recommended for wide release.

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However, Nerney became disheartened when she discovered that the remaining edits were very minor and did not fully satisfy the NAACP.

Unable to ban the film nationally, the NAACP focused its attention regionally. It was successful in getting the film banned in West Virginia (1925) and twice in Ohio (1916 and 1925) and prohibiting children under 10 from seeing the film in Chicago (1917). However, the NAACP failed to get the film banned in New York, its first big battle. According to historian Melvyn Stokes, the fight could not be won because it was fought primarily by a minority of whites in defense of black rights, and he claims that the black population of New York reacted to the film with “utter indifference.” The argument for suppression was that the film would likely incite racial violence, but in New York, Boston, Chicago, and elsewhere, theaters increased security and police ensured public safety resulting in very few violent outbursts with the exception of eggs thrown at the screen in a handful of incidents. Notably, in the years following the showing of *Birth of a Nation* there were large numbers of lynchings and incidents of violence against African Americans, particularly in the deep South, and the Ku Klux Klan rose to a point of enormous political influence in the 1920s, even making inroads into northern states—at one point largely ruling the state of Indiana.

Nonetheless, it would be hard to establish that these developments were a direct result of the film. Indeed, even many liberals opposed the notion that the film should be

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17 Stokes, 134-135.
19 Stokes, 140.
20 see Stokes, Chapter 6, “Fighting a Vicious Film,” 129-170.
21 Ibid.
censored. As William L. Chenery of Chicago’s *Record Herald* nicely stated, “Liberals are torn between two desires. They hate injustice to the negro and they hate a bureaucratic control of thought.”22 What’s more, demeaning racial stereotypes, unlike sexually explicit materials, did not fit into any existing legal definition of the “obscene.”

**Censorship of Political Ideology: Diego Rivera**

Political opinion is an area where freedom of speech has generally been strongly protected. In the case of painting, however, freedom of speech has often conflicted with the wishes of a patron. In such instances, at least in the United States, the rights of ownership and private property, that is, the rights of the person or entity commissioning the painting, have generally over-ridden the rights of artists to express their views. Cadmus’s first censored painting, *The Fleet’s In!*, was produced on the heels of probably the most celebrated case of this sort of the 1930s, the destruction of Diego Rivera’s now infamous mural, *Man at the Crossroads with Hope and High Vision to the Choosing of a New and Better Future* (fig. 1.1), which he had executed for Rockefeller Center in New York. Based on the Mexican muralist’s international acclaim, and the precedent set by Mexico’s support of a public art program, Nelson A. Rockefeller proposed that Rivera paint a mural for the new Rockefeller Center complex in New York City. In 1933, Rockefeller provided Rivera with the subject matter, and clarified his vision for the mural as follows:

> Our theme is New Frontiers . . . the development of civilization is no longer lateral; it is inward and upward. It is the cultivation of man’s soul and mind, the

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22 William L. Chenery quoted in Stokes, 133.
coming into a fuller comprehension of the meaning and mystery of life. For the development of the paintings in this hallway, these frontiers are—(1) Man’s New Relation to Matter . . . and (2) Man’s New Relation to Man. That is man’s new and more complete understanding of the Sermon on the Mount.\textsuperscript{23}

However, Rockefeller was enraged when he learned through the press that Rivera had included a portrait of Vladimir Lenin, the Soviet leader of the October Revolution. The figure of Lenin is poised as the guide for the innovative, hard working laborer at the controls of a large machine. Rockefeller immediately contacted Rivera in a conciliatory manner stating:

\begin{quote}
The piece is beautifully painted, but it seems to me that his [Lenin’s] portrait, appearing in this mural, might very easily seriously offend a great many people. If it were in a private house it would be one thing, but this mural is in a public building and the situation is therefore quite different. As much as I dislike to do so, I am afraid we must ask you to substitute the face of some unknown man where Lenin’s face now appears.

You know how enthusiastic I am about the work which you have been doing and that to date we have in no way restricted you in either subject or treatment. I am sure you will understand our feeling in this situation and we will greatly appreciate your making the suggested substitution.\textsuperscript{24}
\end{quote}


Out of a commitment to the Communist Party, Rivera refused to give in to the demands of Rockefeller, a pillar of capitalism. Rivera instead suggested a compromise in which the artist would add in the former President Abraham Lincoln opposite the Soviet leader. But he made it clear that removing Lenin was not an option.25 Unwilling to allow Lenin to remain, Rockefeller paid Rivera the remainder of the $21,000 per their contract, and escorted the painter away without completing the project. Months later, Rockefeller sent workers in to destroy the painting with jackhammers.

Rivera was surprised to learn that in the 1930s, the American legal system did not defend the rights of authorship, and as Rockefeller had paid for the painting in full, the artist had no rights to its completion, destruction, or exhibition.26 Because Rivera had no legal recourse, he decided to take his complaint to the people, and have the Rockefellers tried in the court of public opinion. By May 18 (just over one week after his dismissal), the artist organized a protest outside the Rockefeller residence followed by another at the John Reed Club, addressed the Art Students League, held a meeting in Columbus Circle, and issued a radio address in which he is quoted as stating: “even a millionaire should know that there are some things that cannot be bought and sold.”27 Nearly fifty artists and critics, including John Sloan, Rockwell Kent, Thomas Craven, and Lewis Mumford, signed a letter to John D. Rockefeller, Jr. asking that he grant Rivera permission to finish the mural. Their letter was in defense of artist’s rights to fulfill their contracts and have their work completed according to their artistic vision.28 Protests were resumed in

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25 “Rockefellers Ban Lenin in RCA Mural and Dismiss Rivera.”
26 Hermer, 255.
February 1934 when the Rockefellers tore down the mural painted by Rivera, thereby destroying the “red” image. Artists went as far as to boycott an exhibition that was to be held at the Radio City Music Hall that winter.²⁹

Rivera set the stage for media involvement in the censorship of American paintings, and contested the lack of rights for artists just weeks before Paul Cadmus took center stage when the navy censored his painting, *The Fleet's In!*. Artists, critics, journalists, and the American public had already been mobilized against artistic censorship. However, Cadmus’s painting was not the victim of anti-communist sentiments in the U.S., but moral outrage at the behavior of his figures.

**Censorship and The New Deal Mural Program**

The issue of censorship again came to the fore with the creation of the New Deal Art programs, of which there were several. Some were designed to provide a decent wage to out-of-work artists, others to provide murals in public buildings, and still others to enlist artists and photographers to provide support to already existing programs for agricultural relief, or similar causes. All these programs were under constant attack from conservative members of congress, and they were eventually all terminated due to political pressure. During the brief life of these programs, government bureaucrats faced a difficult balancing act. Taxpayers objected to having their tax dollars spent on work that portrayed American life (or their local community) unflatteringly or in a politically subversive manner. Indeed, this issue of appropriate subject matter often drifted over into concerns of style, since much of the public thought that modern and abstract art was

²⁹ “Rivera RCA Mural is Cut from Wall,” *New York Times* (February 13, 1934).
nonsense and a waste of public funds. Artists and critics, on the other hand, did not wish to be limited to images that met the approval of popular public opinion. Moreover, Diego Rivera had shown that stirring up controversy could bring on considerable publicity. As a consequence, some artists deliberately engineered controversies as a way of boosting their fame and bringing attention to political causes that they favored.

Under the Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP), artists often found themselves committed to painting an image far from home. As a result, they often failed to fully research the communities for which they were painting, or to understand which issues of representation would produce negative reactions. Murals produced under this program often stirred up local controversy.

A case in point is Joseph Hirsch’s mural, *Justice as Protector and Avenger* (fig. 1.2), which was painted for the courthouse of Aiken, South Carolina. In his panel, he depicted a dark skinned personification of Justice with an idyllic rural community to the left which she protects, and vigilantes on her right whom she avenges. The people of Aiken were angered in 1938 that a mural, which they knew nothing about, suddenly appeared at the high price of $2,200. Media reports indicate that the dark skin of Justice was of particular concern as many members of the community saw her as a “mulatto,” and believed that the northern painter had intended to criticize the race relations of the south with his mural.\(^\text{30}\) The debate between Washington and Aiken lasted nearly two years as the federal bureaucrats involved the NAACP who dismissed the complaints of

the southern town as racist and therefore “a new low in judicial conduct.” However, Judge Myers of Aiken maintained that he objected to the bureaucracy’s failure to consult the local community. In January 1940, TRAP issued its final verdict in the case—the mural would stay, but they would provide a curtain to cover it from public view.

Hirsch does not seem to have deliberately provoked his audience. But some artists very consciously stirred up controversy to publicize political or social causes. Thus, for example, Rockwell Kent famously antagonized the TRAP with his mural *Delivering Mail in the Tropics* in which the artist placed a letter in the hands of a Puerto Rican islander. The letter was written in an obscure Kuskokwin Eskimo dialect, and as a result, federal bureaucrats let it pass un-deciphered. Shortly after the mural was unveiled, however, the message was translated by the noted arctic explorer, Vilhjalmur Stefansson, who revealed that it declared: “To the people of Puerto Rico, our friends! Go ahead. Let us change chiefs. That alone can make us equal and free.”

Kent was clearly critical of what he perceived to be U.S. oppression of the indigenous peoples of what were then the Alaskan and Puerto Rican territories. Initially, Kent and TRAP reached a compromise in which the artist would replace the text in the letter with the statement: “May you persevere and win that freedom and equality in which lies the promise of happiness.” However, when it was insisted that Kent further add the motto: “To commemorate the far-flung front of the United States Postal Service,” the artist changed his mind. He instead granted permission for the letter to be painted over

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31 Walter White of the NAACP quoted in Marling, 69.
32 Marling, 71.
33 Vilhjalmur Stefansson’s interpretation quoted in Marling, 141.
leaving it blank in the final mural.\textsuperscript{34} It is clear from this series of events that Kent saw the potential offered by scandal in publicizing his political ideology. The mural would have a limited audience, but the resulting scandal was transcontinental and spanned Puerto Rico to Alaska, enabling Kent’s subversive message to be read by many more people than could have interpreted it themselves before the mural.

Perhaps because of the scandals resulting from the TRAP and the earlier Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), the Works Progress Administration (WPA) took precautionary measures to prevent such controversies from happening. An example of the means by which the WPA sought to avert scandal is \textit{Pocahontas and John Smith}, by Paul Cadmus (fig. 1.3). In 1937, Cadmus and Jared French were commissioned to paint murals for adjoining walls of the Parcel Post Building in Richmond, Virginia. The subject matter for the murals was to be scenes from Virginia’s history. Cadmus selected a popular story in which John Smith, a renowned soldier, was captured by the Indian chief Powatan, sentenced to death, and then dramatically rescued from death by Pocahontas, Powatan’s daughter.

As usual, Cadmus’s painting was provocative. It depicts muscular, youthful Native Americans who are nearly nude, and some of these figures are quite sexually suggestive, particularly a male figure with a fox-tailed skin covering his genitals. While nominally the fox-head conceals the genitals, in actual fact it rather obscenely draws attention to them.

\textsuperscript{34} Marling, 184.
Edward Bruce of the WPA wrote to Cadmus requesting that he change the fox head to a simple loincloth. According to Philip Eliason, Cadmus refused. 35 Karal Ann Marling, who examined the correspondence between Bruce, Edward Rowan, and Cadmus, has argued that the artist was antagonistic towards the WPA administrators in his refusal. 36 But in fact, it appears that Cadmus did eventually respond to criticism. In the finished painting, the pelt in question is neither a fox tail nor a simple loin cloth—it is a fox-headed skin.

To avoid unanticipated scandal, the WPA had written a contract that gave them power to make changes at various points in the working process. The contract for the Pocahontas mural required Cadmus to produce a preliminary design, a full scale cartoon, and photographs of the painting when half finished. 37 Approval to move forward was required at each juncture. Obviously this system was intended to keep Cadmus from embarrassing the program by catching any potential problems at an early stage. Since Cadmus was already synonymous with scandal, the administrators were probably particularly cautious.

The preliminary sketch was to be in full color, 2 inches to the foot, and it was to be revised and edited until it satisfied G.J. Peoples, Director of Procurement. 38 The full scale cartoon and the photos half way to completion were required to ensure that the artist did not deviate far from the preliminary sketch. The contract further indicates that the

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35 Eliasoph, “Paul Cadmus: Life and Work,” 100.
36 Marling, 288.
37 “Contract between The United States of America and Jared French, artist,” Archives of American Art, Reel 2812, Jared French Papers, 1936-37. Cadmus’s contract could not be located, but this contract with French is for the Parcel Post Building in Richmond. Cadmus signed French’s contract as a witness, and it is therefore reasonable to conclude that Cadmus’s contract would have the same instructions.
38 Jared French Parcel Post Building contract, 1937.
total $590 would be paid to the artist in three stages: $200 when the preliminary sketch was approved, $190 when the mural was half completed and the photos were approved, and the final $200 when the finished mural satisfied the Director of Procurement.39

The 1937 dates of the letters cited by Marling and Philip Eliasoph, as opposed to the 1938 date of the completed painting, suggest that the debate over the fox skin took place in the preliminary stages spelled out in the contract. As a result, the WPA did not censor a finished painting by Cadmus—they simply fulfilled their obligation to exercise quality control, as spelled out in the legal document signed by the artist.

I should note that while it touches on some of the issues I wish to explore, *Pocahontas and John Smith* will receive only cursory attention in this dissertation: in part because it was not censored, and in part because it was an essentially different sort of painting than the ones discussed here—an academic history painting as opposed to a scene of modern life.40 Even in the U.S. there was greater tolerance for nudity in academic history painting than in scenes of contemporary life in New York.

**Paul Cadmus and Other Painters of the American Scene:**

One of the most interesting aspects of these controversies is that they often shed light on the social mores of the 1930s, including issues of gender and social class that are often not openly discussed. Indeed, many of the major artists of the 1930s, such as Cadmus, deliberately challenged the social norms of their time. Only recently, however, has this fact been noted, since for years artists such as Cadmus were described as

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40 Eliasoph, “Paul Cadmus: Life and Work,” 101. Eliasoph states: “Cadmus was dissatisfied with the mural project and considered it one of the most silly enterprises of his painting career.”
conservative—a label that was applied broadly and inaccurately with reference not only to their artistic style but to their political and social views. Perhaps the key figure in establishing this dismissive approach was Clement Greenberg, who in his influential 1939 essay, “Avant-garde and Kitsch,” argued that modernist aesthetics brought about cultural progress, and labeled representational painting kitsch, which he argued was the official culture of fascist regimes.\footnote{Clement Greenberg, “Avant-garde and Kitsch,” Partisan Review (Fall 1939), 34-49, reprinted in Art in Theory, 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), 529-541.} Despite Cadmus’s modernist subject matter, Greenberg and his followers considered the aesthetics outdated and hindering progress in the U.S.

Somewhat perversely, the murals of the WPA were later categorized with the official, representational state sponsored art of the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, and with the persecution of the avant-garde that took place in those countries. For some sixty years, this dismissive view dominated writing on the subject. Only in the past twenty years have scholars have begun to re-examine the work produced in this decade and to argue against the conservatism so often attributed to it after Greenberg.\footnote{For more information on this development, see James M. Dennis, Renegade Regionalists: The Modern Independence of Grant Wood, Thomas Hart Benton, and John Steuart Curry (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), Wanda Corn, “Coming of Age: Historical Scholarship in American Art,” The Art Bulletin (June 1988), 188-207, Cécile Whiting, Antifascism in American Art (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), and Erika Doss, Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991).} In fact, many of the major representational artists of the 1930s were generally leftist in their political views, although by no means unified in their political viewpoint. In fact, American painting of the 1930s has quite a different character than the art of Russia or Germany.
There is much less consistency of either artistic style or political ideology, and much of the work contains a strong undercurrent of social criticism.

Cadmus’s paintings stand out as somewhat different from that of the other major American artists of the 1930s in their representation of the working class, women, and in liquor and prohibition issues prohibition. A brief glimpse at the work of other major figures of the 1930s, such as Thomas Hart Benton, Reginald Marsh, and Ben Shahn, provides a context for understanding what was unusual about Cadmus’s approach.

The Depiction of the Working Class:

One of the most striking features of American painting of the 1930s is its frequent emphasis on working class subject matter. Notably, it was often a challenge to do so in a way which was sensitive to the social issues of the period. A fundamental dilemma for artists interested in social justice was the question of how to portray the poor. Should proletarian workers be presented as heroic? To show them in this way seemed to deny that poverty existed, or that its consequences were demeaning. On the other hand, to portray the poor as tasteless and degraded seemed to suggest that they were inherently degraded, and unworthy of attempts at social improvement or reform.

Thomas Hart Benton tended to picture the American worker as heroic. In Benton’s now famous 1930 “America Today” murals for the New School for Social Research in New York, seven of the nine panels focus on the diligence and progress of the American worker, both urban and rural. For example, the City Building panel (fig. 1.4) depicts strong, muscular bodies made up of a system of counter-forces as the men
push, pull, and lift drills and levers in the construction of a skyscraper. The progress resulting from America’s workmen is indicated in the background where a completed skyscraper is juxtaposed with the steel armature of a neighboring structure. Henry Adams has rightly indicated that the mural is unusual in that social progress is also present as two black men work alongside white workers as equals.43

By contrast, in portraying urban amusements, Benton tended to indulge in satire. Two panels of “America Today” focus on the entertainment found in American cities, and here Benton focuses on the vulgarity and chaos of the American spectacle: religious revivalists jostle strippers, boxers, circus performers and bootleggers. In many instances, the fashionable attire of Benton’s recreational figures suggests that they are members of the bourgeoisie, as opposed to the industrious working class figures juxtaposed on the adjoining walls. Likewise, the black figures are removed from the recreational panels, in which white men and women attend boxing matches, ride the subway, dance and drink.

Benton’s caustic and satirical view of city amusements was shared by Reginald Marsh in scenes of shoppers, burlesque halls, sideshows, and Coney Island Park. But Marsh’s view is bleaker, for Marsh’s figures are more passive, less energetic, and nearly overpowered by the overwhelming presence of advertising that surrounds them. In paintings such as Twenty Cent Movie, the picture surface is littered with posters, signs, and ads that assault and overwhelm the viewer.

Unlike Benton, however, Marsh did not portray the American poor as heroic workers. Instead, he focused on the down-and-out, figures who are victims of the depression, homeless, hungry, and jobless. East Tenth Street Jungle of 1934 (fig. 1.5)

depicts an alley taken over by the homeless. The all male space is constructed to suggest that the men have spent the night in this alley, and are awakening to start their day. These men are depicted old, dirty, and emaciated. Nonetheless, there is a sense of community as they wash, dress, chat, and heat a bucket of water. It is a sympathetic and humane view of those most affected by the depression.

Marsh also painted images of breadlines, such as *Holy Name Mission* of 1931 (fig. 1.6). Again, he constructed an all male space, but in this painting, the viewer is not permitted to see the front or the end of the breadline. As a result it appears to continue indefinitely in both directions, suggesting an unimaginable number of men waiting for food. The crowd of men is shown orderly, patiently awaiting their turn. However, the line has formed outside of a laundromat and barber shop. Neither of which are the men capable of patronizing, as they cannot even afford food. The hungry men essentially block the entrances to these business establishments. In addition to empathetically depicting the social reality of the poor, Marsh has depicted the effects of poverty on American capitalism as the poor literally preclude entrance to the businesses. Marsh has effectively documented the decline of consumerism in the Depression Era.

As a social realist, Ben Shahn’s images are more overtly political than those of his Regionalist and Fourteenth Street contemporaries. He painted two significant series of images in the early part of the decade. The first of which is the racially biased trial of working class immigrants Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, who were put to death.
for a crime most believe they did not commit. The second is the imprisonment of San Francisco labor organizer, Tom Mooney. Mooney and another labor organizer were convicted of a bombing in San Francisco under evidence that was apparently perjured. Many believed that the wrongful conviction was the result of efforts to prevent organized labor in the U.S.

Interestingly, however, Shahn avoided the sort of heroic muscular figures we find in Benton’s paintings. For example, in Shahn’s painting *Tom’s Mother, Tom, and Tom’s Wife* of 1932 (fig. 1.7), Frances K. Pohl has argued that the artist chose to focus on the ordinariness of Mooney and his family instead of depicting an exaggerated hero of the labor industry. The imprisoned Mooney is depicted between the two women in his life. All three are modestly dressed, without idealized faces. The background to this painting is a large, empty, mottled wall, into which the ordinary figures seem to disappear, separated by only a few simple contour lines.

Later in the decade, Shahn traveled across the U.S. with a camera, and his paintings became less political, focusing more on an honest depiction of American life. Like the paintings of Mooney, simplicity dominates these paintings of the late 1930s. For example, in *Handball* of 1939 (fig. 1.8), the artist framed six men against a large white wall modestly framed by an urban setting. Four of the men are painted as active participants, while two others act as spectators. The humbly dressed men are dwarfed by

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44 For further information about this case and Shahn’s painted series of it, see Alejandro Anreus, ed., *Ben Shahn and the Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti* (Jersey City: Jersey City Museum and Rutgers University Press, 2001).
46 Pohl, 46–48. After 23 years of imprisonment, Mooney and Warren K. Billings were exonerated of the 1916 murder charges.
47 Pohl, 16.
the handball wall and the tenement building behind it. Cadmus’s American figures depicted in leisure activities are garish caricatures next to Shahn’s restrained simplicity.

For all their differences, however, Benton, Marsh and Shahn all showed a concern for social justice: Benton by heroicising his workers, Marsh by empathetically portraying their degradation, Shahn by focusing on an ordinariness of radicals such as Mooney, in a way that belied the accusations of those who sought to demonize him. What is striking about Cadmus’s work, on the other hand, is its apparent lack of interest in issues of social reform. They simply enact a human comedy, in which the viewer observes with sarcastic humor. As will be argued in this dissertation, social critique is present in Cadmus’s paintings, but is manifest in a less explicit manner than that of his contemporaries.

The Depiction of Women and Sexuality

A major innovation of American art of the 1930s was the introduction of women who play an overtly sexual role, similar to that played by figures like Mae West in Hollywood movies. A new subject of this period is the dance hall girl and burlesque performer. While men greatly outnumber women in Benton’s murals, he seems to have been the pioneer in introducing this theme. In two panels of his *Arts of the City* mural for the Whitney Museum of American Art library (fig. 1.9), Benton depicted dancing women, scantily clad, being ogled and kissed by eager male companions. In one panel, women compete in a beauty pageant wearing swimsuits on stage as a heavyset man in a suit with top hat in hand leans in to get a closer view of their bodies. In the other panel, a woman in a revealing slip applies make-up in preparation for her burlesque performance.
In this same panel, another woman is shown seated and putting on a shoe. The pose of this figure nearly reveals her genitals as she raises her leg, and reveals her naked thigh above her stocking. Benton’s urban women are sexually on display in exchange for monetary gain, but certainly not in search for sexual fulfillment. In the late 1930s, Benton stirred up controversy by painting nudes, giving them a modern piquancy by painting familiar stories such as Susanna and the Elders and Persephone in an up-to-date American setting. His frank presentation of the pubic hair on Susanna stirred up particular controversy. 48

Following the model provided by Benton, Reginald Marsh produced a number of well-known paintings of burlesque dancers, such as Star Burlesque of 1933 (fig. 1.10), which portray naked or nearly naked women placing their bodies on display for the male spectator. The dancer in Star Burlesque is depicted bare breasted with ruffles decorating her shoulders and her legs from the knees down. Her only covering is an undergarment that barely conceals her genitals. Many of these paintings, however, seem to focus not so much on the dancer as on the flabby, dejected men watching the performance, who often seem flaccid and impotent in comparison with the female figure.

In fact, even when representing women in the setting of daily life, as pedestrians, shoppers, and beachgoers, Marsh seems to view them as burlesque dancers—powerful sex objects surrounded by ogling men. Some feminist writers, such as Ellen Wiley Todd, find Marsh’s “visual and sexual objectification of women extreme” and argue that he

48 Adams, 284-293.
portrayed a gendered power relationship, with which they feel “discomfort.” But interestingly, Marsh’s women are always unattainable. A perfect example of Marsh’s objectifying gaze is his 1932 painting, *Hudson Bay Fur Company* (fig. 1.11) in which the storefront window is filled with women modeling clothing. In the center of the window is a buxom blonde resembling Mae West. This blonde woman opens her coat, presumably to show the lining, but the viewer’s attention is instead drawn to her breasts, and enticed by the removal of clothing. She quietly smiles at passersby with lowered eyelids in a seductive manner. While Marsh’s constructed image suggests the erotic female body, his painted women are unattainable in that a pane of glass would separate a spectator on Fourteenth Street from the siren on the other side.

Notably, such powerfully sexual women generally do not appear in the work of social realists, like Shahn, who rarely address the subject of sex in their paintings. Shahn painted women as opponents to social injustice as in his 1932-33 painting *Apotheosis* (fig. 1.12) in which Tom Mooney’s mother looms tall over lawyers and crowds proudly wearing a sash that reads: “My Son Is Innocent.” She is depicted in advanced age, and dressed as such in a full-length brown coat, hat, and glasses. She is stoically presented frontally twice in the painting. In both instances her scale is considerably larger than that of the other figures. The title of the painting suggests her strength and virtue in opposing the injustice placed upon her son. The strength of motherhood has made Mrs. Mooney superhuman—she is proud, righteous, and protective.

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It is not entirely clear why Cadmus’s women were singled out for attack and censorship when Benton’s almost equally outrageous presentation of voluptuous women passed by without challenge, except for very general criticisms of the “vulgarity” of his work, and Marsh’s strippers were considered acceptable. To some extent this may simply have to do with context. Benton’s paintings, for example, were often controversial for political reasons, and these controversies were so intense that the sexual element of his images seems to have been overlooked. However, the sexualized women of Benton and Marsh fit into well-defined marginal social roles: dancer, cocktail hostess, or stripper. Cadmus’s women, however, seem to defy traditional categories—or to slip into an unmentionable category, that of prostitute. Amusingly, one of the paintings by Cadmus that was censored, *Main Street*, simply showed a woman in shorts. Compared to the naked strippers of Marsh’s burlesque scenes, this seems not very shocking today, but Marsh’s strippers were playing a well-defined social role, albeit a dubious one, whereas Cadmus’s obviously affluent suburban woman was challenging the mores of her social class. What’s more, perhaps at an unconscious level, Cadmus portrayed women somewhat differently than his contemporaries. He did not paint women from what Laura Mulvey describes as the “scopophilic gaze,” in which the presumably male viewer (or artist) objectifies the female body in the image.\(^{50}\) As a result Cadmus’s female figures are unlike those painted by other artists of his generation.

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Another new theme of the 1930s was that of drinking and bootlegging, and here also Benton was an innovator. His 1928 painting *Bootleggers* was the first large-scale American painting to address these issues by depicting the corruption that results from smuggling alcohol. His 1932 *Arts of the City* juxtaposes a woman shaking drinks with a group of gangsters, one of which holds a handgun. A bottle of liquor sits on the bar in front of the man with the handgun. All of the figures are fashionably dressed, and perpetuate the sexy and dangerous Hollywood image of alcohol. Benton also created rural images that feature alcohol. In these, alcohol is singled out as a valuable commodity—often with hints about its dangerous social consequences. Thus, for example, in Benton’s 1935-36 *Pioneer Days and Early Settlers*, part of his great mural, *A Social History of Missouri* (fig. 1.13), the artist painted a frontiersman exchanging whiskey for pelts with a Native American. Of course, the frontiersman offers the “savage” a mere cup of whiskey, retaining the jug in his unreachable hand. In this context, alcohol has become indicative of racial power dynamics. The white frontiersman holds the power, and offers the Native American a taste of that power. The value of the pelt as opposed to the value of the cup of whiskey is inequitable to the spectator. In addition to stressing the commercial deviousness of the transaction, Benton clearly also intended to suggest the devastating impact of alcohol on Native American communities.

In the 1930s, alcohol only appears in the paintings by Marsh as background props. In one of his burlesque paintings, *Down at Jim Kelly’s* of 1936 (fig. 1.14), the artist painted a group of men smoking at a bar as a dancing girl stands before them wearing
only a feather boa and high heels. These figures dominate the scene, but behind the men, a waiter is depicted carrying a tray with a bottle of liquor and two brandy snifters. It is important that in Marsh’s paintings of the unemployed, no bottles are depicted, and alcohol does not even appear in the advertising in the background. He has carefully constructed his images so as to not suggest that the unemployment of men during the Depression was the consequence of drink. Alcohol is also absent in his paintings of shoppers and Coney Island, only appearing as a prop in the burlesque paintings.

Shahn’s only reference to alcohol in his 1930s paintings dealt directly with the politics of repealing the eighteenth amendment. He painted eight panels on the subject of Prohibition for the PWAP. The panels depict bootleggers, their closed establishments, and the destruction of their bootlegged alcohol. Pohl indicates two panels that demonstrate Shahn’s attempt at neutrality on the subject, *Parade for Repeal* and *Women’s Christian Temperance Union Parade*, both of 1934 (fig. 1.15). *Parade for Repeal* depicts a gathering of all men, bearing signs calling for the repeal of the eighteenth amendment. Its companion panel depicts an all female gathering with a sign that reads: “Women’s Christian Temperance Union, For God, For Home, For Native Land.” As Pohl indicates, the issue was not divided so strictly down gendered lines, but the primary spokespersons for each side off the issue were certainly divided as such.51

Cadmus thus set a precedent for paintings in which figures appear intoxicated by alcohol, or in which empty liquor bottles litter the scene. With the exception of *Shore Leave* (fig.1.16), Cadmus’s paintings of this type were produced just as the prohibition era came to an end. The eighteenth amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which banned alcohol.

51 Pohl, 50-52.
the manufacture and distribution of alcohol, was overturned by the twenty-third amendment on December 5, 1933. What was unusual about Cadmus’s work, however, is the way he combined the theme of alcohol with sexual double-entendre. Cadmus’s first painting to tackle this subject, for example, Shore Leave of 1933 depicts drunken sailors cavorting with flirtatious women--much like The Fleet’s In! of the following year.

Notably, Cadmus painted a reclining sailor with a liquor bottle pointed at his anus.52 The empty bottle makes a phallic shape suggestive of anal intercourse, and Cadmus seems to suggest that the social lubrication provided by the alcoholic contents of the bottle will enable promiscuous sex to take place. Cadmus has therefore aligned alcohol with sex, gender and social class to subvert traditional representations. Shore Leave could easily be read through traditional satire as a warning against the effects of alcohol. However, this dissertation will demonstrate that such a reading is simplistic.

CHAPTER II

HISTORIOGRAPHY OF PAUL CAMUS: THE GAY SATIRIST

Cadmus attracted a great deal of attention during the 1930s. Much of this was based on the controversy surrounding the censorship of *The Fleet’s In!*, after it was condemned as immoral by an Admiral and removed from an exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, but his work was also widely featured in surveys of American art, and even pictured in *The Encyclopedia Britannica*. Then, in the 1940s, as artistic tastes changed, and abstract painting gained dominance, Cadmus virtually disappeared from public discourse. There was only perfunctory criticism, and near silence about his work from 1944 until 1978, when scholarly interest in Cadmus was renewed. The revival of Cadmus’s work coincided with the advent of gay studies as a form of academic discourse. While Cadmus rarely openly discussed his sexuality, he quietly lived for decades with his male partner and homosexual themes form a leitmotif of his work beginning in the 1930s.

For the past thirty years, the lens of the artist’s sexual difference has been emphasized as a model for postmodernism. Yet a study of contemporary writing on Paul Camus reveals that while contemporary scholars focus, almost exclusively, on the artist’s homosexuality, this facet of his work was not openly addressed in the 1930s. Instead, Cadmus’s contemporary critics attempted to locate his work in the longstanding tradition of satire, although their criticism indicates that they felt that in some fashion he violated the unstated rules of decorum for satire in his paintings. Despite the presence of gay
figures in Cadmus’s paintings, it is interesting that what concerned viewers of the 1930s
was not homosexuality, per se, but other issues of gender identity, social class and race,
are rarely mentioned in recent scholarship. Nor have scholars examined his censored
paintings as a group—a logical device for constructing a comprehensive understanding of
why these paintings were so controversial in the 1930s.

1930s: Repulsive Subjects and Garish Color

When Cadmus first gained attention from the media, he was characterized as a
satirist—a term which was used with some ambivalence, since it implied a lack of
sympathy with his subjects. The earliest substantial critical writing on Cadmus primarily
coincided with his first solo exhibition in 1937 at the Midtown Galleries in New York. It
was at this time that Life magazine, the most significant popular magazine of its time,
published a four page article on the artist.53 The article was published with full color
illustrations, which was a rarity in 1937 when few articles were accompanied by color
images. Clearly, Cadmus was an artist of prominence and worth the added expense of
color printing. The article was published to promote the aforementioned exhibition which
opened days after the article on March 29th. The exhibition was extremely successful as
the gallery boasted over 7,000 visitors by May 5th.54

53 “Paul Cadmus of Navy Fame has his First Art Show,” Life (22 March 1937), 44-47. The article is
illustrated by a black-and-white photograph of The Fleet’s In! (1934), a black and white photo of a
childhood drawing by Cadmus, a photo of the artist standing before Greenwich Village Cafeteria, and full
color reproductions of Main Street (1936), Coney Island 1934), Puerto de Andraitx: Mallorca (1932),
YMCA Locker Room (1933), and Gilding the Acrobats (1935). This image list is significant because it
includes three of the artist’s censored paintings and two of the artist’s paintings with the greatest emphasis
on the male nude body on display, as will be discussed later.
The brief text of the *Life* article largely recounts the events of *The Fleet’s In!* censorship, but provides the context in which Cadmus’s paintings were read in the 1930s. There are two points made in the article that the artist’s critics repeated throughout the 1930s. The unknown author stated that he “keeps his color harsh and high-pitched to reflect the vulgarity of life as he sees it.”\(^55\) This analysis of color in Cadmus’s paintings offers an explanation for the garish color schemes devised by Cadmus. Later critics applauded his draftsmanship, but were less forgiving of his color. “Though people are his favorite subjects, he finds people in the mass repulsive. He is, therefore, a satirist.”\(^56\) The term “repulsive” indicates that the unknown author believed Cadmus to hold contempt for his subject matter. Cadmus’s figures are distorted, disfigured, and exhibit animal characteristics—which includes vulgar behavior. As is suggested by the *Life* author, Cadmus is clearly a satirist, but his unusual application of satire was difficult to read.

On April 1\(^{st}\), just weeks after the *Life* article, *The Art Digest* published an article criticizing Cadmus’s Midtown exhibition.\(^57\) The article again briefly recounts the events surrounding *The Fleet’s In!* However, the language used to describe Cadmus’s satire paints the artist as cruel. The unknown author opened the essay with:

> A young man’s bitterness against a world of impossible and sometimes disgusting people is sounded in the exhibition of Paul Cadmus at Midtown Galleries . . . the reaction of Cadmus against present day “civilization” is one of repulsion tinged with hatred. . . . No beguiling criticism is found in these paintings and prints by

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55 “Paul Cadmus of Navy Fame has his First Art Show,” *Life* (March 22, 1937), 46.
56 “Paul Cadmus of Navy Fame has his First Art Show,” 44.
57 “Cadmus, Satirist of Modern Civilization,” 11 *The Art Digest* (April 1, 1937), 17. This article is accompanied by a reproduction of *Greenwich Village Cafeteria* (1934).
Cadmus. They are harsh caricatures that make the work of Reginald Marsh and Kenneth Hayes Miller seem almost gentle.\textsuperscript{58}

The article indicates that Cadmus’s paintings were viewed as presenting a harshly critical view of American society in which the artist was unable or unwilling to mask his disdain for his subjects. Amid these statements on Cadmus’s work, the author attempts to locate the artist in the satirical tradition of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century French Realist, Honoré Daumier. But the author notes that “Daumier looked on the people of his period with a satirical eye but he was amused by them.”\textsuperscript{59} Cadmus’s perceived disgust at American society is an important point as it indicates an apparent malaise on the part of the artist, and suggests that the critics of his time viewed his depicted subjects as repulsive and disgusting with no redeeming qualities. As will be argued throughout this dissertation, Cadmus’s use of satire was unusual for the 1930s, and therefore difficult for critics to contextualize, which left the artist’s intent and the view of his critics in disagreement.

Months after his exhibition closed, an article by Harry Salpeter on the artist appeared in \textit{Esquire.}\textsuperscript{60} This article focused largely on how \textit{The Fleet’s In!} scandal benefitted Cadmus’s career and the irony of the soft-spoken artist arriving on the art scene in such a confrontational manner. It provides a brief biography of the artist and argues that his work is located in the traditions of Italian Renaissance painter Luca Signorelli, Italian Renaissance printmaker Marcantonio Raimondi, and 18\textsuperscript{th} century social

\textsuperscript{58} “Cadmus, Satirist of Modern Civilization,” 11 \textit{The Art Digest} (April 1, 1937), 17.
\textsuperscript{59} “Cadmus, Satirist of Modern Civilization,” 17.
\textsuperscript{60} Harry Salpeter, “Paul Cadmus: \textit{Enfant Terrible},” \textit{Esquire} (July 1937), 105-111. This article is illustrated with reproductions of many of Cadmus’ work including: the etchings \textit{Horseplay} (1935), \textit{YMCA Locker Room} (1933), \textit{The Fleet’s In!} (1934), and paintings \textit{Shore Leave} (1933), \textit{Gilding the Acrobatats} (1935), \textit{Venus and Adonis} (1936), \textit{Greenwich Village Cafeteria} (1934), \textit{Bicyclists} (1933) and \textit{Coney Island} (1934).
satirist William Hogarth. Salpeter argues that Cadmus is unlike his contemporary painters, and that his detachment from their work is because he holds contempt towards Modernism.

He has no interest in contemporary art, American or otherwise, because contemporary art has nothing to teach him. He is silently critical of his peers at those rare moments when he condescends to disturb himself over what they have been doing. It isn’t insolence, it’s aloofness. It’s an amazing paradox that Paul Cadmus should have painted a picture of which city editors were obliged to take cognizance.61

Certainly Cadmus belonged to painting and printmaking traditions that in the 20th century were decidedly anti-modern. However, the treatment of his subject matter is anything but traditional. Salpeter, like the writers for Life and The Art Digest chose to speak on the artist’s atypical use of satire in his paintings and remind readers of The Fleet’s In! for which the artist was primarily known. However, none of these writers closely examined any of Cadmus’s images.62 The essays provide factual biographical accounts of the artist, and address the way in which Cadmus’s caricatures differed from the more optimistic views of American society as depicted by his contemporaries.

61 Salpeter, 111.
62 Salpeter began to address Venus and Adonis by referring to Venus as a “wealthy divorcée in her middle thirties who can afford a gigolo.” However, he almost immediately stops his analysis to state that the painting is an example of how Cadmus makes timeless myths relevant to a modern audience (Salpeter, 111).
The most frequently cited article about Cadmus’s first solo exhibition at the Midtown Galleries was written by Lewis Mumford for the New Yorker. In the article, the noted art critic was openly critical of the artist’s use of satire, and argued that Cadmus was too academic in his approach. Mumford notes that the ineffectual satire is the result of the artist’s youth but that the artist shows potential for overcoming this flaw. Nonetheless, one passage from the column frequently appears in Cadmus’s scholarship out of context from the original article:

The result is not so much satire as inverted sentimentalism; his hand lingers too lovingly on the flesh he would chastise. Instead of hating the subject the painter holds up to scorn, one comes pretty near to hating the artist himself for giving one such an unpalatable mouthful.

This statement has been used by scholars to argue that Mumford recognized Cadmus’s homosexuality and saw a gay subtext in his paintings. For example, queer historian Jonathan Weinberg has argued that “inverted sentimentalism” was a code for the artist as a sexual invert or homosexual. However, Mumford was particularly critical of Cadmus’s portrayal of “leering buttocks of the young ladies parading on a suburban main street and Coney Island beach.” This indicates that the “flesh he would chastise” is not necessarily that of the male homosexual figures that reappear frequently in the artist’s oeuvre. In addition to his critical view of Cadmus’s depiction of subject matter, Mumford

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64 Mumford, 248.
66 Mumford, 248.
was also critical of the artist’s garish color. While it is plausible that Mumford recognized Cadmus as a homosexual, the column does not indicate that as the reason for Mumford’s criticism. Much of Mumford’s critique is based on the maturity of the artist who is “young enough to overcome his academic bondage and his ambivalent attitude toward his subjects.” The critic may assume that the artist’s color, composition, and subject matter will improve with time, but the artist was unlikely to overcome his sexuality and therefore improve as a painter in the critic’s eye.

By 1941, Cadmus had achieved such fame in the United States, that *Encyclopedia Britannica* featured him alongside Thomas Hart Benton, Grant Wood, John Steuart Curry, and Edward Hopper to illustrate “Famous American Painters” (fig. 2.1). *Gilding the Acrobats* is the Cadmus painting reproduced, which is significant for two reasons: first, it was not one of the artist’s well-known censored paintings, and second, it openly eroticized the male nude. It is less satirical, less “repulsive,” and less vulgar than much of his work in the 1930s, arguably making it more palatable for the Britannica audience.

However, the erotics of the painting are impossible to ignore. Richard Meyer has located the painted acrobat, with naked flesh on display, in the tradition of physique magazines popularly used as gay erotica in the 1930s. It is therefore puzzling that Britannica would select this image to represent Cadmus as the homoerotics are clearer in this painting than in the less palatable censored paintings. *Gilding the Acrobats* was also the largest reproduction in the photographic spread, which Philip Eliasoph notes is an

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67 Mumford, 249.
indication of Cadmus’s popularity shortly before World War II. Meyer points out the irony that the *Encyclopedia Britannica* spread coincided with Cadmus’s “decline into obscurity.”

1941-1968: Near Silence

It is not surprising that after World War II, a silence emerged around Cadmus. There seem to be a number of reasons for this. First, the artist’s style and subject matter changed in the 1940s as he transitioned away from caricatured depictions of the American Scene to small scale, figurative paintings primarily set on Fire Island. The models for these figures are recognizably his family and friends. For example, *Aviator* of 1941 (fig. 2.2) is a small-scale depiction of Cadmus’s friend, George Tichenor heroically raising a box kite before a vast seascape. The low horizon line, emphasis on the strength and virility of the male body, and the dramatic pink and blue sky indicate the power and ingenuity that accompany the creation and discovery of flight. The vastness and isolation of the beach have an affinity to paintings by Surrealist painters Yves Tanguey and Salvador Dali.

The fantasy suggested by such a likeness caused scholars to categorize these paintings as Magic Realism. This movement is very loosely defined and has become a

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71 Meyer, 34-35.
72 Cadmus had often used family and friends as models for his paintings, but in the 1940s the likeness of the model was maintained.
73 George Tichenor was photographer George Platt Lynes’s great love and frequent model. While it is generally accepted that Tichenor did not return Lynes’s love, he was a key figure in the Cadmus’s circle of friends that included Lynes and Lincoln Kirstein. Tichenor was killed shortly after the painting was made in the First Battle of Alamein, Egypt during World War II. For more information on Tichenor, see David Leddick, *Intimate Companions: A Triography of George Platt Lynes, Paul Cadmus, Lincoln Kirstein, and their Circle* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000).
catchall for artists painting in a non-abstract, non-expressionist mode in the post-war era. In its purest form, Magic Realism refers to a painting style that suggests otherworldliness while maintaining strict adherence to draftsmanship. Cadmus was included in *American Realists and Magic Realists*, a 1943 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) organized by Lincoln Kirstein. It is important to note that while a fair selection of Cadmus’s paintings and drawings from the 1940s were included in this exhibition, it also included some examples from the 1930s. Of the latter, the most notable for this dissertation are the censored paintings, *Sailors and Floozies* (1938) and *The Herrin Massacre* (1940), both of which should be considered American Realist paintings as they are certainly not Magic Realist. In his introduction to the accompanying catalogue, Kirstein establishes Magic Realism in opposition to modernism. He writes that in Magic Realism:

> There is emotion, but the feeling runs narrow and deep rather than violent or accidental. All looseness is wasteful. Impulsiveness cannot be afforded lest it seem the impatience of an amateur who enlarges his incapacities into a style of dilettante idiosyncrasy. It is a puritanical artifice wherein a termite gusto for detail is substituted for exuberance, exquisite or, at the least, painstaking handling for the spontaneous miracles of bold brushwork and edible surfaces.\(^7^4\)

In this passage, Kirstein reveals his own bias against modernism, much as Cadmus did earlier. As a counterpoint to the rising gestures of “action painting,” Cadmus is an appropriate match for this loosely defined category of American painting. Kirstein saw a

Dutch Protestant aesthetic running through this vein of American aesthetics and likened Cadmus’s work to the “truculent hatred expressed in Jerome Bosch’s paintings of Christ Mocked.” Again, Cadmus’s unorthodox depictions of the American scene were seen as though the artist despised his American subjects, but in the eyes of Kirstein, this was a positive aspect of the artist’s work.

Kirstein and others tend to agree that Cadmus’s emphasis on draftsmanship and figurative painting caused critics to ignore his work in the 1940s and 50s. The rise of color field and action painting, and authoritative critics such as Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg created a context in which American painting succeeded on an international scale. As a result, there was little critical interest in artists working outside the boundaries of painterly abstraction. Additionally, Abstract Expressionism arguably became a “weapon” used by the United States to demonstrate cultural superiority over the former Soviet Union during the Cold War. As such it was not only celebrated by critics, but officially sanctioned by the U.S. government. During the Cold War, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) monitored which artists would be exhibited overseas, and promoted within the U.S. Cadmus was among the many artists who were excluded from exhibition abroad because of perceived anti-American sentiments in his paintings.

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75 Kirstein, “Introduction,” 8. It is important to note that among the Cadmus images included in the exhibition were still-lifes of sea shells and driftwood. In fact, the paintings of the 1940s do not exhibit the “truculent hatred” perceived in the 1930s American scene paintings.
77 Krenn, 202. Cadmus was listed in 1965 among painters Ben Shahn, Larry Rivers, Jacob Lawrence, and Siegfried Reinhardt as an artist who “might cause public disturbances.”
therefore understandable that Cadmus’s art, which had garnered a reputation for presenting a negative view of American culture, was ignored in the post-war era.

1968-1992: Re-emergence and Re-considered

Throughout the period of near silence, Cadmus continued to be shown at the Whitney Museum of American Art in the annual exhibition of contemporary American art, and he continued to prosper in the art market, and was represented by the Midtown Galleries. The first major exhibition of his work following this period of silence was organized by Una E. Johnson at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. Johnson’s exhibition and catalog focused exclusively on the artist’s prints and drawings. She linked him to the 18th Century painter and printmaker, William Hogarth, whose satirical paintings were similar to that of Cadmus, and who also produced print editions of his paintings to achieve a greater number of collectors. Johnson argued that the artist’s training as an etcher and engraver under the strict tutelage of Joseph Pennell enabled Cadmus to be a skilled graphic artist, whose drawing skills made the prints and drawings his most significant body of work. Her catalog contains the first written biography of Cadmus, with particular emphasis on the artist’s upbringing and training at the Art Students League in New York.

Over the next ten years, there was again little scholarly interest in Cadmus, until 1978 when Philip Eliasoph wrote his doctoral dissertation on the artist. Eliasoph’s dissertation is modeled on a traditional artist monograph in which he traced Cadmus’s

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78 Una E. Johnson, Paul Cadmus: Prints and Drawings (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum, 1968).
79 Johnson, 13.
80 Eliasoph, “Paul Cadmus: Life and Work.”
development from childhood through the 1970s. Eliasoph is primarily concerned with Cadmus’s position as a satirist and follows that development through two periods isolated by the author: American Scene and Magic Realism. Eliasoph problematized Cadmus’s position in American painting in the 1930s by differentiating him from the Regionalists and social realists. According to Eliasoph, Cadmus’s paintings did not present the same nationalistic optimism as the other Regionalists, and did not address specific political policies and events taken up by the social realists. Rather, Cadmus’s satire is located in traditional European sources, not American. Eliasoph argues that the artist belittles the inflated subject (or “victim” of the satire) through distortion and disfiguration. However, Eliasoph notes that unlike Cadmus’s European forebears, the subjects are not political leaders or members of the aristocratic elite, rather “he deals with the average American and exposes the bourgeois sense of overblown self-importance.”

Using Kirstein’s MoMA exhibition as a point of reference, Eliasoph indicated that in midcareer Cadmus made a shift from the American Scene to Magic Realism. Eliasoph defines Magic Realism as sharp rendering of fantastic figures or objects. He differentiates this from Surrealism in the fact that Cadmus and his contemporaries were not interested in the political agendas or Freudian symbolism sought by the Surrealists. Additionally, the Magic Realists sought symbolism in their works as opposed to searching for avant-garde aesthetic choices and techniques. In fact, Cadmus and his colleagues often worked

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82 Eliasoph, “Paul Cadmus: Life and Work,” 120. Eliasoph pages 116-150 examine the fundamentals of satire, and Cadmus’ application of it.
in the anti-modern, Renaissance egg tempera technique.\textsuperscript{83} Because it was such a quick drying process, each brushstroke had to be slow and deliberate, and therefore set these artists apart from their more gestural contemporaries.

While Eliasoph’s dissertation is useful in placing Cadmus’s paintings and satirical compositions in context, it is his introduction of “homosexual iconography” that has ignited subsequent scholarship. Eliasoph was the first scholar to write about Cadmus’s romantic relationship with Jared French, and openly discuss the artist’s homosexuality as a lens through which to read the iconography of Cadmus’s paintings.

Eliasoph’s analysis of Mallorcan Fishermen of 1932 (fig. 2.3) demonstrates his analysis of “gay iconography.” The painting depicts a group of men wrestling aboard a fishing boat and includes a reclining male figure with his legs spread. One of the wrestlers maintains his balance by firmly planting his leg inches away from the reclining figure’s groin. Eliasoph’s reading of this grouping is that the strong leg of the standing figure is an extension of the reclining man’s erection.\textsuperscript{84} However, a large portion of his chapter addresses gay iconography in Cadmus’s Fire Island paintings, and culminates in a thorough analysis of Playground of 1948 (fig. 2.4). Playground depicts a nearly nude young man looking desperately at the viewer as a group of teenage boys taunt and tease him in an urban parking lot turned “playground.”\textsuperscript{85} Eliasoph finds many references to erections in the painting, as well as newspaper headlines and urban signs that are

\textsuperscript{83} Eliasoph, “Paul Cadmus: Life and Work,” 151-156. For the text used by Cadmus, Jared French, and George Tooker for egg tempera technique, see Daniel Thompson, \textit{The Practice of Egg Tempera Technique} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937).

\textsuperscript{84} Eliasoph, “Paul Cadmus: Life and Work,” 23-24.

\textsuperscript{85} Eliasoph, “Paul Cadmus: Life and Work,” 258-261. It is important to note that Eliasoph indicated that his curiosity about \textit{Playground} led him to initially meet and interview Cadmus, and then led to his dissertation on the artist (Eliasoph, i-ii).
messages encouraging conformity. The combination of these iconographic messages indicate that the painting demonstrates Cadmus’s anxiety as a young gay man socialized in a society that disapproved of his sexuality and encouraged him to deny it.

Notably, however, while Eliasoph openly addressed homosexual issues, he did not make this issue central to his analysis of Cadmus’s work. He noted that while Cadmus’s gay iconography suggests openness about his sexual identity, it remained only one aspect of his personhood. Additionally, while Eliasoph notes the artist’s commercial success in the gay community, he also indicates that Cadmus distanced himself from the gay rights movement, preferring to remain quiet about this aspect of his life.

Shortly after completing his dissertation, Eliasoph mounted a retrospective of Cadmus’s work at the Miami University Art Museum in Oxford, Ohio in 1981 and wrote the accompanying exhibition catalogue. The exhibition was a fairly comprehensive collection of Cadmus’s paintings, drawings and prints spanning nearly fifty years of the artist’s career. It also marked the first time The Fleet’s In! was ever publicly exhibited. In the catalogue, Eliasoph distinguishes Cadmus from the American avant-garde of the 1980s, specifically his draftsmanship, interest in the human figure, and references to the old masters. Additionally, Eliasoph addresses the roles that ballet aficionado Kirstein, British novelist E.M. Forster, and model Jon Andersson played in Cadmus’s career.

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88 Philip Eliasoph, Paul Cadmus: Yesterday & Today, 44. Shortly before the exhibition, Elaisoph and the Midtown Payson Gallery worked together to have the painting removed from the Alibi Club and put on public display. Cadmus’s life spanned 1904-1999, and fortunately he saw the painting exhibited at the Miami University Art Museum.
In the foreword to the catalogue, Lloyd Goodrich argued that the qualities of Cadmus’s paintings which initially garnered the artist harsh criticism had become those for which he was most applauded. Goodrich stated:

The motivating forces in Cadmus’s art, as I interpret them, are a belief in mankind’s capacity for moral and physical excellence and beauty, and a corresponding indignation at mankind’s failure to attain them more often. Hence the intensity of his exposure of human vulgarity, overindulgence, brutality, and physical ugliness.89

The statement by Goodrich indicates that as late as 1981, critics and historians saw repulsion in Cadmus’s depiction of subject matter. However, nearly fifty years later Goodrich softened the deplorable criticism of Cadmus’s imagery by suggesting that the artist found humanity inherently beautiful, but societal conditions prevented people from fully realizing this human potential.

Renewed interest in Cadmus led to a 1983 film directed by Donald Sutherland for PBS titled Paul Cadmus: the enfant terrible at 80. In it, Cadmus paints and draws while speaking to the camera. In a letter to Mary Lago in 1988, Cadmus explained that it “was not really an ‘interview.’ I was the narrator.”90 In his monologue, Cadmus addresses his profound appreciation for the work of the Old Masters, and his painting process. He demonstrates the mixing of egg tempera, and recounts significant events in his professional career, such as The Fleet’s In! scandal of 1934. However, he is careful not to

90 Letter from Paul Cadmus to Mary Lago, 1988, in the University of Missouri archives Mary Lago Collection, Paul Cadmus, 2ALS, 1986, clippings, B.4, F.4.
interpret or read his paintings for the viewer. He explains that this task is best performed by scholars and historians, and views his task as limited to the painting of the images. It is rumored that the film was so popular on PBS, that a special on Paul Cézanne in honor of an exhibition in Philadelphia was bumped in favor of re-airing the Cadmus film.

The Sutherland documentary was followed in 1984 by the only published monograph on Cadmus written by his brother-in-law and close friend, Lincoln Kirstein.\(^9^1\) The 1984 monograph was updated and reprinted in 1992. Kirstein minimizes the “gay iconography” argued by Eliasoph. Rather, Kirstein marginally addresses the artist’s homosexuality, and focuses instead on old master and literary sources interspersed with brief biographical information about Cadmus. Kirstein’s text is cleverly juxtaposed with short quotes by critics placed in the margins. These critical passages suggest to the reader that there are alternate readings of the images. For example, Kirstein writes about *Venus and Adonis* (fig. 2.5), a modernized painting of the classic subject in which Venus is depicted as a middle-aged woman desperately clinging to the beautiful Adonis.\(^9^2\) Adonis is painted shirtless and holding a tennis racket in one hand and two balls in the other, which becomes an obvious reference to male genitals and this reference is reinforced by the dog depicted licking his genitals in the foreground. While Kirstein states that the painting is “partly social comment and partly parody,” he dedicates his text on the painting to parody by examining how it is a visual homage to Titian, Tintoretto, Paolo

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\(^9^2\) *Venus and Adonis* is a classical myth in which Venus takes the beautiful Adonis as her lover. Then she foresees that he will be killed hunting and begs him not to go. He does not heed the warning of the goddess, and he is killed in the hunt.
Veronese, Peter Paul Rubens, and François Boucher and a parody of William Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis*. However, he suggests an alternate reading of the painting by placing critic Henry McBride’s 1936 critique of it in the margin of his text:

> Mr. Cadmus’ picture shows Frederick Perry, the tennis champion of Wimbledon, America and the rest of the world, abandoning the amateur ranks to become a professional. His wife and child protest vigorously but all to no avail. Mr. Perry sells out to the moneyed interests. In real life Mr. Perry has no child and Mr. Cadmus takes a poet’s license in introducing one into the composition—or perhaps it’s just Cupid—but anyway it’s the rendition of the lady that will offend all tennis fans. The artist makes her as hefty as a heroine in Rubens, whereas all of us who saw her on the sidelines at Forest Hills during the Perry-Budge match know her to be fully as chic as Mrs. Wallis Simpson herself. Just to fool people, Mr. Cadmus entitles his picture: *Venus and Adonis*. Venus! Well, I’ll say no more.

Kirstein cleverly dodges the “gay iconography” of the painting by informing his reader that the image is “part social commentary” and juxtaposed with McBride’s reading of the painting as a desperate wife losing her husband to the time constraints of professional tennis. In fact, Cadmus’s image seems to contain a double-entendre: Adonis’s firm grip on the phallic racket and balls indicates that she will lose her husband because of his homosexuality. Kirstein cleverly entices the reader to examine the painting closer by permitting McBride to problematize the depiction of Perry and his wife, allowing the

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reader to form their own interpretation of “social commentary” without openly addressing it himself.

1992-present: Queering Paul Cadmus

It was not until the publication of Jonathan Weinberg’s 1992 *Art in America* article, “Cruising with Paul Cadmus,” that the artist’s homosexuality became irrevocably fused with queer interpretations of his imagery.95 The article was written in recognition of a small retrospective of Cadmus’s paintings at the Midtown Payson Galleries in New York in 1992. In the article, Weinberg argues that the censorship of *The Fleet’s In!* (fig. 3.1) and the ire that it stirred in the Navy resulted from a homosexual pick-up on the left side of the painting. Weinberg argues that the well groomed blonde civilian depicted offering a cigarette to a Marine is one of homosexual offering and acceptance as the cigarette has a phallic shape to it. Additionally he finds the red tie worn by the civilian to be a signifier of his homosexuality as it was a common code at the time.96 Weinberg acknowledges that no newspaper accounts from 1934 directly address the homosexual content, and argues that an open discussion about homosexuality in the Navy would have disastrous consequences. Weinberg continues to make a connection and distinction between Cadmus and postmodern photographer, Robert Mapplethorpe. Both artists were censored from exhibitions at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, and it is Weinberg’s assertion that the depiction of homosexuality was the impetus for both acts of

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96 Weinberg, “Cruising with Paul Cadmus,” 103-104. While Weinberg states here that the red tie was a common code “at the time,” in his 1993 book, *Speaking for Vice*, Weinberg locates the red tie as signifier of homosexuality in the 1880s and 1890s and asserts that as more people understand the signifiers, the less effective they become as a secret code (Weinberg, 33-34).
censorship. Weinberg argues that the difference between the two artists is that Mapplethorpe graphically photographed sexual acts between men, while Cadmus focused on the preludes to such encounters.97

Weinberg concluded his article with rather harsh words for Cadmus, Kirstein, and the Midtown Payson Galleries for not being more open about the artist’s homosexuality. He states:

Cadmus seems almost embarrassed by his art’s appeal to homosexuals, who supported his career long before its most recent notoriety. And even more disturbing is the way in which his gallery, Midtown Payson, and his biographer, Lincoln Kirstein, have avoided the question in their presentation of the artist. . . Kirstein and the organizers seem to share a mistaken belief that focusing on the homosexual content of art narrows its significance and its audience. . . While I congratulate Midtown Payson Galleries for bringing The Fleet’s In! out of the closet, it is disappointing to see them trying to lock Cadmus back inside.98

Despite references to homosexuality that are obvious to a postmodern observer, Cadmus was not comfortable publicly discussing his sexuality. Nonetheless, media outlets such as The Village Voice and The Advocate celebrated Cadmus as a gay icon and hero for gay activism, and validate Weinberg’s claim that Cadmus’s paintings were significant to a post-Stonewall gay community.99 However, this criticism by Weinberg indicates that the

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97 Weinberg, “Cruising with Paul Cadmus,” 104-105. Weinberg notes that the censorship of both artists from the Corcoran caused newspapers to link the two artists with Cadmus as precursor.
99 See Donnell Stoneman, “Paul Cadmus,” The Advocate (June 2, 1976) 25-27, which claims that “Cadmus’s painted images of muscular young men were possibly among your very first experiences with gay erotica.” See also, Jeff Weinstein, “Paul Cadmus: Out for Art’s Sake,” Village Voice (June 1, 1982) 42-
two were of different generations: Weinberg of the generation of gay activism in which homosexuals were encouraged to come out of the closet to break down stereotypes and taboos by alerting friends and family that they indeed know a homosexual. Eliasoph quotes Cadmus from a personal interview as stating “Although I have never been stuck in the closet, I have chosen as much as possible the semi-privacy of my semi-ivory tower and friendly friends’ apartments rather than calling from rooftops and shouting in parades.” According to this statement, Cadmus belonged to a generation that believed in quietly living their lives without an overt political agenda. In response to Weinberg’s statement and defense of Cadmus, his close friend Tamara Lichtenstein stated: “If the aim of gay liberation is for gays to live an uncompromising and open life, then Paul Cadmus’s is a model of that life—he is a man who liberated himself before there was a movement.” Ironically, current scholarship on Cadmus suggests that his paintings and the reactions stirred by them oppose the quiet dissention practiced by Cadmus in support of his sexuality.

Weinberg addressed Cadmus and the red tie again to introduce a system of gay codes used to identify homosexuals to other homosexuals, what Weinberg calls “modes of disclosure.” In Speaking for Vice: Homosexuality in the Art of Charles Demuth, Marsden Hartley, and the First American Avant-Garde, Weinberg analyzes the modernist paintings of Charles Demuth and Marsden Hartley to argue that the modernist aesthetics

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43, which offensively claims “If Paul Cadmus is a significant artist and is to be remembered as important, it’s because he is obsessed with the male body. Cadmus is an important artist because he is gay.”
100 Cadmus quoted in Eliasoph, “Paul Cadmus: Life and Work,” 249. The quote by Cadmus predates the statements by Weinberg and should in no way be read here a response to the Art in America article.
101 Letter from Tamara Lichtenstein to the editors of Art in America, found in the DC Moore Gallery Archives.
and subject matter of their respective oeuvres were informed by their homosexuality. It is important to note that the military played a significant role in the work of these artists of the earlier, avant-garde generation. Demuth painted overtly erotic watercolors of sailors engaged with one another in sexual activity, which were never meant to be openly seen by the public, and Hartley painted a series of Cubist-inspired, semi-abstract elegies to a fallen German soldier who he loved.

Weinberg introduced his analysis of Demuth and Hartley with *The Fleet’s In!* to demonstrate the inherent danger of publicly exhibiting a readable image of homosexual exchange. To make his earlier *Art in America* analysis more complete, Weinberg offers an explanation for the navy’s concern over the depiction of a gay hook-up. He recalls an incident from 1919-20 in which naval recruits in Newport, Rhode Island were being sexually solicited at the local Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA). Rumors of this behavior caused the Secretary of the Navy, Josephus Daniels, to enlist the support of some attractive young recruits. They were instructed to engage in sexual activity with the civilians in order to garner evidence against the so called “perverts.” Several men in Newport were arrested and convicted without question until a high ranking Episcopalian minister was brought up on charges. The ethics of the naval investigation was then contested in the media. Weinberg argues that it is the memory of this scandal that the navy wanted to avoid by censoring the painting.102 Weinberg cites references to Sands Street, a popular New York gay cruising site, in a couple of interviews during the scandal to argue that people recognized the gay iconography in 1934 despite the fact that it was

not openly discussed.\footnote{Weinberg, \textit{Speaking for Vice}, 39-40.} Weinberg examined other texts by critics as noteworthy as Lewis Mumford to construct a convincing argument that people recognized the gay iconography at the time of \textit{The Fleet’s In!} scandal.

Weinberg’s analysis of the contemporary accounts surrounding \textit{The Fleet’s In!} scandal was further examined by Richard Meyer in his book, \textit{Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art}. In his text, Meyer argued that Cadmus’s paintings were an attack on heterosexual normativity. Meyer’s text centers on three paintings, the censorship of \textit{The Fleet’s In!}, \textit{Self-Portrait: Mallorca} (1932), and \textit{Gilding the Acrobats} (1935) to argue that the paintings were imbued with gay codes. His analysis of \textit{The Fleet’s In!} argues that the painting was constructed to illustrate gender inversion and that the artist was shrewd in his statements to the press during the scandal in order to preclude any outright mention of his homosexuality or that found in the painting.\footnote{Meyer, 37-56. Meyer’s analysis of \textit{The Fleet’s In!} will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter of this dissertation.} He argues that \textit{Self-Portrait: Mallorca} was a painted admission of the artist’s homosexuality by reading the painting through a Freudian analysis in which the artist gazes narcissistically at himself in a mirror. The artist prefers his own image (and gender) to the enticing presence of a nude woman in the background.\footnote{Meyer, 57-72.} Meyer argues that \textit{Gilding the Acrobats} as a fixation on, and satire of the male nude. His analysis of the painting demonstrates that the complex intertwine of nude and near nude figures is homoerotic, but safeguarded the eroticism by placing the male bodies in the context of carnival. He argues that this deliberate construction created an acceptable space for a
nude male figure. The nude women of Marsh and Benton were permissible in the space of a burlesque hall, and Cadmus’s nudes were tolerable in the context of the circus and locker rooms.

The scholarship of Weinberg and Meyer have become hegemonic in the sense that numerous survey books of social issues in American art cite homosexuality as the cause of *The Fleet’s In!* censorship. In response to this hegemony, the most recent published book on Cadmus, Justin Spring’s 2002 *Paul Cadmus: The Male Nude*, asserts the importance the artist placed on his privacy. Spring’s book serves primarily as a catalog of the artist’s drawings, both finished and preliminary sketches spanning Cadmus’s entire career. Spring notes that Cadmus’s lifestyle was modeled on the Swiss publication, *Der Kreis Le Cercle*, which promoted “the complete integration of gay men into existing society through strict accommodation of prevailing (heterosexual) norms of behavior. Both monogamy and masculine (as opposed to effeminate) behavior were strongly emphasized in its editorials.” In addition to problematizing queer theory in Cadmus’s work, Spring addresses the artist’s attitude toward modernism, particularly that of the post-war period. He notes that Cadmus often quoted Jean-Dominique Ingres to defend his opposition to contemporary art trends.

Let me hear no more of that absurd maxim: “we need the new, we need to follow our century, everything changes, everything is changed.” Suppose my century is wrong. Because my neighbor does evil, am I therefore obliged to do it also?

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Because virtue, as also beauty, can be misunderstood by you, have I in turn got to misunderstand it?

Spring applauds Cadmus’s graphic ability and the years of dedication and practice that preceded it. Like Kirstein, Spring looks back to the Old Master sources for Cadmus to find a connection between the homosexual expressions of Michelangelo, Correggio, and Luca Signorelli.

Speaking broadly, writings on Cadmus have focused on two themes. Early writings commented on his interest in the grotesque and ugly, in short on his role as a satirist. Notably, this emphasis on the repulsive often made his work problematic for display, since his paintings pictured forms of behavior, such as prostitution, or homosexual cruising, which were generally kept under wraps. This theme has continued in writing up to the present, but was joined in the late 1970s by another theme, that of Cadmus’s homosexuality and the ways in which homosexuals and homoerotic themes were pictured in his work. There are interesting tensions between these two positions. For example, if Cadmus was himself homosexual, should the viewer see his representations of homosexual pick-ups as satirical or approving? And did he wish the spectator to condemn the follies portrayed in his paintings, or were they a plea for good-humor and tolerance? In fact, there seems to be no simple answer to these questions. Like most good artists, Cadmus portrays issues that are endlessly fascinating since they do not lend themselves to simple, straightforward solutions. The goal of this dissertation, in fact, will not be to simplify readings of Cadmus’s work but to reveal complexities that previous writers have largely passed over. By looking closely at the arguments over Cadmus’s six
censored paintings of the 1930s, we can see the ways in which they not only quietly introduced homosexual themes, but mocked traditional notions of what was normal. Often what was distressing to viewers of the 1930s was not their inclusion of gay figures, but the complex way they seemed to both assert and subvert traditional sexual, social and racial stereotypes. This dissertation will first examine the controversies about these paintings one by one, and then consider the degree to which they form a statement as a group.
CHAPTER III

THE NAVY, THE NEW DEAL, AND THE FLEET’S IN! RECONSIDERED

Paul Cadmus had just returned to New York after a two year trip to Europe when he signed up for the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP).¹⁰⁸ The PWAP was a New Deal program aimed to provide support for artists during the Depression.¹⁰⁹ Cadmus produced two paintings under the PWAP, The Fleet’s In! (fig. 3.1) and Greenwich Village Cafeteria (fig. 3.2), both painted in early 1934. The former image brought the artist national fame when it was censored by a navy admiral when it was to be exhibited at the Corcoran Art Gallery in Washington, DC and it has since become the focal point of Cadmus scholarship, and become the painting for which the artist is best known. Both Philip Eliasoph and Lincoln Kirstein have argued that the actions of the navy were unwarranted, unsuccessful, and resulted from prudery regarding the institution’s public image. Queer historians Jonathan Weinberg and Richard Meyer have argued that the navy’s objections, and the subsequent scandal, resulted from fear surrounding the depiction of a civilian and a serviceman engaged in a homosexual exchange. This chapter will argue that while Cadmus’s painting certainly depicts a homosexual exchange, and some members of the navy and the public were likely aware of it, the artist’s unconventionally sexual depiction of women, public intoxication, and the opposing financial objectives of the navy and the PWAP were all contributing factors to the very public scandal.

¹⁰⁹ The PWAP was established in December 1933 as part of the CWA. It was announced in January 1934 that the CWA would be abandoned, and FDR spent much of 1934-35 trying to devise a new relief plan that would eventually become the Works Progress Administration (WPA).
The National Exhibition of Art by the Public Works of Art Project:

The PWAP was a short lived program established in December 1933 as a branch of the harshly criticized Civil Works Administration (CWA). Organizers quickly appointed Edward Bruce as director, and he appointed Forbes Watson—the noted Arts Weekly critic—as his technical director. Initial funding for the program was scheduled to expire in the spring of 1934, when Bruce organized “The National Exhibition of Art by the Public Works of Art Project” to run from April 24-May 20, 1934, at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington to convince Congress that such a program was necessary, successful, and relevant to ensure its renewal. In the catalog for the exhibition, Bruce clearly states that the “objective of the Project was to give artists employment at craftsmen’s wages in the embellishment of public property with works of art.” In justifying its relevance to taxpayers and elected officials, Bruce stated:

It has gone far to take the snobbery out of art and make it a part of the daily life of the average citizen. It has blazed the trail in the direction of getting rid of the drabness and monotony of our public buildings and parks. It is hoped that means can be found to carry forward the work so auspiciously begun.

Bruce optimistically believed that by financially supporting artists, this program could rejuvenate American interest in art, and relate it to their daily lives. An article in an electrical workers’ journal is indicative that the latter was at least marginally fulfilled.

110 Bonnie Fox Schwartz, The Civil Works Administration, 1933-34 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984): 139. Edward Bruce was selected not only because he was a painter with work in the Whitney Museum of American Art, but he was also a Hoover Republican. The administrative positions of the PWAP were assigned to legitimize a program that was anticipated to receive harsh criticism from New Deal conservatives.


112 Edward Bruce, National Exhibition of Art by the Public Works of Art Project (1934): 2.

113 Bruce, 3.
The article argues that the work produced under the PWAP has labor as its core subject matter and “One could forcefully argue . . . it is labor that brings vitality to any art, be it the dance or the canvas, and the Public Works of Art Project Exhibits overwhelmingly support this argument.”114 The author clearly finds success in eliminating “snobbery” from art, and further mocks the modernist critics who scoffed at the paintings as “crude.”115

However, as was true of many New Deal programs, the PWAP and its parent organization, the CWA were generally unpopular and criticized by conservatives from their beginning. The CWA and the PWAP were designed as a form of relief for the overwhelming numbers of unemployed Americans during the Great Depression. Conservatives attacked the CWA in part because they felt that it caused the government to unnecessarily compete with small business.116 The CWA was specifically designed to provide relief for the anticipated harsh winter of 1933-34. Aid was primarily provided in exchange for the construction of bridges, sewers, and incinerators. However, by December the PWAP was established as a branch of the CWA to support artists, writers, and musicians. While many people recognized the need for bridges and sewers, objections to federal funding of the arts were stronger as many did not see them as a necessity. Harry Hopkins, advisor to President Roosevelt, responded to this conservative

116 For a more complete analysis of the criticisms of the CWA, see Kenneth S. Davis, FDR: The New Deal Years, 1933-37: a history (New York: Random House, 1986). The criticisms ranged from race relations in the south where African American laborers were paid higher wages under the program than white laborers by farmers, to the competition caused by government produced mattresses to be given free of charge to those in need.
criticism by arguing that artists “have got to eat just like other people.” However, the unusually high wages paid under the program were a constant source of criticism, and naval officials were among the conservative critics. Lieutenant Colonel H.C. Lee stated:

Mr. Hopkins’s loose fluidity of organization . . . enabled him to engage for employment in two months nearly as many persons were enlisted and called to the colors during our year and a half World War mobilization, and to disburse to them, weekly, a higher average rate of wage than Army or Navy pay.

Lee’s statement here demonstrates that competition for federal money between New Deal programs and the American armed forces was very real.

Criticism of the PWAP not only came from conservatives, but also from those most desperately in need of aid. Juliana Force, the PWAP New York Regional Director (and director of the Whitney Museum of American Art) believed that the first criteria for relief projects should be talent as opposed to financial need. She earned a reputation for assigning artists to projects who had not signed onto the PWAP. One noteworthy artist believed to be without need, John Sloan, was harshly criticized in the press for receiving aid from the program. This practice resulted in over fifty jobless artists protesting outside the Whitney Museum of American Art on December 23, 1933, and followed two weeks later by a march from Washington Square to the Whitney by over one hundred

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118 Lieutenant Colonel H.C. Lee quoted in Davis, 309-10.
119 John Lougherty, *John Sloan: Painter and Rebel* (New York: H. Holt, 1995) 324-325. Sloan was directed by Juliana Force to sign a statement that he was unable to support himself and his weekly income did not exceed $60. Artists did not believe the statement and viewed the arrangement with Force to be a form of nepotism against which they picketed.
jobless artists. The situation in New York was indicative of other regional branches as amateur artists were frequently bypassed for more experienced artists who were also more financially secure. A debate ensued over the general purpose of the program: to provide relief to the unemployed or to maintain high quality artistry throughout the depression era.

The artistic community also feared that a government bureaucracy would inhibit creativity and hinder freedom of expression. Forbes and Watson considered this fear to be very legitimate and decided quickly that artists would be instructed to paint the “American Scene” so that the public could relate to the images, but the artists would not be hindered by such a broad and deliberately undefined subject matter. Artists were further encouraged to draw subject matter from contemporary, local sources because Bruce and Watson saw academic history painting as “scholastic frumpery.” Further restrictions were, however, implemented when Watson appointed Edward Rowan as his assistant. Rowan mandated that it was inappropriate for artists to depict the nude figure. He also insisted that American Scene paintings should not include foreign subject matter and that any artist who found it necessary to reference European modernism would be replaced by artists who preferred “their own great country.” Rowan’s mandates are indicative of the American zeitgeist in the Depression Era— isolationism resulted in an

120 “Idle Artists March in Protest on CWA,” New York Times (January 10, 1934) 19. The gathered crowd was permitted to send in five delegates to speak with Force directly. The article states that Force defended her decision based on the fact that the government instructed her to select the most qualified artists for projects and that she complied. She requested that they put their complaints in writing, but they refused.


122 Clark, 104.

123 Clark 111-112.
anti-European backlash and sexual conservatism in the United States dates back to its Puritan founders.

A successful exhibit in April 1934 at the Corcoran was essential in order for the program to be renewed by Congress because it had been so unpopular with conservative opponents. The CWA had already begun to crumble in January 1934, and was nearly defunct by March, with the exception of “white collar” jobs awarded to artists and scholars.124 The PWAP certainly did not want the negative publicity that erupted before the exhibition opened to the public.

Cadmus recalled receiving a modest salary for his work on the project, although he did not recall signing onto the PWAP.125 In 1934, he painted both *The Fleet’s In!* and *Greenwich Village Cafeteria* under the program, and both were accepted for exhibit at the Corcoran. Both paintings are crowded figural scenes set in New York. The figures are depicted as middle class, vulgar, and appear to be publicly intoxicated. While both paintings exhibit clear references to homosexual characters, it is important to note that only *The Fleet’s In!* was formally censored, in the end neither painting was included in the exhibition at the Corcoran.126

*The Fleet’s In!* depicts a group of women who have donned their tightest dresses to drink and flirt in Riverside Park with sailors temporarily on leave. All figures, male and female, are presented in very taut clothing, with the noticeable exception of an

124 Davis, 314.
125 Paul Cadmus and Judd Tully, “Interview with Paul Cadmus in Weston Connecticut,” March 22, 1988, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, found online from www.aaa.si.edu on January 25, 2006. Cadmus recalls that he received approximately thirty-two dollars a week from the PWAP.
126 The exhibition catalog does not include Cadmus’ name among the exhibited paintings and sculptures. Given the scandal caused by *The Fleet’s In!* it is understandable that the PWAP would choose not to exhibit any Cadmus painting at all.
elderly woman to the far left. The sailors smile and tip their hats in a reciprocal flirtatious manner. At the center of the scene, a seated sailor reels back from a playful slap by his female companion. (The slap is clearly playful and not defensive because her hips are presented pushed forward into his groin, thereby negating any real threat posed to the woman necessitating protection). None of the figures appear to be attractive: the women have robust bodies which are emphasized by their thick fingers, except for the waif in the foreground who wears an abundance of make-up (and is painted with a prominent Adam’s apple). The servicemen are depicted with yellow teeth, an overbite, a unibrow or passed-out from an overconsumption of alcohol. Cadmus’s scene takes place in a very shallow space defined by a low lying wall on which the characters sit and lean. They are placed in the scene like actors on a stage, which was a common convention in the paintings of Reginald Marsh.

*Greenwich Village Cafeteria* is of a similar scene, except that the figures are depicted indoors and seated around a table, and there is an absence of military figures. Thirteen figures fill the shallow space defined by an interior wall. They are crowded around a table that would comfortably seat four customers. Much like the Old Master paintings of the last supper, no figures are present on the viewer’s side of the table but are gathered around the remaining three sides. The unsightly nature of Cadmus’s Riverside Drive figures is outdone by his cafeteria group. Drunken women stumble out of their chairs, apply make-up at the table, and lean in with puckered lips as the men stretch, sneer, ignore them. Yellow teeth, beer bellies, double chins, and acne are prevalent in marring the beauty of humanity in this painting.
Scandal at the Corcoran!

Cadmus delivered *The Fleet’s In!* and *Greenwich Village Cafeteria* to the Whitney Museum of American Art, where they were shipped to the Corcoran in Washington, and received by the media. On April 3, 1934, the *Washington Evening Star* ran a headline story about the exhibition and illustrated it with a photograph of Cadmus’s *The Fleet’s In!*. The article reproduced a letter written by Admiral Hugh Rodman, a World War I battleship commander, to Claude A. Swanson, Secretary of the Navy. In the letter, Rodman discredited the painting as follows:

> It represents a most disgraceful, sordid, disreputable, drunken brawl, wherein apparently a number of enlisted men are consorting with a party of street-walkers and denizens of the red-light district. This is an unwarranted insult to the enlisted personnel of our Navy, is utterly without foundation in fact, and evidently originated in the sordid, depraved imagination of someone who has no conception of actual conditions in our service.127

Some of Rodman’s accusations in the letter will be addressed later in this chapter: specifically that it depicts a “drunken brawl” and that the women are “street-walkers and denizens of the red-light district” to argue that these statements by Rodman are significant indicators of the social anxieties that led to the censorship.

> It is disingenuous that this private letter from Rodman to Swanson, which caused so much controversy, somehow came to be published in the *Washington Evening Star*.

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However, the remainder of Rodman’s letter strongly defends sailors as righteous. He claims:

. . . when in command of the flagship of the North Atlantic station, liberty was granted in one of our seacoast watering places to some 13,000 men. Of this number, there were reported for disorderly conduct on shore seven men, of whom five were found to be guilty.

On the police blotter of this city of not over 30,000 inhabitants, there were twenty-seven entries of offenses by the citizens on the same day. Can you imagine 13,000 young college men, say, from Yale, Harvard, Columbia . . . being on shore for recreation and having such an excellent record?\textsuperscript{128}

It is possible that Swanson leaked the letter to generate a positive image of the navy and undue stereotypes of sailors on leave, and used Cadmus’s painting as a reason to make that argument. The photograph of the painting that accompanied the article apparently angered Swanson and his Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Henry Latrobe Roosevelt (cousin to then President FDR) as the latter insisted that the painting be taken down before any more photographs could be taken of it. The navy had no authority to make such a demand on the Corcoran, but as the president’s cousin, no questions were asked when Roosevelt entered the Corcoran on April 18\textsuperscript{th} and walked out the door with it. Roosevelt took the painting promptly to Swanson, but by morning newspapers across the United States were disseminating the photograph of the painting and the story of its

censorship.129 What is surprising from the account is that the PWAP had complied with Roosevelt, and the painting was already out of the exhibition. In a letter dated April 5, 1934 to Watson and Rowan, Bruce states:

Colonel Roosevelt, Assistant Secretary of the Navy, called up and requested that the picture called The Fleet’s In! which was reproduced in the Star not be hung at the National Exhibition. I assured him this would be done, and the picture turned back to the Regional Committee so that there will not be any slip up.130

From this letter it is clear that the painting would not be seen at the Corcoran exhibit, and that the PWAP was not contesting the navy’s request to censor the painting. Further, H.L. Roosevelt was aware that the painting was to be returned to New York. If his removal of the painting was unnecessary, it should be considered that it was an attack on the painting, the artist, and the PWAP.

The media spent the next month debating the accuracy of Cadmus’s portrayal of sailors on leave, and newspapers across the country ran stories about the censorship and frequently accompanied by a photo of the painting.131 As the story played out in the press, Cadmus vehemently defended his painting, but his quiet, reserved nature left him uneasy about the media attention. As an unknown writer for the Literary Digest reported:

... [Cadmus] has a private little joke he must wait nearly three weeks to relish fully. At about that time, the United States Fleet will anchor in the Hudson River,

129 The account of the censored painting comes from Elaisoph, 40-48.
131 Archives of American Art, microfilm reel DC8, Public Works of Art Project, selected Administrative and Business Records, 1933-34, contains newspaper clippings from such cities as Detroit, Salt Lake City, and Indianapolis.
and Cadmus with camera, but no gun, will stroll up Riverside Drive and try to
snap unretouched proof that what he painted really happens—Admirals, or no
Admirals.

Meanwhile, he’d be grateful if the public, and the Admirals, too, would
forget the tempest stirred up by the painting. Cadmus wants to go back to work
and he can’t go back to work with the door-bell ringing every ten minutes.132

While Cadmus never photographed the sailors along Riverside Drive as he threatened,
the press showed their support in defending him. However, some of the public remained
angered by the painting. Cadmus recalled receiving threats at home, and decided to stay
with relatives until the scandal subsided. 133 The PWAP also felt pressure from the
scandal. While Bruce had hoped the exhibition would merit considerable media attention,
the focused attention on Cadmus and *The Fleet’s In!* was likely to negatively impact and
thereby threaten its renewal in Congress. As a result of this pressure, Cadmus was
officially reprimanded in May 1934 by V.C. Porter on behalf of Juliana Force.

Mrs. Force has expressed her displeasure to me concerning the amount of
publicity you are giving to the work you did under the Public Works of Art
Project. It is exceedingly distasteful to her and the other members of the New
York Regional Committee to have the matter exploited so cheaply in the press.134

While the PWAP initially insisted that the painting must be returned, within weeks it had
been de-accessioned, complicating its ownership. Cadmus did not own the painting as the

132 Anonymous. “Sailors, Beware Artist with Camera: Resentful Painter of ‘The Fleet’s In’ to Take Snap-
shots Along Riverside Drive to Try to Prove Admirals Wrong,” *The Literary Digest* (May 5, 1934): 24.
133 Tully interview.
PWAP had already paid him for it, but as they denounced ownership, it legally belonged to H.L. Roosevelt as he was in possession of the painting.\textsuperscript{135}

**Queer Interpretations of The Fleet’s In! Scandal:**

Contemporary scholars have focused their attention on why the navy objected so vehemently to Cadmus’s painting. Jonathan Weinberg’s argument that a Newport, Rhode Island scandal in 1919-1920 made the navy particularly sensitive to suggestions of homosexuality in the navy has been widely accepted as the sole reason for the censorship. Weinberg acknowledges that 1934 criticism of *The Fleet’s In!* makes no explicit mention of a homosexual subtext to the painting, but argues that the navy’s aggressive removal of the painting indicates that such a subtext was recognized. Weinberg points to the fact that traditionally the (hetero) sexual prowess of sailors was praised in American literature and artistic production and therefore its presence in Cadmus’s image was not objectionable.\textsuperscript{136} Weinberg argues that the navy feared the public recalling the scandal in Newport, Rhode Island.\textsuperscript{137} Naval recruits were trained in Newport, and when rumors spread in 1919 that the recruits were drinking, using cocaine, and having sex with civilian men at the local YMCA in exchange for money, drugs, and a place to stay for the night, the navy began an investigation. Josephus Daniels initiated the investigation. Daniels was the Secretary of the Navy at the time, and his Assistant Secretary was Franklin Delano Roosevelt, but

\textsuperscript{135} Jonathan Weinberg, “Cruising with Paul Cadmus,” 103.
\textsuperscript{136} Weinberg, *Speaking for Vice*, 38.
ultimately it was Daniels whose reputation was marred by the investigation when it was learned that recruits were instructed by the navy to allow fellatio to be performed on them in order to gather evidence against so-called “perverts.” Given this context, Weinberg argues that FDR’s cousin was particularly sensitive to issues of homosexuality in the navy being openly depicted and publicly displayed.

Weinberg located a homosexual coupling on the far left side of *The Fleet’s In!* where a well groomed, blonde civilian with pursed lips is depicted offering a Lucky Strike cigarette to a Marine who eagerly accepts it. Neither man looks at the cigarette but intently maintain eye contact with each other. Weinberg identifies the civilian as a stereotyped homosexual with pencil thin eyebrows, rouged cheekbones, ringed fingers, and most importantly—a red tie. Weinberg’s research shows that in the late nineteenth century, red ties were codes used by gay men to signal other gay men of their availability. This coding system worked well because it permitted men to publicly announce their sexuality with signifiers that could only be read by other homosexuals thereby protecting them from authorities and self-appointed moralists. In this context, the phallic shaped cigarette exchanged between the two men has come to be read as a homosexual exchange.

While homosexuality was not explicitly discussed in the media, Weinberg argues that there were articles that implicitly raised a homosexual subtext, but that those references were only understood by the savvy reader. For example, he cites a *New York*

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138 Lawrence R. Murphy, *Perverts by Official Order: the campaign against homosexuals by the United States Navy* (New York: Haworth Press, 1988). While recruits were also encouraged to drink alcohol and take drugs as part of the investigation, current scholars focus almost exclusively on the homosexual acts.
139 Weinberg, “Cruising with Paul Cadmus,” 103-104.
World-Telegram article that questions if Cadmus “had ever been to Sands Street, near the Brooklyn Navy Yard.”\footnote{141} Weinberg indicates that Sands Street was a notorious gay cruising location, and argues that the gay subtext would have been evident to those familiar with the location.

Weinberg demonstrates that the virility of the sailors was not otherwise threatened by Cadmus’s painting by citing a New York Daily News editorial titled “Should Our Sailors be Sissies?” which argued that “The shore-leave activities so vividly pictured by Mr. Cadmus go with the fighting man’s trade.”\footnote{142} The editorial argues that there is danger in restricting the sailors’ shore-leave activities to libraries and YMCAs, and that it is in the best interest of the country that these men rejuvenate themselves with women and liquor before returning to sea. In this context, Weinberg argues that the homosexual content was the only public threat to the navy because the women and drunkenness were socially acceptable for sailors.

Richard Meyer expanded this argument to demonstrate that Cadmus deliberately attacked heterosexual norms in the painting—and in the resulting media storm. Meyer argues that Cadmus’s construction of the painting sets up a complicated intersection of heterosexual, homosexual, and homosocial behavior in the figures which is held together with an “anal-erotic logic of insertion and reception.”\footnote{143} His reading of an anal paradigm
throughout the painting is established by a right to left reading of the painting in which the hands or crotch of one figure is immediately met by the buttocks of another.\textsuperscript{144}

Meyer further complicates the scandal by analyzing the media accounts, and Cadmus’s response to them, to argue that the painting came to signify normal manly behavior, and therefore the navy’s objections to it feminized the dissenters. Meyer provides as evidence political cartoons from 1934 in which sailors read the Bible on leave and turn a cold shoulder to beautified, flirtatious women.\textsuperscript{145} However, it is Cadmus’s references to the “Pollyanna admirals” who were seemingly unaware of the “things” the artist had seen along Riverside Drive that are emphasized by Meyer as a shrewd method of inversion for Cadmus.\textsuperscript{146} In so doing, Cadmus suggests that his image presents a masculine ideal, but that the prudery of the navy is more traditionally feminine. This inversion prevented the navy from accusing him of being homosexual, shielding the artist from accusations of sexual “deviance” by accusing the navy of such behavior.

Certainly Cadmus depicted a homosexual figure, and that figure can be further complicated in terms of heterosexual normativity. Meyer’s text addresses the gay civilian as a “fairy,” a term he takes from George Chauncey to describe a gay man who was historically considered to be of a “third sex.”\textsuperscript{147} Chauncey argues that at the end of the nineteenth century, and early into the twentieth, it was widely accepted that a gay man’s sexual desire was the result of a gender inversion which caused the fairy to be more

\textsuperscript{144} Meyer, 41.
\textsuperscript{145} Meyer, 50-52.
\textsuperscript{146} Meyer, 52-56.
\textsuperscript{147} Meyer, 43-44.
female than male, resulting in a gendered confusion as opposed to a sexual identity.\textsuperscript{148}

Weinberg discusses sexual inversion as well in defining the homosexual. According to Weinberg, one was labeled homosexual based on their role in sexual activity. Men who were penetrated during sex (through fellatio or anal intercourse) were homosexual, but men who acted as the penetrators in homosexual encounters were not stigmatized with such a label.\textsuperscript{149} Traditionally masculine men who engaged in sexual activity with so-called fairies were not vilified to the same degree as their “feminine” peers.

While both Weinberg and Meyer rightly identify the gay civilian as the stereotypical fairy, Cadmus has played a game of inversion as well. The gay civilian offers the phallic shaped cigarette to the Marine, who eagerly accepts. The civilian leans back coolly, and it is the Marine who leans forward, desirous of the cigarette. Certainly the Marine will be the one to place the cigarette in his mouth, thereby suggesting that it is he who will take the role of penetrated in their suggested sexual encounter. Cadmus’s clever inversion would certainly have angered the navy, and much of the public as well.

As Chauncey thoroughly outlines in his text, the feminine signifiers of the fairy were well known, and in many cases the fairies were tolerated in working-class neighborhoods as long as they upheld the fairy signifiers, through which they were not seen as a gendered threat.\textsuperscript{150} However, Cadmus’s homosexual Marine is not depicted with plucked eyebrows (even in profile he is depicted with a prominent unibrow), rouged cheeks, or a red tie. He blends easily into heterosexual norms, and would never be suspected of being a

\textsuperscript{149} Weinberg, \textit{Speaking for Vice}, 39.
\textsuperscript{150} Chauncey, 47-63.
homosexual. While the known fairy is non-threatening because he is easily identified, the unknown homosexual posed a greater threat to masculinity because it meant that any man could potentially be gay. Cadmus’s depiction may have caused further anxiety as it illegitimated the long held belief in sex inversion.

*Dancing Sailors* (fig. 3.3), one of Charles Demuth’s homo-erotic watercolors nicely demonstrates that images of traditionally masculine men were not suspected of containing a gay context. In it, Demuth depicted three dancing couples, one of which is comprised of two male sailors. As Weinberg indicates, Demuth has focused the viewer’s attention on the buttocks of the male dancers and suggested a physical and psychological connection between two adjacent dancing sailors. Weinberg argues that the subtle depiction of homosexuality is so understated that Demuth allowed the image to be publicly exhibited in 1929, and that there is no documentation of scandal resulting from it.151 Because it was common and permissible for sailors to dance with each other in the absence of women, and because the sailor represented virile masculinity, the gay subtext of such an image was unrecognized in 1929.

Although Cadmus painted a homosexual inversion in *The Fleet’s In!*, one must question to what extent that figure would have been visible to a heterosexual audience. Chauncey’s text nicely demonstrates that the signifiers of homosexuality were easily identified in New York. However, the painting was neither intended to be exhibited nor censored in New York. One must question to what extent the homosexual figure was recognizable outside of New York City. Weinberg states that such signifiers changed

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rapidly to protect their wearers and “maintain a set of signs that were immutable and therefore too easily recognized by the law.” If the red tie was not a fixed signifier of the wearer’s homosexuality, it is difficult to attribute the wrath with which the painting was received exclusively to the admittedly obscure referent. Meyer questions how Cadmus depicted the homosexual coupling “at a moment when it was virtually unrepresentable within the sphere of painting and all but unspeakable within that of art criticism?” If an outright depiction of homosexuality was otherwise unseen in 1934, how likely were audiences to quickly recognize its public debut in American painting? According to Gale Munro, curator at the Navy Historical Center Art Museum, even in 2009 most people are surprised when the homosexual content is pointed out to them by the staff at the museum. If the homosexual content is often missed by a 21st century audience, it stands to reason that it would have been easy to miss in 1934.

An alternative figure type common within the sphere of painting and art criticism is the dandy, which had become a fixed figure in European painting since Charles Baudelaire’s influential essay, “The Painter of Modern Life.” Baudelaire characterizes the dandy as follows:

The distinguishing characteristic of the dandy’s beauty consists above all in an air of coldness which comes from an unshakeable determination not to be moved; you might call it a latent fire which hints at itself, and which could, but chooses

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152 Weinberg, Speaking for Vice, 34. Weinberg cites a letter by Havelock Ellis in 1890 as the source of the red tie as gay signifier, but Cadmus’s painting was 40 years later. Therefore, the red tie was not likely to still be in use in 1934.
153 Meyer, 37.
154 Conversation with Gale Munro, March 16, 2009 at the Navy Historical Center.
not to burst into flame. It is this quality which these pictures express so perfectly.\textsuperscript{155} The vanity of the dandy led to his boredom with the world and his subsequent cool, detached, attitude. Such aloofness can be seen in the civilian as he leans back away from the Marine with an impish grin across his face. The fashionable, man-about-town, with his double-breasted suit, high collar, and slicked back hair is not dissimilar to Chauncey’s description of the New York homosexual in the early twentieth century.\textsuperscript{156} The dandy’s vanity is appropriate for an indulgent painting such as \textit{The Fleet’s In!} and arguably recognized easily by a general audience that was likely unaware of homosexual signifiers.

One of the results of the imposed silence about homosexuality in the 1930s and 40s is that it was largely invisible. Images with a gay subtext that would be easily understood by a contemporary audience were largely unreadable as such in this decade. A case in point is an advertisement in \textit{Life}, a magazine with a circulation in millions, for Munsingwear’s “stretchy-seat” underwear (fig. 3.4). In the ad, two men are presented in front of a small bed with crumpled sheets. With the exception of their boxer shorts, neither man is dressed. One of the men stands before the other who is bent over on hands and knees with his anus pointed at the viewer. The caption reads: “Best Seat in the House


. . . Sez You,” an implicit conversation about the aforementioned anus. The kneeling man then explains to the reader why Munsingwear is ideal: it does not tear when you “bend over,” and when standing, it “comes right back.”

While it is clear that the advertisers intended to show men wearing the underwear, the setting is obviously suggestive sexually. The men are not changing in a locker room after a vigorous tennis game, nor are they in a room with two beds. Rather, the image suggests these two undressed men have shared the bed, and their poses indicate what kind of activity took place there. At the bottom of the ad, is a photograph of the boxer shorts with a caption that reads “Right in the Seat of the Pants,” which is of course the view of the kneeling man that is provided to the viewer, as well as a campy reference to anal intercourse. The sexual overtones of this image make its context clear to a contemporary audience, but must have been fairly invisible at the time as Munsingwear was unlikely to target a homosexual audience because they would risk alienating heterosexual customers by doing so. If such an obviously suggestive image was unnoticed by the Munsingwear executive who approved its publication, and Life readers, how clearly could the civilian in The Fleet’s In! have been recognized less than a decade earlier?

Further complicating the relative explicitness of homosexuality in The Fleet’s In! can be demonstrated by another advertisement from 1937. The ad for Lucky Strike cigarettes presents the lead actor of A Farewell to Arms, Gary Cooper, in similar attire and with similar mannerisms to the civilian homosexual in The Fleet’s In! (fig. 3.5). Like Cadmus’s painted figure, Cooper has pursed lips that terminate in a mischievous grin.

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157 Munsingwear advertisement in Life (March 17, 1941).
158 Luck Strike Advertisement in Life (July 26, 1937) back cover.
The movie star is depicted effortlessly holding a cigarette with such delicacy, that his hand could only be described as limp wristed. His wardrobe for the ad includes a green button down shirt with a red ascot tie tucked into its collar. The colorization of the photo has left the leading man with rouged cheeks and obviously painted-on eyebrows.

Certainly Lucky Strike cigarettes and Paramount Pictures (who represented Cooper) did not intend for the image to be read with a homosexual context, and they certainly would not have printed it were one plainly present. If such popular imagery of an iconic leading man of the 1930s was common, then perhaps the homosexual civilian depicted by Cadmus was less visible than scholars have argued. A gay audience was likely to recognize themselves in the painting, but the greater heterosexual audience was less likely to identify gay signifiers. A re-framing of the image will therefore further complicate the censorship, to locate other potential aesthetic and moral paradigms that were broken by Cadmus.

The Navy, Cheap Liquor and Women:

Both Weinberg and Meyer focus their scholarly attention on what could not be said during the scandal. They propose that Cadmus depicted a homosexual coupling, and that this was the unspoken reason for censoring the painting. However, there are other contexts in which the media accounts can be read. Much was written about the women depicted by Cadmus, some of whom may be prostitutes, as well as the fact that the figures appear to be intoxicated. These are significant contexts because the navy was in a precarious financial situation at the time of the censorship, and images of their soliciting
prostitutes while drunk in a park could threaten the financial support so desperately needed. Furthermore, the military takes orders very seriously, and the behavior of the depicted sailors is strictly forbidden with very serious consequences, in which case, Cadmus’s painting would be seen as a personal attack on the morals of the navy.

As early as January 1934, Georgia representative Carl Vinson proposed a bill in Congress that allowed the navy to strengthen itself. Vinson recognized that financial support of the navy had been in a two year decline during the Depression, and recognized that Japan was unsatisfied with its allotment of aircraft carriers under the Washington Naval Treaty of 1922.\(^{159}\) Vinson was rightly concerned that the U.S. Navy was becoming “obsolete” and had fallen to fifth place worldwide. The Vinson Bill was not universally popular, as Darwin J. Meserole’s letter to the editor of the *New York Times* demonstrates. Meserole refers to the bill as “iniquitous” and challenges the money already allocated by Congress to the navy, and how that money is actually being spent.\(^{160}\) Of particular concern to Meserole was the fact that the U.S. initiated the Washington Treaty limiting the tonnage of vessels in navies worldwide, but would break it by amassing such a large navy that American authority would be unchecked. Despite such objections, the bill passed in the House of Representatives in January, the Senate in early March, and signed by President Roosevelt less than one week before Rodman’s letter about Cadmus’s painting was leaked to the press. President Roosevelt made it clear that the final bill he

\(^{159}\) “Roosevelt Backs Treaty Navy Bill; $286,445,577 Asked,” *New York Times* (January 23, 1934): 1. Under the Washington Naval Treaty of 1922, countries were allotted a set tonnage of capital ships and aircraft carriers and Japan was allotted nearly two-thirds that of the U.S. and U.K.  
\(^{160}\) Darwin J. Meserole, “Letter to the Editor,” *New York Times* (January 26, 1934): 16. Meserole suggests that the navy was double dipping as it was directly allocated funds for rebuilding, but also indirectly awarded funds by the Public Works Administration, and he argues that the money was not spent on building or salaries.
signed did not appropriate funds for the project, but merely “authorized” the construction of more ships.\textsuperscript{161} Certainly Cadmus’s painting was disadvantageous for the navy, who did not want a negative image of sailors portrayed one week after the start of a campaign to fund rearmament.

Media accounts of the censorship indicate that the anger surrounding \textit{The Fleet’s In!} was due to his depiction of the sailors as “guzzlers and neckers.”\textsuperscript{162} The virtue of the women (and by extension, the sailors) and the consumption of alcohol months after Prohibition was officially repealed, were of particular concern to the media, and to the navy in 1934. According to Article 8.1 of the United States Navy Regulations, written in 1922 and reprinted in 1932, the punishment for sailors behaving as Cadmus’s was a court martial.

\textbf{Scandalous Conduct:} Such punishment as a court martial may adjudge be inflicted on any person in the Navy—(1) Who is guilty of profane swearing, falsehood, drunkenness, gambling, fraud, theft, or any other scandalous conduct tending to the destruction of good morals.\textsuperscript{163}

To put this regulation into perspective, Article 14 describes the lesser offenses “Punishable by Fine and Imprisonment,” and it lists embezzlement and selling of naval property.\textsuperscript{164} The 1920 regulations were put into effect by Josephus Daniels during and

\textsuperscript{162} Frank Sullivan, “The Black Sheep,” \textit{New Yorker} (June 2, 1934): 36.
\textsuperscript{164} \textit{United States Navy Regulations, 1920}. 

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after the Newport scandal, and his legacy is his attempt to clean up the moral image of
the navy following World War I.

Further complicating the scandal is that following the repealment of Prohibition,
the navy relaxed the restrictions on alcohol put into place in 1921 under Daniels. On
March 21, 1934 (roughly two weeks before the Cadmus scandal), H.L. Roosevelt issued a
general order in which he explicitly states that the possession and consumption of
alcoholic beverages on “shore establishments” will be “confined to officers’ quarters,
officers’ messes, and officers’ clubs.”\textsuperscript{165} He further asserts that under “special
circumstances” exceptions can be made, but only when permission has been granted by
the secretary of the navy. The drunkenness of the sailors in Cadmus’s painting (none of
which is depicted in an officer’s uniform) would have been in direct violation of
Roosevelt’s order. Overriding Daniels’s 1921 outright ban on any consumption of alcohol
was certainly met with some criticism, and Roosevelt would certainly not wish for any of
his sailors to be influenced by Cadmus’s painting, nor would he want his critics to see in
the painting the possible outcome of Roosevelt’s relaxation of the rules.

In addition to the public drunkenness of the sailors, the virtue of the women was
also vehemently objected to by the navy. Returning to Admiral Rodman’s statements
about the painting, it is plain that he emphasizes the moral virtue of the women. His
concern is that “apparently a number of enlisted men are consorting with a party of street-
walkers and denizens of the red-light district. This is an unwarranted insult to the enlisted

personnel of our Navy.” Rodman’s objection is not that the sailors are cruising for women, but rather he objects to the kind of women with which the sailors are “consorting.” Whether the women are intended to be read as prostitutes can be debated. However, what is clear is that the sailors did not have to travel far to find these women. In other words, these are women who had dressed themselves up in tight dresses, painted their faces, and hurried to Riverside Park as the fleet came in. Their excitement is indicated by Cadmus’s addition of an exclamation point in the title. They are depicted as enthusiastically seeking temporary relations with the sailors on leave. These are not the virginal girls that were fantasized about by men as the ideal for marriage. A passage from Admiral Rodman’s personal memoirs in 1927 indicates his misogynistic attitude toward such women’s sexuality. Rodman wrote about an incident that took place ten years earlier in which a ship under his command had docked in New York City. He gave the order that only married men were permitted to go ashore, and the incident he describes took place when an unmarried sailor, Peter Worms, asked permission to break the rule:

He went away, but within thirty minutes he was again at the mast . . . this time with a very much painted and bedeckled “chippie” apparently eighteen—silk dress, feathers in her hat, and an abundance of cheap jewelry. Where on earth he had accumulated her in that short time, I do not know . . .

Again Peter asked to go on liberty.

“Look here Worms, you have been informed, and know full well, that no one but married men can go ashore.”

“I’m a married man, sir; and this is my wife.”

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“The mischief you say; what is her name?”

Turning to her sharply, he said, “What is your name, you hussy?” Before she could reply, and realizing his predicament, he turned to me and said, “Why, it’s Mrs. Worms, sir; you don’t suppose I’d associate with any one but a lady do you?”

This was too much; it was impossible to keep my face straight, so I said, “Go to it, Peter, have your name put on the liberty list.” And the last I saw of him, he had hired a hack with two horses, had “Mrs. Worms” with him and, amidst the plaudits of the crew was headed at top speed straight toward the Navy Yard gate.167

The casualness, and crude humor, with which Rodman uses the phrases “chippie” and “hussy” indicate that the Admiral held contempt for the “free love” that Ellen Wiley Todd argues was a feature of the New Woman in the early 20th century.168 One could be tempted to argue that Rodman’s cavalier story, featuring one of Cadmus’s women, indicates that the women cannot be the subjects to which Rodman objected. However, the navy’s financial condition in 1934 was much more delicate than it was in 1927, and measures were put in place to clean up the navy’s image by the time Cadmus’s painting was viewed.

There were other paintings at the “National Exhibition of the Art by the Public Works of Art Project” in which sailors soliciting attention of women were not contested. An unknown New York Times writer stated that the Navy was likely to be offended by a

168 Todd, 24-26.
nearly completed painting by John Sloan, *The Old Wigwam* (fig. 3.6).\(^{169}\) Formally, Sloan’s painterly surface and low horizon line have little to do with Cadmus’s painting. However, the depicted crowd passing by the historic building includes two sailors, one of whom is barely able to walk because he is so intoxicated, and is kept upright with the help of his colleague’s arm. In the crowd on the street, this pairing is emphasized by having the most open space around them. They are depicted passing by two women, as the drunkard calls out to them, gesturing wildly with his hand. However, the women to whom he calls are fashionably dressed and accompanied by a man. They turn their bodies away from the drunken sailor to indicate that his advances are unwelcome. Their male companion returns the gaze of the sailor in a protective gesture. As in *The Fleet’s In!*, Sloan has depicted intoxicated sailors cruising for women. The main difference between the two is that the women are morally upstanding, and could in no way be read as prostitutes—they are “ladies.”

Richard Meyer has argued that Cadmus depicted women harshly because of his lack of sexual desire for them stating “an excess of chastising, occurs when the figure is female or otherwise feminized.”\(^{170}\) His evidence for such a statement rests on the apparent belittlement of the woman competing with the homosexual for the passed out sailor. However, if this painting were to be read in the context of Linda Nochlin’s influential essay, “Women, Art, and Power,” it can be argued that the depiction of women in *The Fleet’s In!* as active, and therefore “unladylike,” may be a positive critique of gendered norms. According to Nochlin,


\(^{170}\) Meyer, 75.
Assumptions about women’s weakness and passivity; her sexual availability for men’s needs; her defining nurturing and domestic function; her identity with the realm of nature; . . . all of these notions, themselves premised on an even more general, more all-pervasive certainty about gender difference itself—all of these notions were shared, if not uncontestedly, to a greater or lesser degree by most people of our period, and as such constitute an ongoing subtext underlying almost all individual images involving women.¹⁷¹

Cadmus’s women have likely been read as prostitutes because they do not conform to the traditional construction of women in art. The assumption that the women must be prostitutes is premised on their presence at Riverside Park to meet the sailors for a brief encounter. The “active” role of these repellent women seeking physical, sexual release has been reduced since 1934 to a financial exchange. It is assumed that these women are sexually available for the sailor’s needs, but instead of seeking pleasure for themselves, they seek only financial gains. Neither are these women “nurturing and domestic,” they are not behaving as mothers, and do not appear to be seeking husbands. Nochlin argues that passivity, sexual availability, and maternity are socially linked with women as “ladies.”¹⁷² The statements of Admiral Rodman suggest that he was primarily angered by the suggestion that his sailors were depicted carousing with un-ladylike women. While

¹⁷¹ Linda Nochlin, “Women, Art, and Power,” *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988):3. The portion left out of the quote includes the role of women as creators of art, which is not applicable to the points being made here.
¹⁷² Nochlin, 4-5.
the prevalent trope of the virile sailor with a woman in every port was frequently represented in the 1930s, “good girls” were often represented alongside them.¹⁷³

Anna Chave argues that the central cause of such anxiety expressed by Rodman is a general fear in the modern age that women and people of color were perceived as a threat to the status quo and therefore believed to denigrate society.¹⁷⁴ Because Cadmus himself was a marginalized figure due to his sexuality, and because he constructed this painting as a legitimate threat to the status quo, it is problematic to assume that the unladylike behavior of these women was intended to reinforce societal norms. Eliasoph has argued that Cadmus’s satire functioned to generate equality in which homosexuals and heterosexuals were equally “immoral” with regards to sexual activity.¹⁷⁵ To accomplish this, one must assume that all participants in the sexual exchanges, both homosexual and heterosexual, are participating for their own pleasure. In order to construct an image of universal sexuality, Cadmus painted the women as equals to the men—equally unattractive, unrefined, and desirous of selfish sexual pleasure.

Alcohol, sex, women, sailors, and a gay figure intersect in The Fleet’s In!. Censorship of this image by the navy is as complicated and varied as the painting itself. The navy, who had full control over its image in Hollywood,¹⁷⁶ was particularly sensitive to many of the issues raised by Cadmus in this painting. In order to rearm itself after World War I, the navy found itself in a position of intolerance towards any negative

¹⁷⁶ See Lawrence H. Suid, Sailing the Silver Screen (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1996).
depiction. Cadmus would never find himself pitted against such a Goliath as his later suppressors were small institutions in comparison, and none wished to be as outspoken after the fallout from this scandal. The artist had claimed a position in American art with this debut, and over the next decade crowds gathered whenever a painting by Cadmus “of navy fame” was exhibited.  

177 Articles published on Cadmus nearly always referred back to *The Fleet’s In!* such as the article “Paul Cadmus of Navy Fame Has His First Art Show,” *Life* (March 22, 1937): 44-47.
CHAPTER IV

THE IMMIGRANT WORKING CLASS AT PLAY: CONEY ISLAND

The media had not yet calmed down from *The Fleet’s In!* fury when Paul Cadmus’s second painting was attacked. The attempted censorship of *Coney Island* (fig. 4.1), however, was less successful than that of *The Fleet’s In!* and did not create a similar uproar in the press. In part, very likely, this was because the painting was not paid for by the PWAP or any other federal program.\(^\text{178}\) Thus, there was no possible argument that public money had been improperly spent, and censorship would have been a clear infringement on free personal expression. The painting depicts the famous beach crowded with people, obviously of working class background, and the figures are depicted with pronouncedly ethnic features. The grittiness of the figures is emphasized as they eat lollipops and ice cream cones in the sand, while their body hair, tan lines, boils, and varicose veins are gloriously depicted.

The painting was first exhibited at the Whitney Museum of American Art’s second biennial exhibition in November 1934. At this time, The Coney Island Business Men’s League, a group of businessmen with a financial interest in the park, filed a complaint of libel against the Whitney.\(^\text{179}\) As the artist later recalled, they “threatened all sorts of things. Nothing ever happened except publicity for me.”\(^\text{180}\) The painting was not removed, and the threatened lawsuit never materialized as it was likely intended to force the Whitney to take the painting off public view. The painting was again exhibited in a

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\(^{178}\) Judd Tully interview.

\(^{179}\) Salpeter, 111. The lawsuit never materialized. Therefore, any record of the original complaint has been impossible to acquire.

1935 exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum titled “Humor in Art,” where it was harshly criticized, but allowed to remain in the exhibition.

This chapter will argue that Cadmus’s working class figures did not conform to contemporary paradigms for depicting the working class in the Depression Era, and the artist did not utilize traditional satire, both of which resulted in a general agreement that Cadmus presented an unsympathetic and amoral view of his subject. Additionally, his choice to present the subject with ethnic figures was especially disconcerting in the mid 1930s as the ethics of eugenics was heavily debated in the popular media, especially in New York where the painting was exhibited twice.

Cadmus painted *Coney Island* in the summer of 1934. Based on sketches made on Coney Island, it was completed while vacationing in the more elite surroundings of Martha’s Vineyard. The painting centers on a figural group posing for a photograph. The central group is stacked in a pyramidal form, all blissfully grinning towards a photographer. Around this group are scattered people sleeping, eating, and casually reading popular magazines. The figures have no personal space, and their hairy, sweaty bodies actually come in contact with one another as evidenced by the young man lying on his belly who is depicted shoulder to shoulder with the man buried in the sand. These two figures are not presented as having arrived at the beach together, or as companions. Instead, the artist has denied any comfort for the viewer by depicting these strangers touching. This claustrophobic depiction is nearly as uncomfortable for the viewer as the figures are unappealing.

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181 Eliasoph, “Paul Cadmus: Life and Work,” 129.
Coney Island at the Whitney Museum of American Art

Cadmus’s *Coney Island* was first exhibited at the Whitney Museum of American Art in the biennial which was to last from November 27, 1934 to January 10, 1935. The curator of the exhibition, C. Adolph Glassgold, personally invited the artists to participate in the exhibition, but permitted the artists themselves to select which of their works would be shown. Juliana Force, then director of the Whitney, explained the unusual practice of artist authority as follows: “We send out our invitations, and each artist may wear what he pleases to our party.”182

*Coney Island* was a sensible choice for Cadmus as it was his most recent work, and was not a federally subsidized painting. It was also less likely to incite scandal than his only other 1934 painting available for exhibit, *Greenwich Village Cafeteria* (fig. 3.2), which dealt with homosexual themes. Homosexuality is marginally present in *Coney Island*, but is limited to the blonde male youth who dreamily gazes at a muscular acrobat while ignoring his female companion. She is depicted with her eyes closed to his gaze, while using his firm buttocks as a pillow. The blonde youth has raised his lower leg in excitement, reminiscent of a film siren swooning at the muscle man before him. This minor suggestion of homosexuality is unnoticeable compared to *Greenwich Village Cafeteria* which includes no fewer than three men with pencil thin eyebrows, wearing an abundance of jewelry, and a man entering the rest room with red painted fingernails. While the male civilian in *The Fleet’s In!* could have been publicly interpreted as a dandy, or invisible to the general public in 1934, the red fingernails were an unmistakable

signifier of the sexuality of the man entering the men’s room. The artist could expect some controversy from the latter painting, and likely believed he would avoid controversy by exhibiting *Coney Island* instead. But if he hoped to avoid controversy altogether, he was to be disappointed.

The biennial was favorably reviewed. The art critic Edward Alden Jewell declared that it announced a new era in American painting, stating “we need not call upon any very acute clairvoyance in order to perceive that the American artist has been doing some pretty bold and purposeful thinking of late.” Jewell notes that the American artist’s ability to transcend their social subject matter with formal aesthetics is the true strength of contemporary American art. In his review, Jewell discusses and notes nearly forty names, but remarkably, omitted any mention of Cadmus, although his painting was one of the few in the show that a contemporary art historian would recognize.

Considering Cadmus’s recent scandal in Washington, it is understandable that the Whitney would be sensitive to the potentially negative impact that the previous scandal could garner. An exchange of letters between Glassgold and Cadmus indicates that neither party wished for a scandal to negatively influence the public about the biennial exhibition. According to Glassgold, a reporter from *American Weekly*, Charles Robbins, wished to write a review of the exhibition. Robbins’s goal was to write “a sensational story on a few pictures” including the one by Cadmus. The letter from Glassgold inquired whether Cadmus would permit a photo of *Coney Island* to be reproduced with

the article. Glassgold declared that he believed that Robbins intends to write a sensational article, and thought it in poor taste, but was not in the business of censoring the press or hindering an artist if he or she chooses to have their work presented in such a manner. Cadmus’s response sheds an interesting light on his initial reaction to the scandal over *The Fleet’s In!*. He wrote: “Publicity of such a nature may give the fake impression that my aim is to be sensational. If my aim were such, I would gladly accept the proffered notoriety. As it is not, I will refuse.”185

It was apparently not until much later that the artist recognized the positive effect that the censorship had caused his career. In 1988, for example, Cadmus recalled that “I don't think we realized how important it would be for my future career, but it just seemed like a passing thing.”186 Clearly at the end of 1934, Cadmus wished to distance himself from scandal, and therefore declined the potential notoriety an article in *America Weekly* would provide.

The earliest published and public account that the Coney Island Business Men’s League used litigation to insist *Coney Island* be removed from the biennial is found in a 1937 *Esquire* article by Harry Salpeter, fully three years after the exhibition took place.187 The fact that it did not appear in earlier newspapers or journals indicates that the scandal was kept quiet. Certainly both Cadmus and Force were still exhausted from the ongoing scandal surrounding *The Fleet’s In!*, and the Coney Island businessmen certainly did not

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186 Judd Tully interview, 1988. It is unclear from the interview who is included in “we.” Cadmus answered a question about how Jared French felt about the publicity, and Cadmus’s response indicates that “we” is in addition to French.
187 Salpeter, 112.
want the negative press that previously surrounded the navy. All benefitted from the silence surrounding the attempted suppression of *Coney Island*.

*Coney Island at the Brooklyn Museum of Art*

Cadmus exhibited *Coney Island* for the second time at the Brooklyn Museum in a 1935 show titled “Humor in Art,” which was organized by Herbert Tschudy, the museum’s curator of contemporary art. The artists exhibited were primarily American, however, Tschudy indicates that the scope of the exhibition included Asian, African, and ancient examples of humor in art to demonstrate that humor and satire are universal and had a long history in art, although not one that had been seriously examined. Tschudy was particularly interested in what he calls “grim humor,” which he defines as:

. . . based on daily accidents, ludicrous but ghastly incidents of war, laughter at death, or at the queer movements of the halt or blind. When did man first laugh? . . . did he laugh first at irregularities in the human face and form, or was it mostly at the antics of animals?\(^{189}\)

Notably, Cadmus’s depiction of bodies clumsily strewn about on the sand was an instance of the sort of “grim humor” that Tschudy singled out. The grotesque ethnic features of the figures fit neatly into the issues that he identified, that of the “irregularities of the human face and form.” The high keyed color in the painting was also an element that contributed to the painting’s exaggerated, humorous effect. Interestingly, however, the press releases preceding the exhibition were not accompanied by any examples of

\(^{189}\) Tschudy, 69.
grim humor. Tschudy’s press release reproduced conservative paintings of clowns by little known artists Victor de Pauw and S. B. Kahan, flirtatious paintings of women by Lena Gurr and Helen Farr, and animal images simply attributed to Nura and Buk. Cadmus, who was nearly the most recognizable name in the exhibition, is not mentioned outright in the article. Tschudy’s one possible reference to Cadmus’s work was veiled and oblique: he stated that the exhibition included “pictures of singers and of people who parade their vanity along the highways, at the beaches or in the home.” In fact, a New York Times announcement of the “Humor in Art” exhibition includes a listing of thirty-eight artists in the show, but Cadmus is not among them. Again silence was likely beneficial to everyone involved. The Brooklyn Museum successfully kept the artist’s name out of the press—that is until critics began to review the show, at which point the artist’s name began to appear in a negative light. A New York Times review of “Humor in Art” by Elisabeth Luther Cary found little humor in Cadmus’s depiction of the immigrant working class.

Cary opened her review by applauding the portraits of clowns by de Pauw, which she felt captured the nobility of these traditional entertainers. In fact, it is specifically the conventional manner in which de Pauw treated his subject that is greatly applauded by Cary in her review: she admired the fact that de Pauw treated clowns in the same manner

190 The only other noteworthy artist in the exhibition was Philip Evergood, who was also not mentioned in Tschudy’s article.
191 Tschudy, 72.
as traditional aristocrats.\textsuperscript{193} However, she was less complimentary to Cadmus’s unconventional depiction of the immigrant working class.

It is an acrobat’s leap from these sophisticated persons [paintings of clowns] who are neither coarse nor commonplace, whom we instantly recognize and who are beautifully drawn, to the “Coney Island” of Paul Cadmus in which is realized the ideal of “a good time” among those who must be supposed to share with us what used to be called the time-spirit, and whom we shudderingly repudiate as in any sense belonging to the social life of our time. And yet they do belong, and if the picture of their good time has its source in pity . . . that source is completely concealed. . . [It is] a lusty physical temper in pleasure and candor in demonstrating it. It is quite impossible to think that the author of “Coney Island” meant it as an educational treatise in color and line, nor can we take it as such. It is tremendously vulgar, and it shows us how vulgarity at this extreme looks.\textsuperscript{194}

Cary’s criticism of the painting rests on both moral and formal grounds. She finds no appeal to the intense color and she finds the drawing to be clumsy. Most importantly, she sees no empathy for the working class in Cadmus’s painting, no moral lesson to be learned from their vulgarity. Cary’s expectation is that the artist’s choice to depict such extreme vulgarity, which the reviewer agrees is present in American society, there must be some purpose for its depiction. In painting the ignoble without a moral lesson, the image becomes a gratuitous insult to the working class. Instead of satirizing the beachgoers, Cary finds Cadmus’s painting a pastiche of American life.


\textsuperscript{194} Cary, X15. (My brackets).
Cary’s expectation of the moral function of art was common in the 1930s and articulated well by noted theater critic, Brooks Atkinson. According to Atkinson in a review for *Tobacco Road* when it opened in New York in 1933, the play was criticized as “a shameless attempt to pander to sniggering audiences.” Critics disapproved of the “degradation” of Erskine Caldwell’s characters, and found the play to encompass low standards of taste. Atkinson defended *Tobacco Road* as follows:

> It is one thing to deplore the theatre’s lack of fastidious sensibilities. But to maintain that the theatre should be devoted to the fine aspects of the human race is to imply that the human race is innocent of corruption. The function of art is not to promote a code of standards or to establish social ideals but to tell the truth about all the people who inhabit the world. What is, is, and if we are ever to get anywhere with enlightened civilization we must know the full truth about it. Whether it is flattering or distressing, inspiring or depressing, is beside the point; and the need is not for temperate speaking but for complete frankness about everyone and everything, for none of the ills of humanity can be cured until it is understood.

For Atkinson, *Tobacco Road*’s Lester family was an important depiction of an unpleasant aspect of American society, the unscrupulous family ravaged by rural poverty. The play presents the patriarch, Jeeter, perpetually scheming, denouncing God, and stealing from his neighbors with the help of his wife. One of his daughters uses sex as a tool and repeatedly throws herself at the husband of her virginal sister, a man who in his

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196 Atkinson, X1.
sexual frustration has apparently attempted to rape his wife. Jeeter’s son is disrespectful and openly hostile towards his parents. He marries a preacher who has developed her own religion, but not for love, but because she has agreed to buy him a car. None of the characters have any work ethic. Nonetheless, they exhibit an overwhelming sense of entitlement. Ultimately, their selfishness obstructs their ability to acquire what they desire. By the end of the play, Jeeter is alone and will be evicted from his unusable farm, his virginal daughter leaves town never to see her family again. His other daughter chases after her brother-in-law who runs from her because he finds her so ugly due to a hair lip, and his son’s new car is all but destroyed within a day of its purchase and is responsible for his mother’s death.  

According to Atkinson, these characters were created to provide a foil to American values, but the viewer’s awareness of the consequences of their actions only reinforce American diligence, morality, and ethics. Such an approach nicely turns moral criticism on its head. The representation of bad behavior becomes a sort of admonition for virtue.

But Atkinson’s argument does not transfer neatly to Cadmus’s Coney Island group, which are not quite so easily reduced to simple moral stereotypes. Cadmus’s sloven figures are certainly not the “social ideals,” but neither are they morally reprehensible. While the figures are nearly nude in their swimming attire, their sexuality is far less explicit than was present in The Fleet’s In!. The sexuality of the Coney Island figures is implicitly suggested as the blonde woman licks an ice cream cone while seated

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197 Jack Kirkland, Tobacco Road (New York: Viking Press, 1934). This 1934 play was based on the 1932 novel of the same name written by Erskine Caldwell.
between the legs of the man at the base of the pyramidal group. The figures are not depicted as engaged in any criminal activities—no pick-pocketing or unwanted groping, for example, takes place amid the crowd. The figures enjoy themselves as they eat, drink, and doze on the beach, without negatively impacting any other beachgoers. Therefore, there are no consequences for their sloven appearance, as their only moral crime is being unattractive and unrefined. Cary’s assertion that we “shudderingly repudiate as in any sense belonging to the social life of our time,” indicates an expectation that virtue and beauty should intersect in art, as should their opposites.

**Coney Island as Carnival**

In fact, Cadmus’s painting was unusual since it did not present a moralizing form of satire, but was a celebration of what Mikhail Bakhtin has described as “the carnivalesque,” a form of satire that provides a form of “release” from normal social standards. As such, carnival is a ritual performance that assaults conventional morality and social hierarchies and when performed at specific festivals, it is a socially acceptable break from everyday experience. Bakhtin differentiates the negative function of modern satire from the positive aspects of Medieval “folk humor.”¹⁹⁸ Medieval folk humor is associated with carnivals that provided people temporary relief from “official culture,” which Bakhtin describes as “hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions.”¹⁹⁹ Coney Island beach provided its visitors similar respite as Bakhtin’s Medieval carnivals. Bakhtin argues that the folk laughter found at the carnival is not aimed at a specific comic

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¹⁹⁹ Bakhtin, 10.
event, and is not narrowly focused. Rather, all people partake in the jubilant laughter, and all who partake in the laughter are also the subject of that laughter. The folk laughter therefore held a rejuvenating spirit as opposed to one of destruction and degridation.

Reading *Coney Island* in the context of folk humor and laughter, it can be argued that the viewer is not intended to negatively laugh at the figures to reinforce cultural norms, as is the case with modern satire. Rather, the viewer is meant to find pleasure in the beachgoers’ ability to transcend the serious tone of daily life in the Depression Era. The figures laugh, play, and eat at the beach. The tan lines, sunburns, and varicose veins indicate that the pleasure they experience at Coney Island is a temporary respite from their daily lives of hard labor. Unlike his contemporaries, Cadmus does not depict these figures finding pleasure and solace in their labor, nor does he depict them somberly waiting in bread lines. His optimistic view finds relief and jubilation on the beach at Coney Island.

Bakhtin argues that folk humor is focused on the lower stratum of the body: the belly, the buttocks, genitals, and those body parts exposed to the elements of the earth. Eating, defecating, and sex thus become important themes of regeneration and are more democratic than that of the upper stratum of the body. Intellect and knowledge are essentially elitist, but the elements of the lower stratum are inherently universal. Cadmus’s depiction of the lower stratum is therefore simultaneously offensive and uplifting. While Cadmus could not have been aware of Bakhtin’s theory in 1934, he likely would have been aware of the precedents set by the Medieval author, Rabelais.

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200 Bakhtin, 11-12.
through the painter’s relationship with Jared French who had previously studied literature before embarking on his career as an artist. Bakhtin has described Rabelais’s work as having:

. . . a certain undestroyable nonofficial nature. No dogma, no authoritarianism, no narrow minded seriousness can coexist with Rabelaisian images; these images are opposed to all that is finished and polished, to all pomposity, to every ready-made solution in the sphere of thought and world outlook. . . . Many were repulsed and still are repulsed by him. The vast majority, however, simply do not understand him. In fact, many of his images remain an enigma.202

The criticism of Cadmus indicates a parallel between the work of both Rabelais and Cadmus. The emphasis of the lower stratum has for so long been considered vulgar and unsophisticated and stands in opposition to art critics who celebrate the cerebral in the arts. However, Bakhtin notes that the body parts of the lower stratum and their actions are only positive and regenerative when performed collectively, the isolated, private body remains shameful and detached from society.203 Bakhtin’s communal carnivalesque spirit is present in Cadmus’s canvas. In Coney Island, sex is implicit as the seated woman licks the phallic ice cream cone, Cracker Jacks and lollipops are gratuitously consumed, beer is poured into the mouth of a recumbent man by his bare breasted female companion, and the only legible sign in the background announces the public baths. Cadmus’s figures are associated with this lower stratum of the body and their sunburns alert the viewer to the exposure of their bodies to the world around them. Their link to the earth remains

202 Bakhtin, 3.
203 Bakhtin, 23.
unbroken, and they will be rejuvenated and more productive after their temporary relief from their laborious lives.

Today we can see Cadmus’s “carnivalesque” painting as a form of positive expression. But it was not seen in a positive light in the 1930s. For a better understanding of how Cadmus’s figures came to be seen as unconventional, shocking, and reprehensible, it is useful to make a comparison of his lone depiction of the beach with the many paintings of this subject by his contemporary, Reginald Marsh. Cadmus and Marsh first met when both attended the Art Students League in the 1920s. Marsh began painting Coney Island in 1931 as Cadmus was beginning his two year trip abroad with Jared French. In fact, Cadmus later paid tribute to the influence of Marsh on the subject matter of his pictures, and indicated that his work provided the impetus for the shift in artistic direction he made at this time. When asked why he stopped painting pastoral scenes and landscapes in favor of the American scene, Cadmus indicated that while painting in Mallorca, 1932, he received art journals from his sister, Fidelma, and he “began to look closely at Reginald Marsh’s scenes.”

The influence of Marsh can be seen in Cadmus’s statements about Coney Island as subject matter:

Coney Island seemed to me a sort of classical American subject; Reginald [Marsh] had used it a great deal before I did, other painters had too. But what Reginald [Marsh] said about Coney Island, I quite agree with. He said: “I like Coney Island because of the sea, the open air and the crowds—crowds of people

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in all directions, in all positions, without clothing, moving, like the great compositions of Michelangelo and Rubens.\(^{205}\)

While both artists deny personal space for their figures and include acrobats and human pyramids in their compositions, there are significant differences between the artists’ compositions and apparent attitudes towards the working class subject matter.

Marsh’s many paintings of the famous beach include images of the amusement park rides, heroic lifeguards, playful rough-housing, and circus side-shows. His depiction of social class in these images is unlike that depicted by Cadmus. In *Coney Island* of 1935 (fig. 4.2), Marsh depicts the working class of Coney Island as fashionably dressed. The women in the painting are painted with hats and hairstyles reminiscent of Hollywood actresses. They do not reflect the photographs that the artist took in the 1930s, of robust women with sweaty, greasy hair, sometimes covered by a bathing cap (fig. 4.3). In translating his photographic studies into painted forms, Marsh has prettified the working class to create an aesthetic that parallels a Hollywood musical.

Scholar Marilyn Cohen has described Marsh’s women as “the American male’s ideal of femininity.”\(^{206}\) According to Cohen, Marsh depicted the women as they emulated the screen sirens of the 1930s. The projected fantasies of Jean Harlow and Mae West types on the crowded beach are unrealistic—the heat and humidity of Coney Island would assault the hairstyle and make-up of such sirens. Such aesthetic choices led critic Lloyd Goodrich to describe Marsh as though “he was only a Yale man in bum’s

\(^{205}\) Cadmus quoted in Kirstein, *Paul Cadmus*, 27. (Brackets are by Kirstein).

clothing.”

Cohen explains that Marsh was decidedly drawn to the lower classes, but notes that he was “selective” in the lower class types as evidenced by his frequent repetition of subject matter.

Marsh is quoted by Lloyd Goodrich as stating: “well bred people are no fun to paint.”

Perhaps the “fun” for Marsh was in transforming the actual conditions of the working class into a fantasy of their reality.

In contrast, Cadmus presents little fantasy for his viewer. Bakhtin describes the difference as the classic body (official culture) versus the grotesque (non-official culture).

As opposed to the classic beauty of Marsh’s figures, Cadmus paints the beachgoers as unattractive, irreverent, and outside the official canons of beauty. However, to say that all of his figures are exaggerated caricatures of the Coney Island beachgoer would be a significant overstatement. Certainly, the youthful figures comprising the couple in the foreground have classical bodies, with beautiful, muscular proportions. Equal to their classic glory is a male acrobat demonstrating his strength and agility by raising his lower body above his torso. However, it is significant that the apparently “grotesque” bodies are central to the composition, and our attention is focused on them, whereas the classic bodies are marginally present, literally squeezed between their contemporaries.

One notable exception to Marsh’s classical working class figures can be found in Coney Island Beach of 1934 (fig. 4.4). In this painting, Marsh’s figures are presented claustrophobically close to one another—a point which is exaggerated by the artist’s

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208 Cohen, 14.
209 Goodrich, 35.
210 Bakhtin, 25.
choice to distort proportions. The figures in the middle ground are depicted larger and clearer than those in the foreground so that perspective is unclear and any space between these figures is negated. He painted the beach covered with trash and replaced the classical strength and beauty of his figures with bathing caps, receding hairlines, and eyeglasses. Many of the figures are depicted with very dark skin, as opposed to his more classic depiction of figures with lightly golden tans. Danger is implied within the crowd as a very pale, blonde woman recoils with horror at a dark skinned man who quickly advances towards her. The woman is painted covering her torso and breasts with a shocked expression and mouth agape. His aggression and her fear indicate that for Marsh’s figures there is little relaxation to be had at the beach. Superficially, the figures in this composition come very close to those presented by Cadmus. However, the gritty realism of Marsh’s working class is counterbalanced by the addition of the Coney Island Boardwalk in the background. Watching—literally from on high—is the bourgeois class in hats, suits, and dresses, watching and pointing at the masses below them. The boardwalk becomes a place of respite for the Marsh viewer. In contrast, Cadmus’s figures are perfectly contented in their surroundings, making the hoard of working class figures autonomous.

Almost all of Marsh’s Coney Island paintings depict classical beauties, and they are nearly all presented as Anglo-Americans. However, Marsh directly addressed race in his 1934 painting, *Negroes on Rockaway Beach* (fig. 4.5). Marsh’s depiction of the beach clearly reinforces the long held stereotype that African Americans have uncontrollable sexual desires, as he depicted a primary female figure in the foreground with her legs
spread wide toward the viewer. Additionally, the shoulder strap of her swimsuit falls
down one arm as she raises the other above her head in the pose of an odalisque.²¹¹
Marsh’s black beachgoers are depicted lying atop one another and their physical contact
further sexualizes them. The African American figures further differ from Marsh’s other
Coney Island paintings because the painting is the only instance in which his figures
simply lie about on the beach in an apparently lazy manner. Marsh’s other Coney Island
paintings are filled with active figures: playfully wrestling, performing acrobatics, and
enjoying amusement park rides.

With the notable exception of Marsh’s *Negroes on Rockaway Beach*, Cadmus’s
dozing, eating figures are more passive in comparison to Marsh’s Coney Island paintings.
Marsh only portrayed African Americans in this fashion. Cadmus applied this approach
to Caucasian figures, but not the homogenous Anglo-American figures of Marsh. Rather,
Cadmus’s figures have ethnic features linking them to the Mediterranean and East
European nationalities. Marsh’s racially homogenous figures were heroically viewed by
the public as “Americans” at the famous beach, whereas Cadmus’s ethnic figures
emphasize their otherness, and are therefore suggestive of their immigrant status.

Such a depiction of race was a controversial matter in the 1930s. One writer even
suggested that this demonstrated that Cadmus was somehow linked with Nazi racial
doctrines. Harry Salpeter, writing in Esquire magazine, in 1932, declared that “a Nazi
reached the complementary conclusion that the painter must be a fellow Hitlerian
traveler.”²¹²

²¹¹ The historic reference to the odalisque will be examined more closely in Chapter VII.
²¹² Salpeter, 112.
Historian Kerry Soper has argued that stereotyped images of the immigrant classes as criminal, dangerous, and lazy were strengthened in such popular sources as *Up from the Ape* by E.A. Hooton distributed at the Chicago World’s Fair in 1933 and *Dick Tracy* comic books. Soper attributes the popularity of such imagery to anxiety from the mass immigration of the 1910s and 1920s, job competition in the Depression Era, and the rise of organized crime during the Prohibition Era. According to Soper, the immigrant class generally came to represent the “criminal class” in American society, and people feared that the genetic integrity of the U.S. was threatened by the influx of racial “others.”

She maintains that in the 1930s there was a binary opposition between the “good” Anglo and Northern European standard, and their “criminal” East European and Mediterranean counterparts. In this context, Marsh’s images of a homogenous American society would have been read at the time as a positive depiction of the heroic American working class at play. The depiction of his figures shows the American class as vitally active, even in their leisure activities. In contrast, Cadmus’s figures are more passive as they doze in the sand, eat Cracker Jacks and lollipops, and pose for photographs.

In fact, Cadmus’s painting presents the social fabric of Coney Island more accurately than Marsh. The neighborhoods immediately adjacent to the amusement park and beach had become crowded immigrant tenements by the mid-1920s. These tenements

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214 Soper, 273-274.
were primarily comprised of East Europeans, southern European, Slavic and Jewish
immigrants.  

The crowds on the beach were applauded and despised at the time. Poet Federico
García Lorca wrote in 1929 that at Coney Island he found himself floating amongst the
beach’s “vomiting multitudes.” Sir Percival Phillips stated that “Coney Island is slum
New York transported to the sea front by underground trains that function like a machine
gun.” Italian immigrant Giuseppe Cautela found Coney Island to be the epitome of
American democracy in an article he wrote for The American Mercury in 1925. Cautela
wrote: “Democracy meets here and has its first interview skin to skin. The garments of
Puritanism are given a kick that sends them flying before the winds. Here you find the
real interpretation of the Declaration of Independence.”

Critics, such as Elisabeth Luther Cary, were likely uncomfortable with Cadmus’s
ambiguous position in depicting the immigrant class. On the one hand, the painting could
be read as supporting popular stereotypes of East European and Mediterranean
immigrants, as they are depicted passively enjoying a lazy day at the beach. However, as
discussed earlier, there is nothing criminal about Cadmus’s figures, regardless of their
“grotesque” depiction.

Further complicating Cadmus’s position within the eugenics campaign is the
presence of a mentally disabled woman who is depicted as photographer on the beach.
She is painted with a bathing cap, but wearing a striped shirt and overalls, the cap is

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216 Lorca quoted in Immerso, 127.
217 Phillips quoted in Immerso, 127.
218 Cautela quoted in Immerso, 128.
rendered unnecessary and inappropriate. Her wide toothy grin and disoriented stance suggest that her mental capabilities are limited. Eugenics dictated that this person was inferior to her companions, and therefore potentially subject to sterilization within the U.S., and to a death sentence in Nazi Germany. However, Cadmus treats this figure with optimism and sensitivity regardless of her unflattering physical characteristics. Despite her mental limitations, she is depicted as an artist of sorts behind the camera. Furthermore, she is represented as a street vendor who photographs tourists and beachgoers to earn a modest living and therefore becomes a productive member of society rather than a burden to the state.

It is important to state that Cadmus was unlikely to support the eugenics campaign that was debated, but popular, in the United States based on key biographical information about the artist. Cadmus’s mother was Basque, with dark hair and olive skin. Her ethnic features, like those of his sister, Fidelma, placed her outside the Nordic “race” that was so strongly supported by eugenicists as the ideal. Cadmus’s mother died when he was young, and he remembers her as a very nurturing woman who spoiled her children. “I remember how spoiled we were in that she would bring me cocoa in the morning and if it had scum on it I would make her take it back and get rid of the film on the top [laughter]. Terrible child.”

However, Cadmus’s father was described by the artist as “Anglo/Dutch/American,” but he remembers his father much less fondly. “She was the one I loved. I didn't really love my father, I would say. In fact, I used to often wish I could push him out the window, but I was afraid I would be caught [both artist and

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219 Tully interview. Brackets are by Tully.
interviewer laugh].”\textsuperscript{220} It is therefore likely that Cadmus held an inverted view of the ethnic hierarchy than that of the eugenicists.

As with his earlier paintings, the controversy about Cadmus’s work seems to have been due not only to the way he satirized figures, but to the fact that his satire was not easily reduced to a clear-cut social message. While clearly fascinated by the “lower class” and by racial types that departed from the Caucasian pattern, Cadmus neither idealized them nor proposed that their lives and social condition should be improved. Both the threatened lawsuit against the Whitney, and the critical commentary about the painting, makes it clear that viewers were dismayed. Significantly, however, Cadmus does not seem to have intended to single out the “lower class” or “ethnic types” for particular attack. Within two years, he turned his carnivalesque gaze towards the upper middle class instead. And the critical response was even more virulent than when he portrayed the poor in this fashion.

\textsuperscript{220} Ibid.
CHAPTER V

CRITIQUE OF THE AMERICAN BOURGEOISIE:

ASPECTS OF SUBURBAN LIFE

In 1936, Paul Cadmus found himself censored once again when he was commissioned by the Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP) to paint murals for the United States Post Office in Port Washington, New York. Port Washington was a wealthy suburb on Long Island, and Cadmus chose to depict the bourgeois class as lazy and foolish while enjoying leisure activities. The final murals were never completed because the large scale studies were deemed too critical of the community they were to enrich. 

Aspects of Suburban Life: Golf (fig. 5.1), Polo Spill (fig. 5.2), Public Dock (fig. 5.3), and Main Street (fig. 5.4) are the large scale studies for the murals, and they were sent instead to the American Consulate in Ottawa, Canada where they were exhibited in a billiards room. However, Main Street was returned to the artist as “unfit for a federal building.” At some point, the three remaining panels were removed from the billiards room in Ottawa and stored in a boiler room where they were rescued by Louise Armstrong, the wife of a cultural attaché working at the embassy, and transferred to the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

221 Eliasoph, “Paul Cadmus: Life and Work,” 87.
222 Eliasoph, “Paul Cadmus: Life and Work,” 92. Eliasoph indicates that Golf, Polo Spill, and Public Dock are on permanent loan to the National Gallery of Art in Washington, but the paintings are on permanent loan to the Smithsonian American Art Museum.
223 Ibid.
224 Letter located in the curatorial file for Aspects of Suburban Life: Golf, at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, dated 3/13/1981 and signed “MAF.” The paintings were transferred to the SAAM in 1974, so this letter was likely written to update the file in preparation for the 1981 Cadmus retrospective organized by Philip Eliasoph.
The *Aspects of Suburban Life* series was therefore censored twice, and for different reasons. Once in being rejected by the Port Washington post office, and again when *Main Street* was returned to the artist. This chapter will argue that Cadmus’s critical depiction of the bourgeois class was the reason for sending three of the panels to an alternate location from its intended site. It will further argue that the depiction of a sexualized bourgeois woman titillating working class men violated contemporary conventions of femininity/masculinity and sexual morality in the 1930s.

Cadmus had visited the Port Washington Post Office before beginning his plans for the murals, and their design was based on the interior space of the post office. According to Philip Eliasoph, *Golf* and *Polo Spill* were to be next to one another with *Polo Spill* to the left and *Golf* to the right so that their opposing triangular compositions would create a pedimental form on the wall. Both *Public Dock* and *Main Street* were to be on separate walls, and each composition has its own triangular format. The painterly and unbalanced composition employed by Cadmus to represent his subjects, as well as the drama of the scenes, has led Lincoln Kirstein to describe the paintings as “transmitted through the fullness of the Baroque.”

*Aspects of Suburban Life: Golf and Polo Spill*

*Golf* shows a group of golfers with their caddy. Cadmus’s mode of presentation emphasizes the dichotomy between the bourgeois and working class. The working class caddy is represented with a strong back and arms, and holes in his shoes. This figure is in stark contrast to the bellied, elderly “athletes” smoking cigars. The subservience of the

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225 Kirstein, *Paul Cadmus*, 34.
caddy is made clear as he is kneeling before the lumbering golfers. A seated golfer is depicted unsuccessfully lighting a cigar because his matchbook is empty. He sneers at the otherwise occupied caddy in the hopes that his need for a match will be fulfilled by his subordinate. The wealthy man is therefore rendered powerless and impotent without the aid of the working class. The wealth of this figure is heightened by the raised brushstrokes indicating gold embroidery in his shirt. The painted lines of the man’s shirt are mirrored in the twisting musculature of the caddy’s outstretched arm. Wealth and opulence therefore come to define the bourgeois golfer, while hard work and strength come to define the working class caddy.

_Polo Spill_ dramatically portrays an accident during a polo match. One of the riders who has been thrown is shown expressing concern with an outstretched arm for the other fallen riders. An elderly woman turns her back to the action, placing her gloved hand to her bosom in shock and horror. However, her concern for the fallen players appears superficial and shallow as she is depicted casually looking at the scene through lowered eyelids. She is painted clutching her pearls and stole, as if any trace of concern on her face is due to her distrust of the aggressive photographer’s close proximity. Her fashionable accessories are of more concern to her than the possible danger to the athletes that mildly entertain her. The embroidered red lines of her dress form the same patterning present in the gold embroidered shirt of the seated golfer, thereby connecting these two figures from one panel to the next. The primary fallen athlete’s desperately outstretched arm is painted with raised and swirling brushstrokes to indicate a play of light off of his well defined veins, which in turn suggests the strain of muscle in his forearm. While the
detailed lines delineating veins are not present in the figure of the caddy, their youth, musculature, and subordinate position on the ground connect these two figures.

While it is unlikely that the artist intended the polo player to be read as a working class figure, as the sport is aligned exclusively with the upper class, the physicality of his athleticism is in opposition to the passive sportsmen in *Golf* or the mere spectators of *Polo Spill*. Both *Golf* and *Polo Spill* depict sporting events favored by the bourgeois class. Unlike the democratic and universal nature of Coney Island, golf and polo are sports of exclusivity. The expense of horses is limiting as is access to golf courses. These sports represent official culture—requiring wealth, intellect, and sophistication for participation. As with *Coney Island*, one can describe the general effect as “carnivalesque,” as defined by Mikhail Bakhtin.\(^{226}\) But in this instance Cadmus directed his satire not on the poor but at the wealthy bourgeois class, which he presents as oafish. Significantly, he de-emphasized the upper stratum of their bodies (intellect) in favor of the lower (bodily). The bellies, buttocks, and musculature of the figures have little relation to the intellect that supposedly characterizes people of this affluence. Through Cadmus’s comedic gesture, they are thereby transformed as reproductive, bodily, earthly, and humble.\(^{227}\) In Cadmus’s design, the figures closest to the earth in both paintings are the most classic, youthful, and strong bodies of the compositions. These classic bodies are juxtaposed with the aging, flaccid bodies of the men and women standing or seated on benches who attempt to distract from their bodily nature through fashion. The seated

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\(^{226}\) Bakhtin, 12-15.  
\(^{227}\) Bakhtin, 21.
golfer’s gold embroidered shirt and the shocked woman’s stole are signifiers of wealth and style that grotesquely fail to mask the ungainliness of their bodies.

Preliminary small study panels for *Aspects of Suburban Life* indicate that initially, Cadmus did not intend to represent the athletics of the bourgeois class. *Commuter Rush* (fig. 5.5) of 1935 depicts businessmen rushing off to work, kissing their wives and waving to their children, all while hurriedly reading the newspaper. In the final ensemble, Cadmus replaced *Commuter Rush* with *Golf,* thereby negating the busy work-a-day lives of the suburbanites in favor of their rather lazy “athletics.” This early study reveals an intention to represent the vitality and diligence of the middle class. But the painting lacks the sharp satirical edge found in most of Cadmus’s paintings of the 1930s, and has a blandness that verges on kitsch. The only Cadmus feature in the preliminary study is what Richard Meyer refers to as the “anal logic” of the design, which parallels sections of *The Fleet’s In!.* To the far right side of the painting, a half-seated man kisses his wife, as he steps out of the car with his legs spread. Appearing from behind this figure is a speeding phallic shaped train aimed at the buttocks of the man in the foreground reading the paper as he walks. While one can appreciate the lower stratum humor present here, Cadmus was wise in scrapping *Commuter Rush* in favor of *Golf.*

*Aspects of Suburban Life: Public Dock*

The figures in *Public Dock* are grouped to form the most clearly defined triangular composition of the series, but the figures are less stable in this painting than in the others. A comedic chain reaction has taken place, forcing the viewer to perceive the
bourgeois class as clumsy and foolish. Unlike *Golf* and *Polo Spill*, Cadmus does not juxtapose the suburban middle class with their heroic working class foils. The satire in *Public Dock* is more direct, and does not require comparison. The scene painted by Cadmus centers on a fisherman with a straw hat, seated on the pillar of a pier. This fisherman is apparently startled to find an eel at the end of his fishing rod. A dog, excited by the spiraling, serpentine eel, and anxious to attack, has run into the foreground, and knocked over a little girl with an ice cream bar. The little girl is represented falling into an older woman with a hat, who reaches desperately for something to grab onto—and finds only the eel. As the robust, older woman falls backwards into the water she will knock a swimmer off the ladder and back into the sea. The awkward, unstable poses and tightly crowded composition emphasize the oafishness of the bourgeois leisurely at play at the public dock. The clumsiness of the figures is heightened by their physical attributes. The toppling woman is heavy set, with severely sunburned shoulders. Her red shoulder calls attention to her abundance of make-up as her face remains a ghostly white and her mascara makes her eyes appear inhuman. A shirtless young man in the background carries an oar, and despite his beautiful physique, Cadmus painted this figure with a very heavy and prominent unibrow.

In the lower left quadrant of the painting, Cadmus has depicted a middle-aged man protecting his blonde daughter from the danger of the eel (or the danger of the crowd). The man is painted with slicked back hair, a yellow sleeveless shirt, white pants and a prominent wristwatch. The styling of his hair, clothing, and the artist’s emphasis on the wristwatch are all signifiers of wealth. However, Cadmus has indicated to the viewer
that the illusion of wealth in this figure is merely superficial. The artist painted a significant tear at the seam of the sleeveless shirt. One would expect that a torn shirt could be mended or replaced given the man’s exhibition of wealth. The wear to the shirt is an indicator that it has been used and washed often, and if the man chose the torn shirt, he likely has others with similar wear. For Cadmus, suburban wealth is a façade, a superficial display of fashion and consumer goods.

The buffoonery of the figures in this painting focuses on the lower stratum of the body and essentially denies the significance of the upper half—or the brain. As in Coney Island, the exposure of the body to the elements has resulted in sunburn. The little girl consumes ice cream. Body hair from armpits to heavy eyebrows abound. Most significantly, the bodies are clumsy and knock into one another.

Interestingly, Cadmus’s initial idea was quite different in its social implications, although many of the same poses appear in the final picture. Cadmus’s preliminary panel, Regatta of 1935 (fig. 5.6) depicts a gala on board a yacht. The figures are painted in extremely fashionable suits and summer dresses with elaborate jewelry, jackets, hats, and gloved hands. Unlike the change from Commuter Rush to Golf, each of the figures from the early preliminary panel can be found in the later, larger version. While the background sails remain intact, these figures have been significantly altered, and the yacht has been transformed into a crowded dock.

There is a beautiful woman depicted seated on the railing of the ship with long legs and high heeled red shoes. She was transformed into the oafish fisherman. To the right of this woman, is depicted a jeweled matriarch accompanied by two long haired
dogs. This woman is extremely elegant and graceful, but Cadmus has transformed her into the sunburned, robust woman falling off the side of the dock. The classic bodied blond man pointing across the yacht to the matriarch was transformed into a chubby red haired boy with freckles. And the handsome captain has been marginally altered and become the man with the torn sleeveless shirt. Cadmus’s vision clearly changed from the earliest stage to these large scale preliminary paintings. The figures became significantly more grotesque and ungainly.

The fourth panel, *Main Street*, once again juxtaposed bourgeois and working class figures. It depicts a confident woman in a red, short sleeved shirt, a large straw hat, and tennis shorts. The long-sleeved sweater and full length pants of her companion call attention to the amount of flesh on display. The companion’s pants and sweater are dull and earth toned in color, a stark contrast against the bright red and white of the vixen. The only other women in the painting are elderly, fully covered in outdated, ill-fitting garments, and horrified at the sight of the beauties walking down Main Street. Their horror is reinforced by the ogling looks of the working class men for whom the woman in red has put herself on display. These men eagerly gawk at the woman, who is the center of attention within the composition.

Unlike the other paintings, there is no overtly foolish behavior taking place, but ironically, this was the painting that was returned to the artist as “unfit for a federal building.”228 As opposed to the other paintings of the series, social class distinctions do not establish buffoonery for the bourgeois class, but instead operate around desire. The working class men desire the bourgeois woman, and she encourages that desire. The folly

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228 Eliasoph, “Paul Cadmus: Life and Work,” 92.
here is that the desire of the men will go unfulfilled as she merely teases them, knowing that they gaze upon her, but does not return their gaze.

Philip Eliasoph rightly connects Port Washington and Cadmus’s murals with F. Scott Fitzgerald’s 1925 novel, *The Great Gatsby*, to argue that the artist painted his satirical paintings to comment on the “idle rich” and their “obsession with leisure” as did Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald renamed Port Washington as “East Egg,” but the action of his novel takes place here. Interestingly, what seems to have been sensitive about Cadmus’s paintings was not simply their satire but the place where they were to be hung. Their satire was evidently directed at the very people who would be using the post office, who were likely to be offended. Consequently, the TRAP devised an ingenious solution: send them somewhere else—send them to the American Consulate in Ottawa. Unfortunately, however, even in Ottwa Cadmus’s satire of the bourgeoisie evidently was too strong. Hence the exile of the paintings to the boiler room, until they were fortuitously rescued and removed to a museum, a more exalted but also a more neutral zone, where, ironically, this sort of satire became socially acceptable.

Aspects of Suburban Life: Main Street:

Interestingly, one panel of *Aspects of Suburban Life* was deemed so offensive that it was even unsuitable for the American Consulate in Ottawa: the panel *Main Street*. The literature on Cadmus has thus far left the reason for the return of *Main Street* to the artist up to the readers’ imagination. What is known is that this particular panel was

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230 Kirstein, *Paul Cadmus*, 33-34.
thematically different than its companions. It is this author’s assertion that the proud display of flesh by the woman in tennis shorts and the attention she solicits from the working class men that made the American Consulate in Ottawa uncomfortable with the painting.

The woman is fashionably dressed as tennis shorts had become socially acceptable in the early 1930s. According to Patricia Campbell Warner, by the 1930s, athletics had become synonymous with wealth and class, and sportswear found its way into fashion via Hollywood films.231 Hollywood films, such as 42nd Street (1933), dressed actresses in clothing formerly reserved for athletics, but updated to look expensive, chic, and above all else—“feminine.” While the chorus girls of 42nd Street were filmed rehearsing in shorts and sleeveless blouses, the transition into popular style was limited. Fashion magazines were not well circulated, and were aimed at an elite audience. Even chic, wealthy women reserved shorts for the beach and resorts—not Main Street.232 A 1936 Life magazine photo and its accompanying caption (fig. 5.7) demonstrate that the shorts worn by the chorus girls in 42nd Street had become popular among young women, but caused anxiety for an older generation within the U.S. The photo is of University of Missouri student, Jean Campbell, taken as she rests during a musical rehearsal. She wears thigh length tight shorts and a loose fitting button down shirt paired with heels. The boastful caption demonstrates that such a view of women’s legs was still largely unacceptable. It reads: “Had it not been for me [the photographer], the world would never

232 Warner, 90-93.
have seen those legs, because, at the ‘suggestion’ of the dean of women, co-ed dancers in the Missouri U. show wear below-the-knee skirts.”

Warner states that outside of California, most women wore skirted suits and/or sweaters even when participating in sports. A Long Island suburb was certainly not an appropriate place to wear the revealing outfit of the woman in red shorts. Her fully covered companion is more indicative of the fashionable attire most American women would have worn to play tennis. Further, the women are not depicted at the country club playing tennis, but rather they walk down Main Street, presumably to or from a game of tennis. While the tennis shorts may have been fashionable on a Californian tennis court, they were still not permissible in such a prominent public space. The attention garnered by the trio of working class men is pointed out by the woman in green pants, with an amused smile on her face, but the vixen does not need the attention to be pointed out to her. The stance of her stride is confident and proud, shoulders back and hips forward, as she struts, knowingly seeking male attention. Cadmus’s gendered power relationship is unusual in the history of American painting because it is the woman who is in the position of power.

Ellen Wiley Todd argues that a similar, but more typical, gendered power relationship is exemplified by Edward Hopper’s Office at Night of 1940 (fig. 5.8) in which a working class woman is depicted in the position of power as she is in control of the file cabinets. Her power in the secretary-boss relationship is garnered by her sexual prowess and the desire of the male viewer is applied to the male boss who averts his eyes

234 Ibid.
in order to keep balance in check. Such power relationships caused writers to warn women not to engage in office romances, and Todd argues that this was because of the perception that a working class woman sought to raise her social standing by seducing her boss to become his wife. In Cadmus’s painting, the woman is in the position of power, but her power is only partially based on her sex appeal, it is also based on the class difference between them. Her social standing would not be improved were she to ultimately marry one of these men, which is clear to the viewer.

Instead, Cadmus’s woman has put herself on display with the promise of flesh that is unattainable by the working class men she has aroused. Unlike the women of The Fleet’s In!, this woman does not seek sexual fulfillment, but rather enjoys the scopophilic gaze of the men. This gendered, power relationship can be explained using Sigmund Freud’s theory of castration. According to Freud, women feel incomplete because of their lack of a penis, and they experience a desire to castrate men, and therefore claim his “phallus” as their own. The unfulfilled promise of sex in this painting can be read as a symbolic castration that renders the genitals of the working class men useless and immaterial.

The power relationship established by Cadmus is not wholly unique for his decade. It is similar to that of the wife of Curley, the ranch foreman in John Steinbeck’s 1937 novel, Of Mice and Men. Steinbeck described Curley’s wife—who is not named in the novel—as having “full, rouged lips and wide spaced eyes, heavily made up. Her

235 Todd, 305-306.
236 Todd, 308.
fingernails were red. Her hair hung in little rolled clusters, like sausages." In addition to her beauty, she is described by a rancher as having “the eye,” as she flirts with the workers when her husband is absent. Her knowing display of sexual desire toward the working class men on the ranch is dangerous as it ultimately leads to her death at the hands of the simple Lennie Smalls. Smalls, enticed by the softness of her hair, desires to stroke and pet her. When she resists his advances, Smalls unknowingly crushes her skull. This act ultimately leads to his death at the hands of his companion, George Milton, as an angry mob approaches to lynch them.

The viewer can read Cadmus’s painting as not only violating social norms of the 1930s, but in violating these norms the woman as *femme fatale* has put herself and the working class men in danger. These uneducated men are potentially unable to control their sexual desire. Perhaps aware of the potential danger, Cadmus’s woman is depicted walking with a male companion. However, this man looks neither at the *femme fatale* nor her on-lookers. He remains focused ahead. His hands are full with athletic equipment, leaving him, and her, vulnerable.

This male escort plays a very different role from the one depicted in John Sloan’s *The Old Wigwam* (which was discussed in Chapter III). The male escort in Sloan’s painting protects the innocence of the two women by giving a threatening look to the pair of drunken sailors. The man in *Main Street* deliberately evades the working class men, presumably fearful of confrontation. His lack of courage assaults his “masculintiy,” which is further minimized as he acts as pack mule for the women. He is depicted

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239 Steinbeck, 30.
carrying the sporting equipment, but neither woman engages with him. His labor is implicitly unrewarded, and by extension, the women have emasculated their wealthy companion as well as the crowd of working class men whom they approach.

In her influential essay, “Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey argued that the pleasure experienced by the audience when viewing films is either through a scopophilic gaze (based on the desire to sexually obtain the characters) or a narcissistic gaze (based on the ability to project oneself into the characters on the screen).\textsuperscript{240} Mulvey argues that the dichotomy between the scopophilic gaze and the narcissistic gaze is particularly problematic for women. She argues that the fear of castration has caused the female body to be fetishized in film, often displayed as “erotic object” for either the other characters, or for the viewer.\textsuperscript{241} Given Mulvey’s argument, one is likely to argue that Cadmus fetishized the female body—certainly this woman in red shorts is an “erotic object” for the working class characters in the painting, and likely an “erotic object” for viewers as well.

However, if one considers the artist as the ideal spectator—as Cadmus constructed the image and characters to be viewed—then \textit{Main Street} may not conform to traditional modes of viewing. As a gay man, Cadmus was not likely to view the female body with a scopophilic gaze (sexual objectification). One must then question to what extent he was likely, as a man, to project himself as the female body in the image through the narcissistic gaze. Mulvey indicates that her essay is designed to explain the cinematic

\textsuperscript{240} Mulvey, 434-435. Mulvey’s essay is written about cinema, which she argues is a unique viewing experience and is unlike other performative experiences. Nonetheless, Mulvey’s essay has been used by feminist art historians to write about visual culture beyond cinema.

\textsuperscript{241} Mulvey, 436.
experience of the heterosexual viewer. Could there be an alternative experience in which one could understand the appropriate intentions of the gay artist painting such an image of a woman on display? Could this figure be read as subverting gendered and sexual power relationships?

While the woman in *Main Street* is certainly not a burlesque performer, she appears to embody the subversive aspects attributed to the popular form of entertainment. According to Robert C. Allen, American burlesque was similar to the Medieval carnival as described by Bakhtin as a system in which the rules and structures of the bourgeois world are consciously inverted. Allen argues that burlesque was consciously feminist—women performed both masculine and feminine roles, were complicit in their own sexual objectification, and criticized the distance between the female performer and the “real” woman in an effort to parody conventions of femininity. Critic William Dean Howells wrote of burlesque in 1869 that: “though they were not like men, [they] were in most things as unlike women, and seemed creatures of a kind of alien sex, parodying both.” Actress, and gay male icon, Mae West developed her comedic style on the burlesque and feminist scholars have viewed West as performing a “deliberate and ironic female masquerade.” Cadmus’s vixen is not unlike Lady Lou, West’s character in *She Done Him Wrong* (1933). Lady Lou had many sexual partners, and famously posed the campy question: “Is that a gun in your pocket, or you just happy to see me?”

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242 Mulvey, 441.
244 Ibid.
245 William Dean Howells quoted in Allen, 25.
Like Cadmus’s vixen, Lady Lou used her sexuality to manipulate men, and lauded her power over them. Lady Lou sought financial gains as she frequently convinced men to provide her with diamonds regardless of the cost (financial and otherwise). Cadmus’s woman, like Lady Lou, has become complicit in her own objectification in order to use it to gain power over the men in this nearly inverted gendered relationship.

However, this gendered relationship is not entirely inverted as the men are not objectified by the women. Linda Nochlin, for example, has argued that the objectified male body appeals to male homosexuals more intensely than to women. Nochlin asserts that this is the result of the traditional power relationship in which “the male image is one of power, possession, and domination, the female one of submission, passivity, and availability.” As she becomes complicit in her own objectification, Cadmus’s woman denies the man’s ability to dominate and possess her. Their power is based on the shame and degradation that the woman should experience as she is subjected to his scopophilic gaze. She has instead become the powerful figure who dominates the men.

Whereas the Aspects of Suburban Life series posed a threat to the TRAP by mocking the community for which it was made, and violating the unspoken rules of

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248 Nochlin, “Eroticism and Female Imagery in Nineteenth Century Art,” 142.
249 This power relationship struck me in 2004 when modeling for the contemporary photographer, Spencer Tunick. To separate the male and female models, Tunick asked the men to sit dressed on the ground as the women were asked to remove their clothing and walk a quarter mile through the crowd of seated men. Many of the male participants hooted, whistled, and cat called at the women who covered their bodies in shame. When the men were then asked to disrobe and walk through the crowd of clothed women, some of the women whistled and cat-called, but the men proudly showed their genitals and were in no way shamed by the attempt to objectify their bodies. Complicity in the scopophilic gaze seems to remove its dominating properties.
decorum, dress, and sexuality. *Main Street*, which today hardly seems offensive, seems to have violated the phallocentric viewpoint that was the status quo in the 1930s. However, it is worth noting that while these images were apparently inappropriate as federally funded art in a communal public space, they were well received by critics. Harry Salpeter and Lewis Mumford each saw the paintings as a sign of artistic maturity for Cadmus, preferring the series to his paintings from earlier in the decade. They both argued that the artist’s use of color is more sophisticated and less brash in this series.
CHAPTER VI

FASCISM, GENDER, AND THE NAVY: SAILORS AND FLOOZIES

Paul Cadmus was perhaps fulfilling a promise to repaint *The Fleet’s In!* when he created *Sailors and Floozies* (fig. 6.1) in 1938, which also depicts drunken sailors who are paired off with flirtatious women. Like *The Fleet’s In!*, it is set in Riverside Park. Four years earlier, Cadmus had been incensed over the censorship of *The Fleet’s In!*, and vowed revenge. In a 1934 *Literary Digest* article on the scandal, Cadmus stated: “Even if they destroy that painting, I’ll do it over.” While *The Fleet’s In!* was not in fact destroyed, Cadmus may not have known that fact in 1938--since he had no way of knowing its ownership and it had disappeared from public view. Thus, *Sailors and Floozies* can be credibly interpreted as a fulfillment of his promise to do the painting over.

Nonetheless, *Sailors and Floozies* is not simply a straight repetition of *The Fleet’s In!* The characters are slightly different and there are several topical references which move the painting forward in time to the present historic moment. In interesting ways, these changes affect the meaning of the piece. Despite its similarity to the earlier canvas, *Sailors and Floozies* more completely satirizes gender and nationalism while remaining irreconcilably sympathetic to the struggles of the fighting man. As happened to *The Fleet’s In!* six years earlier, *Sailors and Floozies* was censored in 1940. But the scandal was modest and brief compared with the earlier affair. Indeed, the painting’s brief

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removal from the Golden Gate International Exposition in San Francisco may well have been staged to increase attendance, and the painting went back on view after a few days.

**The Golden Gate International Exposition, 1939-40:**

Unlike his earlier censored paintings, evidence suggests that *Sailors and Floozies* was not censored because it was offensive. Rather, it seems as though its potential to offend was exploited by organizers of the Golden Gate International Exposition in an effort to encourage attendance for a failing world’s fair. The United States hosted two world’s fairs in 1939, The Golden Gate International Exposition in San Francisco which opened in February, and the New York World’s Fair which opened two months later in April. Organizers rightly feared that the competition between the two fairs would negatively impact San Francisco (more so than New York because of the comparatively smaller population on the west coast). As it happened, the opening weeks of the fair had high attendance. *New York Times* journalist, Kathleen McLaughlin, reported that attendance at the opening of the exposition surpassed that of Chicago in 1933, “A Century of Progress.” The 1933 exposition claimed 172,559 attendees in the first two days compared to the 237,409 attendees for the first two days in San Francisco.\(^{251}\) Such large attendance promised to lead to a profitable fair. However, the initial optimism had worn off by mid August when it was reported that daily operating expenses needed to be reduced by nearly a third in order to keep the fair open through December 1939.\(^{252}\) Low attendance financially crippled the San Francisco fair in its initial run, and that low

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attendance was attributed to the significant increase in admission prices from the 1933 Chicago fair.\footnote{Porter, 10. Porter reports that the cost of admission at the 1933 Chicago World’s Fair was 50 cents, but that San Francisco admissions were 75 cents. He claims that as ticket sales in Chicago increased from July to August 1933, they have declined at the same rate in San Francisco in 1939.} In the fall of 1939, organizers were optimistic that the fair could be extended into 1940 in order to turn a profit. But by its official closing date of December 2, any chance of its extension seemed to have been exhausted and it was announced that by week’s end bankruptcy would be declared and dismantling begun.\footnote{“San Francisco’s Fair Won’t Reopen Next Year,” \textit{The New York Times} (December 2, 1939): 8.} It was not until December 23, three weeks after the fair closed, that officials announced the Golden Gate International would reopen for the 1940 summer season only, running from May through September.\footnote{“New Coast Fair Plan Approved,” \textit{The New York Times} (December 23, 1939): 8.} Organizers took advantage of the five month closure to make significant changes to the exposition to entice repeat visitors and ensure its profitability.

In its original run, the most significant exhibition of American art at the fair was organized by the International Business Machines Corporation (IBM), a company which took pride that it did business all over the country. To dramatize this fact, IBM established 53 local art juries: one from each of the then 48 states, as well as from Alaska, Hawaii, the Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia. Each jury was to select two artists, who would each be represented by one work.\footnote{“All American Art Assembled for Fairs,” \textit{The New York Times} (April 15, 1939): 15. Each artist was exhibited in either the New York or San Francisco expositions, so each state/territory had one work represented in San Francisco.} Of the two artists from each region, one was exhibited in New York, and one in San Francisco. This unorthodox method of selection was designed to remove the elitism of American art, so often focused on major urban centers. By appealing to an audience across the U.S.,
organizers hoped to draw large crowds. Of course, this also meant that with 53 paintings, the exhibition was relatively small and comprehensive only in geography.

When the exposition reopened in 1940, American art was much more prominent than it had been the year before. Considerably larger than IBM’s contemporary American art exhibit was the “Art in Action” exhibit organized by Dr. Walter Heil and Timothy Pflueger at the Palace of Fine Arts. Pflueger and Heil reportedly amassed 300 contemporary American paintings for exhibit, and reduced the number of old master paintings from the 1939 show to make the exposition more relevant to a contemporary American public. Organizers hoped that greater emphasis on American art might draw a larger number of attendees.

Three Cadmus paintings were included in “Art in Action,” *Sailors and Floozies*, *Venus and Adonis* (fig. 2.5), and *Seeing the New Year In* (fig. 6.2). The selection of three canvasses by Cadmus is perhaps not surprising because it had been proved that in spite of his scandals—or perhaps because of them—Cadmus drew large numbers when exhibited. For example, his first solo show at the Midtown Galleries in New York reported over 7,000 visitors in its first month.

Each of the three exhibited paintings had the potential to offend. *Venus and Adonis* is a modernized version of Ovid’s couple. The composition is very similar to the Baroque painting by Peter Paul Rubens of the same subject that was on view at the

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258 Ibid. Walter Heil had created a significant display of old master works for the 1939 exhibition that included Sandro Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus*.
260 Ovid wrote in *Metamorphoses* that Venus fell in love with the handsomely beautiful Adonis, but warned him against a boar hunt in which she foresaw his death. When he did not heed her warning, he was killed in the hunt. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, book X, lines 520-739.
Metropolitan Museum of Art beginning in 1920 (fig. 6.3).\(^{261}\) However, Cadmus aged the
goddess of beauty and exaggerated the desperate nature of her fearful pleading.

Suggesting that Adonis’s hunting excursion is for men and not boar, Cadmus painted a
pair of tennis balls and a phallic racket in the hands of Adonis. To emphasize the sexual
desire of the characters, the artist replaced the hunting dog with a dog licking himself in a
masturbatory manner. Cadmus vulgarized the painting by Rubens, and parodied classic
literature by humorously substituting homosexual desire and autoeroticism for Adonis’s
hunting expedition.

*Seeing the New Year In* also has a literary reference, as Cadmus was inspired by
Joseph Moncure March’s narrative poem, *The Wild Party* of 1928.\(^{262}\) March’s narrative
tells of a sexually promiscuous couple who consort with homosexuals and other
“deviants” to throw a raucous drunken party in the Prohibition Era that ends with one of
the party-goers killed by gunfire.\(^{263}\) Cadmus’s scene is set in a one-room apartment, filled
with drunken figures. The artist depicted an orgy of drunken party-goers in which the
men grope the women and two gay men converse in the doorway. A potential rape is
depicted as a beautiful woman on the bed is unable to consent to the sexual advances of
an aged man climbing on top of her and kissing her neck. The claustrophobia of the scene
finds parallel with modern painting as Vincent van Gogh’s *Bedroom at Arles* is depicted

\(^{261}\) Peter Paul Rubens, *Venus and Adonis*, 1630s was on loan to the Metropolitan Museum of Art from
1920-37, when the Met acquired the painting
(http://www.metmuseum.org/works_of_art/collection_database/all/venus_and_adonis_peter_paul_rubens/o
bjectview.aspx?page=1&sort=0&sortdir=asc&keyword=venus and
adonis&fp=1&dd1=0&dd2=0&vw=1&collID=0&OID=110001988&vT=1, accessed 12/28/2009).
\(^{262}\) Kirstein, *Paul Cadmus*, 41-42.
March argues that the meter and rhyme of the poem is designed to “tell a story in such a nervous and
rapidly fashion that the reader is kept at high tension, and swept irresistibly to the climax.” Butchinson,
“Vigor and Pace in Mr. March’s Story of the Prize Ring,” *New York Times* (October 28, 1928) 61.
hanging crookedly on the wall. The potential that an audience would find Cadmus’s image offensive is indicated by the fact that it was accidentally removed in place of *Sailors and Floozies* but immediately re-hung.\(^{264}\)

Walter Heil is credited with selecting the contemporary American paintings to be shown in the exhibition and he was also the individual who later briefly censored Cadmus from the exhibition. On August 7, 1940, Heil announced that *Sailors and Floozies* was to be removed from the exhibition “in the interest of national unity.”\(^{265}\) Heil claimed that the United States Commissioner to the exposition, George Creel, insisted it be removed because the Navy objected to its depiction in the painting.\(^{266}\) However, Creel officially stated that the complaint did not come from him as he had heard only “unofficial protests.”\(^{267}\) Considering the media fallout resulting from censoring *The Fleet’s In!* that left the navy defending itself, the morality of sailors, and the perception that the navy was too uptight regarding its representation, it is not surprising that Creel denied having made any official complaint about the painting. In fact, *Art Digest* quoted an assistant to Admiral Arthur Hepburn as stating “What fools we’d be. We’ve learned from earlier foolish Navy squawks against other Cadmus paintings. It does us no good and merely gives the artist publicity.”\(^{268}\) This argument for remaining neutral about the painting is plausible, and if accurate the navy was not responsible for censoring *Sailors and Floozies*.

\(^{264}\) “Cadmus’ Tar Under Fire at the San Francisco Fair,” *Newsweek* (August 19, 1940) 51.
\(^{266}\) Ibid.
\(^{267}\) Ibid.
\(^{268}\) “‘A Good Recruiting Poster,’ Claims Cadmus,” *The Art Digest* (September 1, 1940): 13.
Within two days Pflueger insisted that *Sailors and Floozies* be put back on display. Pflueger asserted that organizers “have been unable to verify reports that the Navy objected.” Nonetheless, the public believed that the Navy was involved in the censorship, and there are reports of a media firestorm surrounding the painting in San Francisco. Heil later claimed that the painting should remain off view because it is “unnecessarily dirty. It’s not a masterpiece, it’s just unpleasant.” Plueger responded to Heil’s criticism by stating “if every picture to which some may object is removed, none would remain.” Heil’s statements read as though he was a critic reporting on the exhibition and Cadmus’s painting, but as organizer of the exhibition one could conclude that if he found it to be “dirty” and “unpleasant” it would not have been included at all. Furthermore, the painting had been on exhibit since May, when the Golden Gate International Exposition was reopened, but not removed until late August, one month before the exhibition closed. If the painting stirred so much controversy with the navy, why wait four months to take it off view? Could Heil and Pflueger have created controversy where there was none? Certainly if the media reported another Cadmus scandal in San Francisco, especially if he were again battling the Navy, large numbers of people would come to the exhibit. *The Fleet’s In!* was never publicly exhibited before 1981, so a controversial sailor painting by Cadmus permitted a rare opportunity for the public to revel in the artist’s brazenness.

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270 Ibid.
272 “Cadmus’ Tar Under Fire at the San Francisco Fair,” 52.
273 In the Tully interview, Cadmus stated that in 1934 “I decided to make an etching from the photograph I had of the painting because I knew that, even if they suppressed the painting, they couldn't suppress the
George Creel’s position as United States Commissioner to the exposition is significant because he was a skilled master of propaganda, who had already demonstrated his ability to sway the public. In 1917, he had cleverly influenced public opinion in support of the U.S. intervening in World War I. Creel was a journalist credited with master-minding the reelection of President Woodrow Wilson on the platform of neutrality in 1916-17. When German u-boats began attacking U.S. vessels in the Atlantic, Wilson turned to Creel seeking support of censoring news reports, and asked Creel to head up the Committee on Public Information (CPI). Creel proudly boasted that he convinced Wilson not to censor the media based on the argument that by censoring the press, the public would lose faith in the war, and would foster a sense of fear in the American public.\(^\text{274}\) However, historian Alan Axelrod argues that the policies of the CPI were designed to force self-censorship of the news media, an approach which the American public found more acceptable.\(^\text{275}\) The distinction between Creel’s claim and Axelrod’s is that through self-censorship, the media was given access to war information and then restricted sensitive or unflattering information before delivering it to the public. Should a media source endanger the lives of soldiers by reporting confidential material, it would be subject to heavy fines and denied access to future war information. Creel is largely considered to be the person responsible for creating a pro-war zeitgeist during the U.S. military’s involvement in World War I. Creel’s ability to censor war information,

\(^{275}\) Alan Axelrod, *Selling the Great War: The Making of American Propaganda* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) 64-70. The distinction between Creel’s claim and Axelrod’s is that through self-censorship, the media restricted information before delivering it to the public, and for Creel, censorship happened after the news went public.
while simultaneously insisting that he was not doing so, suggests that he could apply this same approach to other areas of life. In other words, he may well have engineered for the painting to be taken off view, while insisting that this was someone else’s decision. Given the very late date of this censorship in the schedule of the fair, and the fact that the painting almost immediately went back on view, suggests that a manipulation of some sort was taking place—most like simply that briefly censoring \textit{Sailors and Floozies} would provoke public interest and help increase attendance.

While Cadmus’s painting was scandalous to the organizers of the Golden Gate International Exposition, he was applauded by his colleagues. At the close of the “Art in Action” exhibition, a costume party was thrown in honor of the artists and their patrons. Attendees were encouraged to come dressed as their favorite painting in the exhibition. According to a \textit{Life} article, the invitations read:

\begin{quote}
Come as a picture from the Fine Arts show.

An apple by Cézanne—a potato by Van Gogh,

An Old Master in Action, a thigh bone by Dalí,

But there’ll be no Sanity in Art by Golly.$^{276}$
\end{quote}

The \textit{Life} article was accompanied by photographs of costumed artists in front of the paintings parodied. Among the favorite paintings, and of those selected by \textit{Life} for reproduction, is a photo of party-goers parodying Cadmus’s \textit{Sailors and Floozies} (fig. 6.4). The three men dressed as gobs donned big smiles at the women and for the cameras. The women exaggerate their poses and distort their faces, one of which sticks out her

\begin{footnote}
$^{276}$“Artists in Action at the San Francisco Fair Throw Party to Kid Art,” \textit{Life} (October 14, 1940): 67.
\end{footnote}
tongue at the camera. However, the jubilance found in the photograph is absent in Cadmus’s painting.

**Gendered Roles in Sailors and Floozies:**

There are three distinct figural groupings in Sailors and Floozies: a background couple comprised of a marine with his arms around a woman attempting a playful slap to his face; a middle ground couple comprised of a seated sailor with his head buried in the bosom of a woman; and a foreground couple comprised of a recumbent sailor with a woman climbing on top of him. In the distant background, Cadmus painted a sailor seated alone on a park bench with his head down as if passed out. As opposed to the party-like atmosphere of *The Fleet's In!*, whose figures often display toothy grins, the expressions are somber, and the sailors seem well aware that they are about to be sent on a mission that could end in their death. The setting sun in the distance indicates that the sailors will soon depart for the impending war as their time at home draws to a close.

While the public reaction to *The Fleet's In!* demonstrated that drinking and chasing loose women was important to rejuvenating sailors on leave as a sign of the vitality and liveliness that reminded them for what they were protecting, the drinking and women in *Sailors and Floozies* appears to be a coping mechanism to numb the distraught, fearful sailors. The alcohol and women are insufficient for rejuvenation as the military men are unable to escape the reality of their imminent departure to a war which may lead to their death. Cadmus’s thoughtful analysis of the psychological trauma of military
service seems to contradict his inversion of gendered binaries that conflate traditional
gendered sex roles that are also integral to *Sailors and Floozies*.

The background couple is similar to the couple at the center of *The Fleet’s In!*. In
the earlier representation, the male figure is depicted partially seated and pulling his
female companion into him as she recoils with a playful slap that leaves the man smiling
as she presses her hips into his. This motif of the slap is repeated, but with a different
emotional quality. The woman awkwardly smiles at his frown and distant gaze, and
desperately positions her head to meet his stare. While her slap remains playful, it is an
attempt to bring him back to a passionate moment as opposed to the flirtatious courtship
implied in the earlier painting.

Like the background couple, the seated sailor in the middle ground couple appears
to seek solace and comfort—not sex—from the kneeling woman before him. His
downturned mouth and closed eyes do not suggest pleasure or sexual excitement. Rather,
the painted sailor seeks nurture from his companion as he holds her in a tight embrace
and swathes his face in her breast. The embrace is not that of a man with a temporary
lover, but more similar to a young boy seeking comfort from his mother. The woman,
whose sexual desire is made visible by her vaginally shaped hat, is dissatisfied with the
sailor’s embrace. She recoils with a repulsive curl of her lip. Seeking sex, she is
disinterested in providing motherly comfort, and rejects his yearning for comfort.

Linda Nochlin argues that erotic art has been traditionally produced by men, for
men, with female subjects. The main point of her argument is that the male body signifies
“power, possession, and domination” whereas the female body signifies “submission,
passivity, and availability.”277 Nochlin argues that this is the result of a broad attitude in Western culture which is not specific to the arts. But the general assumption that women’s sexual desire is founded on a desire to please men is thwarted in this painting by Cadmus. As is true of the women in *The Fleet’s In!,* the women of *Sailors and Floozies* are not passive, they have little interest in satisfying the needs of the men, and are ultimately not satisfied themselves. That we understand the title to read “sailors accompanied by floozies” is evidence of Nochlin’s argument. However, Lincoln Kirstein has cited the *Dictionary of American Underworld Lingo* to define “floosie” as follows: “Far West: a woman who sells the implied promise of her favors and fails to deliver.”278 While Kirstein does not outright interpret the painting through this definition, he implicitly states that it is the men who are both sailors AND floozies. In this context, the sailors do not live up to their virile stereotype, but are in fact rendered impotent by the artist.

The foreground couple is the most prominent pairing in the painting, and the least sympathetic to the psychological turmoil of the military men. Cadmus depicted a recumbent sailor whose closed eyes, arched back, spread legs, and raised arm supporting his head recall the Hellenistic Greek *Barberini Faun* (fig. 6.5), of which Cadmus was likely aware, and may have seen on his European trip in 1932-33.279 This very erotic

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277 Nochlin, “Eroticism and Female Imagery in Nineteenth-Century Art,” 142.
278 *Dictionary of American Underworld Lingo,* 1950, quoted in Kirstein, *Paul Cadmus,* 45. Kirstein’s definition is of the word “floosie” or “flossie.” However, *Webster’s New Universal Unabridged Dictionary,* 2003, defines “floozy” as follows: “a gaudily dressed, usually immoral woman, esp. a prostitute” but does not have any secondary definition that supports Kirstein’s definition. However, the closeness between Kirstein and Cadmus indicates that the artist may have intended the title to be read as Kirstein suggests.
279 The most complete accounts of the trip to Europe can be found in Eliasoph, “Paul Cadmus: Life and Work,” and Cole, “Jared French.” While it is clear that the artists traveled to England by boat, biked “throughout” Europe, Orvieto and Mallorca are the two locations that were most influential to Cadmus,
reference to the male body is further complicated along gendered lines because the same recumbent pose was common for depicting women—that of the odalisque.

The trope of the odalisque was used by such nineteenth and twentieth century painters as Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (Odalisque with a Slave, fig. 6.6) and Henri Matisse (Reclining Odalisque or Harmony in Red, fig. 6.7). Marilynn Lincoln Board has argued that the odalisque traditionally signified sexual and cultural dominance over the subject. Board reads the odalisque paintings of modernist Henri Matisse to argue that the woman as Other has the potential to exist as “slave or idol, but in neither case did she have the power to choose or define her part.” She is dominated by the gaze of the male artist and the presumably male viewer. However, by substituting a male figure in the traditional pose of the odalisque, Cadmus has eroticized the body of the recumbent sailor, making him the passive, sexual object for the (questionably) female figure who actively dominates him.

Board argues that the men have traditionally sought to dominate that which is unfamiliar to the Self to thwart the threat posed by the Other. The Othering nature of the odalisque has been applied to French colonialism in which the people of North Africa were “feminized.” Whereas feminist scholars have argued a binary between culture and

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281 Board, 363. The concept of an Other, in opposition to the Self along Freudian terms was first theorized in Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949).

282 Ibid.
nature that is defined by gender, Board argues that the racial Other was also defined by
to justify the otherwise oppressive French culture in Africa.283

However, Cadmus’s sailor is both white and male, and therefore does not negate
the Self, but rather objectifies the Self. In so doing, Cadmus has not inverted the gendered
or racial implications of the odalisque, but negated them. As the artist and intended
viewer remain white males, the subject is to be understood through the objectifying,
scopophilic gaze. The male viewer is not likely to identify with the passively dominated,
erotic body, but rather objectify it.

Linda Nochlin’s writing supports this reading, since she notes that when the male
body has been eroticized in art, it has traditionally been imaged by gay male artists for a
gay male audience.284 That the recumbent figure is partially alert as he shields his
erection, one is meant to understand that he is compliant with his objectification. The
pose of this male figure therefore makes specific reference to an ancient example of
homoerotic monumental sculpture while placing the sailor in the position of an
insubordinate to his “female” companion who is depicted dominating his displayed body.

While the subversive parody inherent in the objectives of camp is present in
Cadmus’s negation of the traditional odalisque, his painted companion further conflates
gender through a camp sensibility.285 The companion of the recumbent sailor is depicted
with extremely broad shoulders—for a woman. The powerful jawline, cleft chin, and

283 Board, 364.
285 “Camp” as a critical discourse which is often linked with homosexuality, evades definition, has varying
degrees of subversion, and a nearly untraceable history. Because this sensibility parodied traditional
gender, sexual, and cultural norms in order to permit gay men to openly express their sexuality to one
another, written documentation of its origins are unclear and debated. For further analysis of the history and
historiography of Camp, see: Fabio Cleto, “Introduction: Queering the Camp,” Camp: Queer Aesthetics
and the Performing Subject, Fabio Cleto, ed. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999) 1-42.
muscular arms suggest that this figure may not represent a woman, but a man dressed as one. In painting the folds of her skirt, Cadmus has inserted the subtle appearance of an erection pressed against the taught ribcage of the recumbent sailor. Evidence that this pairing will result in a sexual encounter between two men, is the discarded, unused, rolled-up condom depicted near the foot off the reclining sailor. Prophylactics were considered unnecessary for gay men as no pregnancy could result from their encounter.

The figure in drag in the painting seems to go against the feminist interpretation thus far put forth. Feminist scholars writing on drag have argued that the impersonation of women by gay men tended to reinforce the lack of “phallus.”286 According to Carol-Anne Taylor, feminist discourse has traditionally viewed drag and transvestitism as a fetish that satirizes the Other-ness of woman, and often emphasizes the “phallus” of the drag performer who slips in and out of both genders.287 Innuendo and a low voice are often used in drag performances to alert the viewer that the drag performer is in fact male and not female. Tyler argues that this is the result of animosity experienced by gay men towards gender inversion and the fear that they will be emasculated (or “castrated”) for their sexual difference. Tyler argues that feminists have gone too far in categorizing the drag performance as a form of misogyny in which questioning the masculinity of a man is more offensive than questioning his virility.288

287 Ibid., 372-375.
288 Ibid.
Cadmus’s figure is depicted with very masculine features, which appears to reinforce the feminist reading of the drag performer as misogynist. Cadmus appears to have replaced the innuendo and deep voice, that could only be expressed in a theatrical drag performance, with the concealed erection and broad shoulders of his painted drag performer.

Cadmus may have painted this figure in response to the increasingly hostile climate of New York in the late 1930s towards drag. George Chauncey has argued that in the Prohibition Era, drag performers were commonplace in Times Square and visitors frequently had souvenir photos taken with the masquerading as women. However, with the impending World’s Fair in New York, the police had began arresting drag queens in Times Square and bars risked losing their liquor license if caught serving obvious homosexuals. As a result, much of the gay and drag culture of New York went back underground by the late 1930s. Chauncey claims that drag performers began to gather in Hell’s Kitchen, west of Times Square, with “soldiers, seamen, hustlers, and the gay men who were attracted to them.” Cadmus’s inclusion of a drag performer in *Sailors and Floozies* stands as a brazen, and accurate, reminder of the gay culture to be found in New York despite the ire of the police and politicians toward this subculture. In fact, Cadmus was so daring in this depiction that the figure was not discussed as a drag performer in the 1930s, and has not been interpreted as male in any of the Cadmus scholarship.

The passivity of the sailor and the dominance of his companion is a sexual inversion whether his companion is interpreted as a drag performer or a very large

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289 Chauncey, 315-21.
290 Chauncey, 335.
291 Chauncey, 333.
woman. In order for Sigmund Freud’s theory of the sexual invert, or “fairy,” to be sustained, the drag performer would be the passive participant in any sexual activity.

Whereas Cadmus subtly broke down Freud’s theory in *The Fleet’s In!* by suggesting that the traditionally masculine marine would perform fellatio on the “feminized” gay civilian, in *Sailors and Floozies* he more overtly criticizes the theory of sexual inversion. Any sex act that will result from this pairing will likely have the sailor in the position of penetrator as the drag performer is less likely to take on this role. However, his drowsy pose suggests that he will remain a passive participant in the sexual encounter, and therefore in a traditionally feminized role. Phallocentrism dictates that the penetrator is the dominant sexual partner, and those penetrated are passive, weak participants. By reversing the expectations of passive and active sexual roles, Cadmus has made the traditionally “feminine” role of penetrated the dominant figure in this sexual power relationship.

**Nazi and Communist Anxieties:**

The unconventional depiction of gender in *Sailors and Floozies* is one potential cause for the censorship, but the fear that the artist may support fascism is another cause for concern about the public exhibition of the painting. Cadmus represented the circumstances around which the military would soon depart for war by depicting a crumpled newspaper in the lower left corner of the painting. The *Daily News* headline reads “3,000 Killed in Air Raid” and is accompanied by a photo of Italian dictator, Benito Mussolini. By 1938, the only air raid to kill such large numbers was the blitzkrieg of the
small, Basque town of Guernica on April 26, 1937. The attack on Guernica was a strategic gain for General Francisco Franco, leader of the Spanish nationalists, who sought to protect Spain from the “atheistic,” liberal, Republican government that had ruled Spain from 1931. As is well known, Franco ultimately proved victorious, becoming official dictator in 1939. Guernica was the seat of parliament for the Basque region of Spain, and was seen as a symbol of liberal strength by 1937.292 Franco solicited the aid of German and Italian planes to obliterate the town of Guernica by repeated and incendiary bombing of the town until it was a fiery maelstrom.

The event shocked the world and demonstrated the complete destruction possible through contemporary warfare. As early as a year before, there had been a general fear that attacks from the air could potentially devastate entire cities. In 1936, The New York Times reported:

The dream of Daedalus has become the nightmare of the twentieth century. The invention and development of the plane have made possible the extension of warfare to practically every city and hamlet in Western Europe; the theater of war has been broadened to include entire civilian populations; the employment of the plane’s exact wartime capabilities are unknown.293 Cadmus’s painted newspaper visualizes this fear, and clarifies for the viewer the fear and anxiety in his depiction of military men.

292 William H. Robinson, “Barcelona in the Maelstrom,” Barcelona and Modernity: Picasso, Gaudi, Miró, Dalí, William H. Robinson, Jordi Falgàs, and Carmen Belen Lord, eds. (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 2007) 414-425. Scholars estimate the number of civilian casualties around 1,600, nearly half the number reported on Cadmus’s depicted headline.

Cadmus certainly would have been particularly interested in the attack on
Guernica because of his Basque heritage. It was only five years earlier that he visited
family in Basque country. The depiction of Mussolini in place of Franco or Nazi
German leader Adolf Hitler may indicate another type of mourning for the artist. History
has vilified Franco and the German Condor League as largely responsible for the attack
on Guernica as Italy contributed significantly less to the attack. However, Cadmus so
greatly admired the Italian Renaissance that he viewed himself as an heir to the painting
tradition of Luca Signorelli. The inclusion of Mussolini may signify his outrage at the
degradation of Italian culture.

However, an ironic detail of the painting questions “national unity” (to borrow the
words of Heil). The wall behind the middle ground couple is covered with graffiti.
Among the depicted graffiti, Cadmus included a swastika and the phrase “Vote
Communism” immediately next to it. While Cadmus painted the image in 1938, by the
time Heil insisted it be removed from the exhibition in 1940, Hitler had invaded Paris and
began a bombing campaign of Great Britain. As American allies were under attack, it
was inevitable that the U.S. would soon enter World War II. It is arguable that the pro-
fascist graffiti included by Cadmus struck a very sensitive nerve for Heil who censored
the painting in the interest of “national unity.” While The Fleet’s In! was censored on the

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294 Tully interview. Cadmus indicates that on the 1931-32 trip to Europe, he and French went to Spain to
look up some of Cadmus’s family, but he recalls not being welcomed warmly.
295 While Italy provided fewer planes, and dropped fewer bombs, their intervention still opposed the
French, British, Russian, and American Non-Intervention Pact with regards to the Spanish Civil War.
296 Tully interview.
297 German armies invaded Paris in June 1940, and began bombing Britain in mid-August 1940.
grounds of societal mores, Heil may have found the political undercurrents of *Sailors and Floozies* equally offensive.

At this time, opposition to the Fascist threat was by no means universal in the United States. Many Americans were isolationists, and some were openly pro-Fascist. In the summer of 1940, for example, *Life* published an article on a group of pro-fascist supporters. The illustrated article describes the *Ordinungs Dienst* or “Order Guard” of the German-American Bund. According to *Life*, they met weekly to “picnic, swim, drill and hear eulogies of Germany and vilifications of the American way of life at Camp Siegfried, Long Island.”298 Given the strong fear of Nazi sympathizers, Cadmus’s depiction of a swastika may have been a cause for alarm.299

By 1938, Cadmus may have been familiar with the British writer E. M. Foster’s essay, “The Menace to Freedom,” which questioned any form of political allegiance. Cadmus did not begin correspondence with Forster until 1943, but Lincoln Kirstein met Forster at a much earlier date, began correspondence in 1936, and probably introduced Cadmus to his writings.300 In the essay, Forster questions any allegiance to political groups. He claims that:

> Man has dallied with the idea of a social conscience, and has disguised the fear of the herd as loyalty towards the group, and has persuaded himself that when he

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298 “Speaking of Pictures . . . These are Signs of Nazi Fifth Columns Everywhere,” *Life* (June 17, 1940): 10.
299 It should also be noted, however, that on occasion, *Life* satirized fears of an internal Fascist or Communist threat. In 1937, Thomas Hart Benton went to Flint Michigan to report on the labor crisis, and produced a series of drawings that lay to rest such fears by showing strikers in normal every-day activities, such as sitting in a bar or playing band music. While the captions humorously comment on Fascist or Communist activities, the benign character of the activities makes it clear that such threats have been greatly exaggerated.
300 Mary Lago Collection, University of Missouri, EMF Letters: EMF to Paul Cadmus, 1943-1965 (B22, F12) and EMF Letters to Lincoln Kirstein, 1936, 1947-1965 (B24, F9)
sacrifices himself to the State he is accomplishing a deed far more satisfying than anything which can be accomplished alone.\textsuperscript{301} Forster argues that nationalism, and loyalty to the State that results, threatens the independence and individualism of humanity.\textsuperscript{302} Cadmus’s depiction of American support for fascism in the face of atrocity supports Forster’s claim that dissent is integral to freedom and individuality.

\textit{Sailors and Floozies} embodies dissent, both sexual and political, at a time when nationalism and conformity defined the American zeitgeist. Whether the painting was censored in the “interest of national unity” or as a publicity scheme, Cadmus’s complex weaving of irony and satire was certainly shocking. That the public was unsure what to think of the painting is evidenced by the fact that it remains one of his best known works, but so little is written about it that it has virtually no historiography.

\textsuperscript{302} Forster expanded this sentiment in his 1939 essay, “What I Believe.” However, that essay was written after Cadmus painted \textit{Sailors and Floozies}. 
CHAPTER VII

LABOR AND SADISM: THE HERRIN MASSACRE

Paul Cadmus painted the most gruesome and violent painting of his career in 1940 for Life magazine. Life invited sixteen artists to paint images representing important historic events from American history to be published throughout the year.303 The Herrin Massacre (fig. 7.1) depicts an event from 1922 in which strikebreakers were inhumanely murdered by a mob of angry union coal miners in Herrin, Illinois. Life never published Cadmus’s image. Lincoln Kirstein argues this was because, with the impending war, editors wanted to present a pro-labor image.304 Kirstein’s argument has been contested by successive scholars on the grounds that the magazine frequently manipulated images through captions to demonize organized labor.305

As has often been noted, many of the American paintings reproduced in Life were intensely patriotic. A good example is John Steuart Curry’s Hoover and the Flood (fig. 7.2), which celebrates the establishment of a medical station by Herbert Hoover when the Mississippi River flooded its banks in 1927. Hoover’s decisive and heroic action is credited with saving many from diseases such as malaria.306 Significantly, capitalism was also often pictures in a positive light. Thus, for example, Alexandre Hogue painted Spindletop (fig. 7.3), an image of a Texas oil geyser that was so profitable that it came to

303 Kirstein, Paul Cadmus, 48.
304 Ibid.
306 While Hoover’s medical station is often credited with his election to President in 1928, it was also controversial because there are reports of African Americans plagued by the flood being used as forced labor, sometimes at gunpoint. Curry’s image depicts African Americans benefitting from Hoover’s decisive action, and happily contributing their labor in constructing dikes.
signify American prosperity, ingenuity, and progress.\textsuperscript{307} These images seem to suggest that \textit{Life} solicited patriotic images, and that by deviating from that paradigm, Cadmus broke his agreement with \textit{Life}. However, Eliasoph’s research indicates that the commission came with a list of potential subjects from which to choose. These subjects included “the assassination of Huey Long and the Wall Street crash of 1929.”\textsuperscript{308} While the selection of the massacre at Herrin seems to have been entirely chosen by Cadmus, it is clear from the suggested topics by \textit{Life} that the depiction of a controversial murder and the collapse of the American economy were also acceptable.

This chapter will re-consider Kirstein’s argument that the depiction of labor caused \textit{Life} to censor the painting. Peyton Boswell’s criticism of \textit{The Herrin Massacre}, which largely centered on the issue of American organized labor, may have contributed to \textit{Life}’s decision to not publish the image. It will further read \textit{The Herrin Massacre} in the context of anti-lynching images of the 1930s to argue that Cadmus deviated from the parameters of acceptability for a lynching image.

\textbf{A Massacre in Herrin, Illinois:}

The attack by Herrin’s mineworkers took place on June 22, 1922 at the Southern Illinois Coal Company run by William J. Lester. During a soft coal miners’ strike, Lester made arrangements with the United Mine Workers of America to permit workers to mine

\textsuperscript{307} On January 10, 1901, Anthony F. Lucas finally realized the goal of the oil drilling that had taken place at Spindletop since 1892. The “Lucas Gusher” blew oil into the air and took nine days to get under control, but was the largest oil geyser in the world. Oil production at Spindletop continued until 1936.
\textsuperscript{308} Eliasoph, “Paul Cadmus: Life and Work,” 110. Huey Long was a Louisiana U.S. senator who opposed FDR’s economic policies in the 1932 presidential election when he ran on the Democratic ticket. He made it known that he wanted to force a Republican victory in 1932 so that he could run for President in 1940 as a Democrat. He was shot at the Baton Rouge Airport on September 8, 1935, and died two days later.
coal on the condition that it could not be shipped. The arrangement benefitted both Lester and his workers because the former would have amassed large quantities of coal that could be shipped as soon as the strike ended, and the miners could continue to be paid through the lengthy strike.\(^{309}\) However, seeing the potential for significant profit through a monopoly on coal production, Lester broke his deal with the union by firing his union workers, and inviting approximately fifty strikebreakers and guards from Chicago to Herrin to mine and ship coal. Paul M. Angle argues that the unions were so thoroughly organized in Illinois that they dominated “every craft and industry, so that the miners had the active sympathy of the entire laboring population.”\(^{310}\) By June 21st, over two thousand unionized laborers had made their way to Herrin, using intimidation to force coal production to stop at Lester’s mine.\(^{311}\) To make matters worse, the local sheriff, Melvin Thaxton, was running for county treasurer and was unlikely to alienate the union votes by intervening to protect the strikebreakers.\(^{312}\)

On June 21st, a truck carrying strikebreakers from Chicago was attacked between Carbondale and Herrin. That the restless union men already gathered in Herrin started to lose faith in law and justice is evidenced in the fact that they began looting buildings.\(^{313}\) Once his mine was surrounded by an angry mob, Lester quickly recognized the potential for loss of life, and arranged a meeting with union officials in which he agreed to cease

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\(^{310}\) Angle, 13. The pro-labor sentiment in southern Illinois was so strong, that non-union mines were not in existence in the state for nearly 15 years prior. In 20 years time, miners’ wages increased from $1.25-2.00 per day to $7.00-15.00 per day, and working conditions improved significantly as well. However, Lester was recently transplanted to Herrin from Cleveland, Ohio and must have not realized the extent to which organized labor dominated southern Illinois.


\(^{312}\) Angle, 17.

\(^{313}\) Angle, 20.
production. In exchange, union officials agreed to permit the strikebreakers to leave the mine unharmed. However, two thousand angry union members were too great a number to effectively communicate and enforce the terms of the arrangement. As they left the mine, the majority of strikebreakers were taken to the nearest woods and instructed to run for their lives shortly before being hunted down and shot by the angry mob as they attempted to climb a barbed wire fence.314

Cadmus’s painting depicts the last six men to be killed who were instructed to crawl on hands and knees for a mile to the Herrin cemetery where they were beaten and shot.315 The painting is organized in three figural groups. In the foreground are depicted five of the strikebreakers, three of whom are already dead. The other two are receiving their fatal blows, one of these men pleads for his life, the other is already so badly beaten that he does not have the strength to appeal. The fallen men have been partially stripped of their clothing, and their bodies overlap one another creating a barrier between the viewer and the angry mob. The mob is the second figural grouping, whose primary figure is an angry red head wielding a bloodied lead pipe. The blood of the victims is not restricted to the pipe, but runs down his arm and into his shirt sleeve, emphasizing the barbarism of the attack. A bottle of alcohol is passed around the contemptuous crowd, suggesting that while the numbers of attackers made the violence possible, alcohol was necessary to numb any feeling of pathos amid the crowd. The third figural group is located in the distance, where one of the strikebreakers is depicted hung by a tree. Among

314 Fliege, 184.
315 Fliege, 184. Cadmus’s painting depicts 7 men. It is important to note that there were no published photos of the massacre. The people of Herrin were immediately concerned about the judgmental eye of the media and almost immediately prohibited those outside the community from entering. The only existing photograph is of the bodies resting on pine boxes from a great distance.
the figures hanging the white strikebreaker is an African American man, and a Caucasian woman. The irony and significance of these figures will be discussed later in this chapter.

**The Herrin Massacre at the Whitney Museum of American Art:**

Before it was to be published in *Life*, the painting was exhibited at the Whitney Museum of American Art in the 1940 exhibition of contemporary American painters. It was harshly criticized by populist and conservative art critic Peyton Boswell in the *Art Digest*. As a populist, Boswell opposed modernism because of its perceived elitism. Boswell’s distrust of modernism is similar to that espoused by Karl Marx:

> Art belongs to the people, its roots should penetrate deeply into the very thick of the masses of the people. It should be comprehensible to these masses and loved by them. It should unite the emotions, thoughts and will of these masses and arouse them.\(^{316}\)

In 1940, Cadmus appears to have shared Boswell’s view of modernism, and lamented what he perceived as a loss of draughtsmanship among contemporary artists.\(^{317}\) Nonetheless, Boswell hated *The Herrin Massacre* even more than he hated modernism and criticized the painting as follows:

> From the standpoint of aesthetics and good taste, I don’t think Paul Cadmus’s Whitney exhibit, *Herrin Massacre* has any close competition for the worst example of so-called fine art I have ever seen. It is not so much the technique that


\(^{317}\) Tully interview.
is bad; it’s the brutal spirit of the thing and its obvious inaccuracies that grate on one’s sensitivities. Cadmus usually paints with the intention to shock, and in this case he has done so with the icy detachment of the super-sophisticate, who neither felt nor cared to see the human drama offered.\footnote{Peyton Boswell, “That Cadmus ‘Shocker,’” \textit{The Art Digest} (December 15, 1940).}

In condemning Cadmus as an elitist intellectual, Boswell has taken the task of defending the common worker for whom he professed to represent. His assertion that Cadmus’s painting is vulgar and in poor taste reveals his bias against the subject matter. In the following issue of \textit{Art Digest}, Illinois resident Burnett H. Shryock wrote a letter to the editors agreeing wholeheartedly with Boswell. However, Shryock was primarily disturbed by what the artist omitted. Both Shryock and Boswell believed that Cadmus’s setting, a cemetery, to be untrue to the actual events at Herrin, and Shryock believed that Cadmus had missed an excellent opportunity to paint action by representing the “scabs” trapped in the barbed wire fence.\footnote{Burnett H. Shryock, “Southern Illinois Speaks Up,” \textit{The Art Digest} (January 1, 1941).}

Shryock’s letter is perhaps more disturbing than Cadmus’s image in that he wished to see greater gruesomeness, human cruelty, and humiliation than was depicted. As such, Shryock’s letter indicates that the pro-labor zeitgeist of Illinois was so strong, that nearly twenty years after the massacre, the organized labor of Illinois still believed it was justified in killing the strikebreakers. This sentiment was best articulated in the days leading up to the 1922 massacre, as the United Mine Workers threatened: “representatives in our organization are justified in treating this crowd as an outlaw organization and in viewing its members in the same light as they do any other common
strikebreakers.” That strikebreakers were not viewed in Illinois as merely opposing organized labor, but as criminal outlaws, appears to have remained the sentiment in that state into the 1940s. The union men appeared proud and unremorseful in the wake of the attack. After killing the nearly fifty strikebreakers, their dead bodies were laid out on pine boxes in Herrin. As people viewed and spit on the bodies, one man was heard saying to his child: “Look at the dirty bums who tried to take the bread out of your mouths.” The anger and hatred felt towards the strikebreakers did not subside quickly in Illinois, as evidenced by Shryock’s letter.

Boswell was primarily upset at the negative depiction of labor. He stated that the union workers “were not the brutes and morons the artist has depicted but they were hard working Americans such as you and I fighting for their hungry families.” Cadmus’s depiction of the violent attack is unusual for the 1930s. Images of labor were fairly common, but in nearly every instance, those images positively depicted the organized laborer.

A well known example of a painting depicting another labor dispute that resulted in bloodshed is Philip Evergood’s *American Tragedy* of 1937 (fig. 7.5). Evergood depicted the 1937 Memorial Day Massacre in which Chicago members of the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC) were on strike. As they marched across Chicago, their path was obstructed by the police. When the strikers taunted the police,
shots were fired, and ten strikers were killed. Evergood’s working men are depicted heroically as they selflessly protect women, and heroically stand up to the bullies that were the Chicago police.\footnote{Doss, 186.} History has painted the Chicago police in as the antagonists, and made near martyrs out of the laborers. However, the massacre at Herrin was an entirely different subject matter. Did \textit{Life} expect Cadmus to manipulate historical fact in order to make heroes out of the unionized miners? Did \textit{Life} expect the artist to compose an image that minimized the bloodshed on the hands of unionized labor?

It stands to reason that if the union worker is represented by Cadmus as the antihero, the antagonist, or the villain, then the strikebreaker must be read as heroic, the protagonist, or the innocent victim. Such a sentiment was extremely unpopular in a climate where scabs were the “niggers” of the working class. Philip Eliasoph argues that Cadmus’s image is heroic because he violated the patterns of representation for labor, and took an unpopular moral position. Eliasoph stated that “Cadmus refused to accept the use of violence against the surrendering strikebreakers. It did not matter to him whether labor was being indicted or vindicated—eighteen men were deprived of life and no economic dispute can excuse that.”\footnote{Eliasoph, “Paul Cadmus: Life and Work,” 111-112.}

In concluding his essay, Boswell taunted \textit{Life} by stating: “Cadmus’s piece of cheap journalism is the first painting ever to get my whole goat. But wait till you see it in \textit{Life}.”\footnote{Boswell.} Boswell’s mention of \textit{Life} may have been intended to be antagonistic towards the popular magazine. Three years earlier, \textit{Life} found itself attacked for depicting imagery that it claimed to be anti-labor. In 1937, Thomas Hart Benton was harshly criticized for

\footnotesize{324 Doss, 186.}  
\footnotesize{325 Eliasoph, “Paul Cadmus: Life and Work,” 111-112.}  
\footnotesize{326 Boswell.}
his journalistic sketches of an impending labor battle in Flint, Michigan. Benton’s sketches do not reveal any bias towards either labor or corporations. He showed the citizens of Flint engaged in thoroughly normal activities, although *Life* did include captions that referred ironically to the threat of a Fascist or Communist takeover of the labor movement. Some readers were insulted, since they thought that Benton (or the editors) were ridiculing the notion that strikers had legitimate social grievances.327 One letter to the editors claimed:

> Although these drawings purport to deal with these political issues, as evidenced by the captions, they seem deliberately perpetrated for the purpose of ridiculing American Labor and deriding the dignity of the American Labor movement. . . such “gags” can be evaluated only as an insult to the American public.328

The negative mood generated by *Life* upon publishing Benton’s drawings three years earlier was likely to be more intensely felt by the magazine after Boswell’s instruction for readers to anticipate Cadmus’s painting.

Erika Doss quoted the editors of the magazine as stating “*Life* assigns only the subject, giving the painter free reign to recreate the scene in his own idiom and with his own ideas.”329 That Cadmus was eliminated from this series is indicative that this was overstated and idealistic. Because the subject matter was decided in tandem between the editors and the artists, one can reason that the subject matter of the massacre at Herrin

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327 Doss, 188.
328 Letter to the editors of *Life* by Irving Marantz, Norman Lewis, Yankel Kufeld, William Gough, and Jan Bols quoted in Doss, 188.
329 *Life* editors quoted in Doss, 189.
was not the reason for the censorship, but Cadmus’s depiction of that subject and the image’s critical reception.

**Cadmus and the NAACP Exhibition:**

While *The Herrin Massacre* is the most brutal painting of Cadmus’s career, the murderous mob was not entirely new subject matter for the young artist. He had earlier participated in an anti-lynching exhibition sponsored by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1935 with a drawing titled *To the Lynching!* (fig. 7.5). The 1935 NAACP exhibition was organized in support of anti-lynching laws in the U.S. following the famous case of the Scottsboro Boys who were accused of raping white women on a train in 1931, and despite the lack of evidence, fought an unjust legal system throughout the 1930s.

To promote the cause of racial justice and social reform, many artists made images of the lynching of black men. But such images remained controversial despite their relative frequency. The NAACP exhibition, organized by Walter White, was originally to be held at the Jacques Seligmann Galleries in New York. However, the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA), which also organized a 1935 exhibition of anti-lynching images, opposed the politics of the NAACP and pressured Seligmann to cancel the exhibition.\(^3\) When “An Art Commentary on Lynching” opened instead at the Arthur U. Newton Galleries in New York, critics reproached the show, but for varying

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reasons. Some critics found the images to be too gruesome and unpleasant, others found them to prettify the gruesomeness through aesthetics, while still others contested the employment of art in politics.

George Bellows, Isamu Noguchi, and Reginald Marsh provided three of the best known images from the NAACP exhibition, and the drawing by Cadmus was awarded one of the five cash prizes. Examining these images will help navigate the conditions through which the depiction of lynchings was acceptable. George Bellows’s lithograph, *The Law Is Too Slow* (fig. 7.6) depicts a muscular, nude black man engulfed by fire and surrounded by a mob of masked men stoking the flames. Dora Apel cites Archer Winston of the *New York Post* as asking “Can’t we be spared the revolting details?” when reviewing the exhibition.331 Lynching is a horrific example of inhumanity, and representing it as such is certainly unpleasant, but these images were not exercises in formalism, and their explicitness was integral to their political message. However, some did not trust (or did not wish to trust) the accuracy of the images. An *Art News* reviewer stated “although the works of many talented artists are to be found, a strong atmosphere of sensationalism is the prevailing note.”332 The argument that the exhibition was “sensational” inherently undermines the political message by asserting that what is depicted is not factual, but exaggerated. By reducing the images to mere fantasies by the artists, viewers and critics could blindly look past the practice of lynching.

Isamu Noguchi’s sculpture, *Death* (fig. 7.7), was singled out at the opening of the exhibition for being too gratuitous and sensational. In *Death*, Noguchi abstracted the human form to capture the essence of the charred, hanged corpse. Noguchi implied the mob without explicitly depicting it, rather he presented a single figure hanging from an actual rope. While the source material for the sculpture was a well published photograph of George Hughes who was lynched in Sherman, Texas during the Depression (fig. 7.8), Noguchi’s lack of specific details makes the image a universal critique of lynching.\(^{333}\) The *Art News* critic attacked Noguchi for what he believed was “aesthetic opportunism in capitalizing on the dramatic values of the subject.”\(^{334}\) The argument suggests that the sculpture’s abstract and formal qualities were the dominant quality, and tactlessly applied to a serious subject. The critic continues to state “Noguchi’s sculpture . . . unfortunately dominates the exhibition. But this pendant mass of silvered realism is only a macabre commentary, closely approaching the bizarre.”\(^{335}\) However, the critic’s discomfort can be read in the words of a critic for *Parnassus*, the College Art Association journal: “If there is anything to make a white man squirmy about his color, he has it in this gnarled chromium victim jigging under the wind swayed rope.”\(^{336}\) The critic for *Parnassus* seems to have captured the discomfort with which many of the other critics viewed the exhibition. While white men in New York could feel distanced from and superior to their racist southern contemporaries, they may have felt

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\(^{333}\) Apel, 94. The photograph was published in the International Labor Defense journal, *Labor Defender*, as well as the journals *Chicago Defender* and *The Afro-American* from 1930-34.

\(^{334}\) *Art News* critic M.M. quoted in Apel, 95. Due to the negative reactions to his sculpture, Noguchi removed it from the NAACP show, and put it in the CPUSA exhibition instead.

\(^{335}\) Ibid.

\(^{336}\) *Parnassus* critic quoted in Apel, 95.
some guilt in being among the race perpetuating the practice of lynching, and likely fearful of retaliation.

Reginald Marsh’s drawing, *This Is Her First Lynching* (fig. 7.9) faired better with critics because the gruesome reality of the lynching is implicitly present outside the border of the picture plane. It depicts a large crowd facing the left edge, and at the center of the drawing is a woman hoisting a little girl into the air for a better view of the killing. Marsh was among the artists applauded by Winston Burdett of Brooklyn’s *Daily Eagle*, who wrote: “The pictures are particularly good when they satirize less the act of lynching than the state of mind which makes it possible.”\(^{337}\) Marsh’s critique of lynching nicely demonstrates how such inhumanity was indoctrinated in children who would someday continue the practice of lynching.\(^{338}\) In that his depiction spares the viewer the violence of his colleagues, it is more comfortable, but in satirizing the indoctrination of children, it is also more disturbing.

Cadmus’s drawing, *To the Lynching!* , was one of the five images to be awarded a cash prize.\(^{339}\) The drawing depicts a man of color tied down to a horse by three other men sneering and shouting. The swirling energy of the scene is emphasized as the horse’s head and neck twist and crane, directing the viewer’s eye from the victim to his aggressors. It is worth noting that Cadmus’s drawing minimizes racial stereotypes by applying them to all figures in the composition. Common tropes for representing people

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\(^{337}\) Winston Buurdett quoted in Park, 166. Burdett specifically names Marsh’s image for its satire.  
\(^{338}\) Apel, 89-90.  
\(^{339}\) Apel, *Imagery of Lynching*, 98. Paul Cadmus was awarded a $15 cash prize for his drawing. According to Apel, the jury for the competition was comprised of noted modernist curator Alfred Barr, Jr., theater critic Heywood Broun, “Father of the Harlem Renaissance” Alain Locke, and Audrey McMahon of the College Art Association.
of color included exaggeratedly full lips and a broad nose. While Cadmus’s victim is
drawn with full lips and a broad nose, so are his attackers. Nor does Cadmus use tonal
ranges to differentiate race in the drawing. The only indication of racial difference in the
Cadmus drawing is hairstyle and subjugation. The victim is the only figure heroically
depicted, and his body is idealized. In opposition to the ideal beauty of his strong body,
his attackers are depicted with missing teeth, and gnarled faces of advanced age. Apel has
argued that while the image is composed to permit the viewer to participate in the
lynching, the viewer identifies more with the victim because of the beauty of his naked
body.

In opposition to the images by Bellows and Noguchi, Cadmus’s drawing depicts
the mob taking the man to be lynched, thereby sparing the viewer the “revolting details.”
The black man is depicted beaten, but while he bleeds, his wounds are not as gruesome as
the burning castrated body in Bellows’s lithograph, or the charred body with rigor mortis
found in Noguchi’s sculpture. Rather than showing the brutal effects of the lynching on
the body of the victim, Cadmus has depicted the aggression of the mob. Like the drawing
by Marsh, Cadmus’s drawing “satirizes the state of mind that makes (lynching) possible.”

340 The same year, Cadmus painted Gilding the Acrobats, in which he painted a young black boy in a
subordinate position painting the white acrobat. Cadmus minimized racial difference in this painting as well
by making the image nearly monochromatic through a homogenizing golden yellow wash that covers all
figures. Again, the exaggerated lips of the black boy are extended onto the white acrobat who flares his
nostrils in a sneer as he looks at his own arm.
341 Apel, 98.
Corporeality and *The Herrin Massacre*

Cadmus’s success in the NAACP exhibition gave his work greater validity and justified his position as a major American artist of the 1930s. It is therefore not surprising that *Life* requested him to participate in their American history series. However, he must have violated the paradigms of acceptability when he painted *The Herrin Massacre*. The depiction of the beaten bodies, which bleed from superficial wounds on their legs and chests, is similar to the earlier drawing. The figures lack the large bruises and swollen wounds that one would expect to result from being beaten with a lead pipe. Their bodies are not deformed or distorted as a result of their attack, but the image appears to be gruesome nonetheless. Arguably the viewer projects deformity and gruesomeness onto the image through the attacker with the lead pipe. The strength of this figure and profusion of blood on his weapon are irreconcilable with the unbruised and unswollen bodies dying at his feet. The horror of *The Herrin Massacre* lies in the bloodied pipe. In opposition, the mob in the drawing is depicted scratching at the subdued body of the black man, but a rope is the only weapon visible that defines the nature of his implicit murder.

Bram Dijkstra has argued that the grisliness of the painting resulted from its depiction in color. Because black and white photography of violent subject matter, was less emotionally powerful and tended to “homogenize horror.” According to Dijkstra, in a black and white photograph a puddle of blood is similar to a puddle of oil and therefore appears less corporal and horrific.\footnote{Dijkstra, 149.} This argument could be extended to locate the difference between the award-winning drawing and the censored painting. Because the
former is a black and white drawing and the latter a vibrantly colored painting, the blood
streaming down the pipe and arm of the attacker is less palatable in the painting than it is
in the drawing.

Dijkstra further argues that the artist’s homosexuality contributed to his
censorship because he eroticized the male bodies and invited the viewer “to imagine
violence of the sort a sadist might fantasize about.” Dijkstra’s analysis of what he
terms the “personal focus” of the artist presumes that viewers would objectify the dying
bodies through a scopophilic gaze and find pleasure in their nudity. However, the image
is more horrific if the painting is viewed through the narcissistic gaze, in which the
viewer identifies with the beaten bodies. If the viewer must imagine the pain of broken
teeth, crushed skull, and facial deformity that are not depicted to project gruesomeness
onto the superficially wounded men, this is best accomplished through the narcissistic
gaze. If the viewer substitutes his/her self for the central figure depicted receiving the
fatal blow, then the viewer shudders with the anticipation of agony.

The composition suggests that Cadmus intended the viewer to view the painting
through the narcissistic gaze as *The Herrin Massacre* is composed to emphasize the force
of the pipe over the nude men. A strong implied line guides the viewer from the
foreground to the pipe. An intersection of lines is created through the fallen bodies of
four men, which extends through the man with the pipe (who has three points of contact
with the ground), and terminates in his bloodied right hand. The fifth figure in the
foreground is depicted extending his arm to create a line that runs through his body and

343 Ibid. According to Dijkstra, Cadmus’s desire of the male body led him to eroticize it, and that his
personal interest in the male form overrode any socially critical analysis of the painting with regards to
organized labor.
directly across the shoulders of the man with the pipe, leading to his right hand which holds the pipe. Cadmus further directed the eye of the viewer with an implied triangle created by the fallen men and the lead pipe in which the latter is the apex of the implied triangle and the point of greatest interest for the viewer. This composition suggests that attention is to be focused primarily on the man with the pipe rather than the nude figures in the foreground. The viewer is as focused on the lead pipe as the central fallen figure who gazes upwards at the weapon as it is readied to strike his face.

The narcissistic gaze is arguably controversial in *The Herrin Massacre* because it asks the viewer to identify with the strikebreakers. In so doing, Cadmus has requested the viewer identify with the “abject” as defined by feminist scholar Julia Kristeva. According to Kristeva, the *abject* is neither *subject* nor *object* as both the latter terms are defined by desire (the subject is one who desires and the object is that which is desired). The abject is therefore defined by its opposition to the Self and that the Self finds it undesirable. While Kristeva grounds abjection in the wastes of the body and finds the corpse to be the ultimate symbol of abjection, Cadmus does not depict bodily waste focusing instead on the corpse. Lynching is the ultimate act of abjection, as the “Other” body is literally destroyed because it is deemed so disgusting and revolting.

Philip Eliasoph thought of the strikebreakers in a similar context to Kristeva’s abject bodies. He posed the question: “But what about the scabs who were forced to

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345 Kristeva, 229.
346 Kristeva, 230. Paul M. Angle states that after the massacre, one of the lynchers proudly urinated in the faces of the corpses (Angle, 10).
humiliate themselves into strike-breaking? Their families were probably worse off than those of the union regulars.” Unemployed and desperate for work, the strikebreakers were willing to violate the social order imposed by the labor union. According to Kristeva, the abject is that which “disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules . . . the traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience . . .” The threat of the strikebreaker is that he/she extinguishes the power wielded by a labor strike, and thereby is seen to act as traitor who does not respect borders and disturbs order. That these men were beaten, shot, and humiliated by the labor union is evidence that they were perceived as “Other” than the Self, their actions so deplorable that they became non-human.

However, there is no visual difference between the strikebreakers and the union laborers. Perhaps more significantly, the abject bodies do not appear different than the intended audience. As argued by Dora Apel and Marlene Park, the rules of depicting the lynching of men of color required gruesome details to be inferred rather than explicitly visible. Nonetheless, it appears as though images of white men lynching the black “Other” were tolerable when the depiction was critical of the practice of lynching.

Cadmus did not allocate any historical, racial, or gendered distance for the viewer. The image became less tolerable to his audience because the violence imposed on “Other” abject bodies was instead imposed on the viewer’s concept of Self.

In the distant background of the painting, Cadmus depicted a white woman stomping on the body of a strikebreaker’s corpse while a black man watches a

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348 Kristeva, 232
strikebreaker hung from a tree. Both figures would have been unpopular, but are evidence of Cadmus’s research trip to Herrin, Illinois and the accuracy with which he tells the narrative story. The addition of the black man appears to parallel and satirize the practice of lynching in the south as the traditional victim is now turned antagonist. The figure is not depicted as an active participant, but a passive one. His complacency suggests that he has accepted the practice of lynching, but his sympathetic expression indicates that the figure is aware of the irony of his presence. Cadmus painted him as though conflicted by his desire for peer approval and the vile nature of the massacre—a massacre that so closely parallels the practice of racist lynchings.

While the black figure provides dark, poetic irony to Cadmus’s social commentary, he is also historically accurate. According to Paul M. Angle, as the strikebreakers marched to their deaths, an African American union member nervously ran back and forth with his rifle. A white union member reportedly tried to reassure his black colleague that “we hate them more than we hate you.” While it was commendable that the union could temporarily set aside racist agendas for the sake of the labor strike, this statement is clearly meant to further intimidate the strikebreakers by recalling the practice of lynching. However, it would likely have the effect of intimidating people of color who are only marginally reassured that this time, they will not fall victim.

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349 Angle, 4.
350 Angle recalls another labor dispute in the 1890s, in which the strikebreakers were all men of color, and though the earlier massacre had far fewer casualties, it must have still resonated with blacks working in Herrin. The fear of people of color resulted from towns in Williamson County prohibiting blacks from entering. Angle argues that when his book was published in 1952, there were towns that still outlawed blacks from spending the night.
The woman depicted stomping on a fallen strikebreaker has precedents in the drawing by Reginald Marsh, *This Is Her First Lynching!*, in which the artist was praised for addressing the role played by women in lynchings. However, Cadmus appears to make a more specific reference to the events at Herrin. Having heard reports of large numbers of angry union strikers, Chicago journalist, Don Ewing, came to Herrin as the massacre took place. He arrived shortly after the six men were beaten and shot in the cemetery, and reported that two of the strikebreakers were still partially conscious and asking for water. When Ewing attempted to fill a small pail with water, one bystander cocked his rifle and instructed the journalist to keep away. Another bystander, a woman holding an infant, yelled at the dying man: “I’ll see you in hell before you get any water,” and then stepped on the man until “blood bubbled from his wounds.” That the woman depicted so closely resembles Ewing’s report suggests that the research conducted by Cadmus in Herrin found its way into the composition.

Cadmus’s disgust for the loss of human life is certainly commendable, but why would he choose this subject matter in the first place? Eliasoph argues that the artist was “intrigued” by the struggle. Indeed, it is an intriguing story, but why might Cadmus have found it intriguing in 1940? Dijkstra convincingly argues that the image is “a critical depiction of systemic homophobia.” The timing of the painting coincided with a severe backlash against homosexuals in New York prior to the world’s Fair in 1940. According to George Chauncey, following the repealment of Prohibition in 1933, there was an

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351 Angle, 10.
352 Eliasoph, 110.
353 Dijkstra, 150.
increasing animosity towards homosexuals in New York.\textsuperscript{354} Chauncey argues that when bars were again permitted to operate lawfully, the State Liquor Authority (SLA) was established to ensure good behavior in drinking establishments and the presence of even one suspected homosexual in a bar resulted in revoking the liquor license of that establishment. With the impending 1940 World’s Fair, proprietors stood to lose a considerable amount of money if their bar were to be shut down. It was in this period of animosity that Cadmus’s circle of gay intellectuals began to publicly mask their homosexuality.\textsuperscript{355} Gay men were often the victims of violent robberies. Chauncey reports young boys targeting “fags” as an easy mark. After being attacked and robbed, gay men rarely reported the crimes against them for fear of police harassment.\textsuperscript{356}

\textit{The Herrin Massacre} combines the visual language of racial oppression, couched in a labor dispute to criticize homophobia. The intersection of these themes, or any one of them on its own, may have contributed to \textit{Life}’s decision not to print the image. This painting was Cadmus’s last officially censored painting and his work shifted significantly after his 1940 scuffle with \textit{Life}.

\textsuperscript{354} Chauncey, 335.
\textsuperscript{355} Jared French married Margaret Hoening in 1937 despite continuing a sexual relationship with Cadmus and Lincoln Kirstein married Fidelma Cadmus (the artist’s sister) in 1941, and their home was shared by Kirstein’s lover José “Pete” Martinez. (Leddick, 116).
\textsuperscript{356} Chauncey, 59-60.
CHAPTER VIII
CONCLUSION: IMAGING THE HOMOSEXUAL AT CADMUS’S 1937 SOLO EXHIBITION

Because Paul Cadmus included homosexual figures in his paintings of the 1930s, scholars and gay historians of the past twenty years have viewed him as a forebear to the gay rights movement that began around 1969 and have argued that the presence of gay imagery was the major factor in the frequent censorship of his work. Evidence suggests that the censorship of these images is more complex, and the causal relationship between these gay figures and the artist’s repeated censorship appears to oversimplify history. Yes, as has been repeatedly indicated, it is certainly true that Cadmus included homosexuals in his paintings and explored gay themes. But paradoxically, this does not fully explain the controversies in the 1930s. In fact, contemporary accounts of his work never mentioned the issue of homosexuality. Instead, his contemporaries cited his unconventional use of satire, representation of women, the working class, immigrants, and race as problematic. The issue of homosexuality, in short, seems to have affected reactions to his work in a highly peculiar way.

Viewers of the 1930s were certainly threatened by his work and found his figural representations controversial, but sexual mores of the time largely prohibited a direct and frank discussion of homosexuality in newspapers and other forms of public exchange. As a result, many viewers of the time seem to have missed representations of gay behavior which would be clearly evident today. Most likely many viewers would not have realized
that New York had a gay underworld, and would not have understood the semi-secret
codes of homosexual communication that signified homoerotic desire as represented by
Cadmus. Of course, what is less than clear is what different viewers of the time
understood but did not publically discuss. Did the members of the Alibi Club knowingly
joke about the homosexual undercurrents of Cadmus’s *The Fleet’s In!*, as they sipped
their cocktails? Unfortunately we have no way of knowing—at least evidence on the
matter has not yet surfaced. But on the whole, because it could not be discussed, the
world of homosexuals was probably invisible to many Americans.

Nonetheless, viewers of the time clearly grasped that something about Cadmus’s
viewpoint was unusual, and they focused in on the issues with which they were most
familiar. Cadmus not only presented the relationship of men with other men in an unusual
way, but applied a similarly unorthodox viewpoint to human relationships as a whole. In
other words, he challenged traditional sexual and social roles in a way that was informed
by his own position on the margins of American society.

No doubt in part because of his status as a gay man, somewhat outside
conventional norms, Cadmus had an unconventional view of women, the working class,
immigrants, and race. It was arguably this side of his art in combination with gay issues
that challenged and offended art critics, military officials, businessmen, and the editors of
the primary popular news source, *Life* magazine. Philip Eliasoph has argued that
Cadmus’s paintings balance the apparent sin of homosexuality by demonstrating that
homosexuals are no more immoral than their “straight” counterparts, who equally
challenge societal mores. Indeed, Cadmus made a practice of challenging a variety of binary distinctions—such as male/female, middle class/working class, American/immigrant, or union worker/scab—which we usually employ to organize a hierarchy of values. In his paintings of the 1930s, Cadmus did not simply invert these binaries, but thoroughly confused them in a fashion that effectively destroys traditional hierarchies. He implicitly introduced a number of issues which were surely unfamiliar to viewers of the 1930s: for example, he asked viewers to think about what today we would term the carnivalesque, camp, fetishism, and abjection.

The main current of critical discourse on Cadmus’s scandalous paintings has insisted that during the 1930s representations of gay issues were invariably censored. According to this view, homosexuality was “unrepresentable” in American art of this decade. As it happens, however, during the 1930s Cadmus often exhibited paintings with homoerotic imagery that did not stir up negative commentary. Thus, for example, in Cadmus’s first solo exhibition in 1937, he showed three paintings which eroticize the nude male figure—*YMCA Locker Room* of 1933 (fig. 8.1), *Gilding the Acrobats* of 1935 (fig. 8.2), and *Two Boys on a Beach* of 1936 (fig. 8.3). Admittedly, all these paintings avoid direct representation of the male genitals, but all three contain sexual innuendos. For example, *YMCA Locker Room* contains a series of suggestive pairings, *Two Boys on a Beach* seems to directly portray an act of undressing that serves as a prelude to sexual intercourse, and *Gilding the Acrobat* seems to contain thinly veiled references to oral

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357 Eliasoph, “Paul Cadmus: Life and Work.”
358 Meyer, 37.
sex. What’s more, along with these works, he showed *Greenwich Village Cafeteria* (fig. 3.2), which includes three unequivocally homosexual figures. Yet remarkably, despite the brazenness of the gay imagery in these paintings, and the high number of visitors to the exhibition, none were censored or harshly criticized.

A closer look at the composition of Cadmus’s gay themed and celebrated paintings will reveal the manner in which such imagery found acceptability in the 1930s. The earliest of these paintings, *YMCA Locker Room*, ambitiously depicts fifteen figures in various states of undress. Some of the nearly nude men are painted with strikingly taut, muscular bodies and some are depicted with middle-aged, robust bodies. The setting suggests the acceptability of homosocial activity that follows rigorous physical exercise. Furthermore, the all-male space of locker rooms appealed to men as a place of exclusion especially once women entered the workforce in large numbers. The painted men lounge, converse, and playfully toss bars of soap over the lockers to one another—they leisurely revel in the freedom found in their same-sex environment.

The *Life* article celebrating Cadmus’s solo exhibition stated: “*YMCA Locker Room* is the 63rd Street ‘Y’ in New York where Cadmus went for exercise. He painted it in faraway Mallorca from memory and brief sketches.” The popular magazine emphasizes the benign homosocial nature of the scene, but to those familiar with New York’s gay subculture, the article signaled the artist’s homosexuality. According to George Chauncey, sex at the YMCA was well known in New York’s gay community. He

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359 “Paul Cadmus,” catalog, Midtown Payson Galleries (March 1937). In addition to being publicly shown at the Midtown Payson Galleries, all but *Two Boys on a Beach* were reproduced to accompany the text in the *Life* article of March 22, 1937.

360 “Paul Cadmus of Navy Fame Has His First Art Show,” 47.
quotes a 1930 interview in which a man states that the 63rd street YMCA was well known as an “elegant brothel, for those who like to live in their ivory towers with Greek gods. If you go to a shower there is always someone waiting to have an affair. It doesn’t take long.” Life’s assertion that Cadmus frequented this particular YMCA implicitly suggests that Cadmus did not simply go there for exercise. Cadmus’s painting likewise suggests the gay activities that were rumored to take place there.

Following the eye lines of the figures in the painting reveals that at least three of the figures do not make eye contact with the other men—but unabashedly gaze at their genitals. This is most obvious on the left side of the painting in which a man is depicted seated and applying deodorant. The seated man is painted with his boxers around his thighs as a fully clothed man reaches over him to pick up a towel. The opportunistic clothed man peeks at the seated man’s crotch as he impossibly reaches for the towel. In the background, Cadmus depicted a middle-aged man who seems to be propositioning a seated youth wearing only briefs.

Nonetheless, the painting was not censored, and was positively written about in both Life and Esquire in 1937. If homosexuality was virtually unrepresentable, one must ask why this painting did not stir up negative commentary. In fact, viewers of the time sanctioned the image because of the painting’s resemblance to a major work of the Italian Renaissance, Luca Signorelli’s fresco cycle for the Chapel of San Brizio in Orvieto (fig. 8.4). This connection was made as early as 1937 when Harry Salpeter stated that

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361 Taken from a 1930 interview with “Louis E.” in Chauncey, 156. The Young Men’s Christian Association built hotels to temporarily house transient immigrants. The single-sex environment was designed to prevent the temptation for sexual activity, but as early as 1896, some feared the attraction such housing might have for homosexuals.
Cadmus’s “chief source in painting is Signorelli, . . . whose muscular art even Michelangelo learned and shaped his own work.” Cadmus himself was probably the source of this information, since on many later occasions he discussed how powerfully Signorelli’s frescoes affected him on his trip to Europe in Europe in 1932-33.

Emphasis on the historic precedents from the Italian Renaissance created a context in which Cadmus’s beautiful male nudes were acceptable. While today historians have argued that Signorelli was among a long list of gay men who were significant to the development of 15th and 16th century art in Italy, this was not an interpretation that was publicly circulated in the 1930s.

What’s more, despite its homosexual undercurrents, Cadmus’s painting permits an alternate, socially acceptable interpretation: we are allowed to suppose that this racially homogenous, all-male space simply celebrates athleticism. The implicit depiction of homosexuality depicted by Cadmus was not overt enough to be offensive, and did not unequivocally challenge other societal norms.

Even more brazen was Two Boys on a Beach, which seems to portray a moment of undressing that serves as a prelude to sexual intercourse. The painting depicts two young men on a beach framed by a log. One of the figures reclines in the pose of an odalisque, wearing only unbuttoned pants that titillate the viewer by barely concealing his genitals. The other figure is seated on the log and depicted removing his shirt, his last bit of clothing.

362 Salpeter, 112.
364 Justin Spring makes this argument and cites James Saslow, Ganymede in the Renaissance (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986) for a historical account arguing that Michelangelo, Cellini, Botticelli, Donatello, Leonardo, Guido Reni, Il Sodoma, and Caravaggio were all “lovers of men.”
Once again, viewers of the time seem to have found ways of rationalizing the imagery in the painting. One of their key points of reference was surely one of the most frequently exhibited American paintings of the 19th century at the time, Thomas Eakins’ *The Swimming Hole* of 1884-85. During Eakins’s lifetime viewers found the painting strange and shocking. When Eakins exhibited it, the critics mentioned it only in passing, and their avoidance of a serious discussion suggests that at some level it must have caused offense. Recently, Jennifer Doyle has argued that the painting likely made people uncomfortable, because it represents specific, identifiable people: Eakins and five of his students and associates were represented with portrait-like accuracy in the painting, and the work therefore documented Eakins’s unconventional relationship with his students.

By the 1930s, however, most viewers no longer recognized Eakins or his associates, and became increasingly comfortable with the image. It was widely praised as one of Eakins’ most ambitious and important paintings. Eakins’s biographer, Lloyd Goodrich, did not even address the nudity in the painting when describing its importance in his monograph in 1930. Instead he stressed the “realism,” of the painting, the skill necessary to create such a complex, multi-figured composition, and the challenge of effectively representing the motion of the diving figure. When the painting was acquired by the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth, the purchase was supported by a public fundraising campaign, and small schoolchildren contributed dimes for its purchase. In good capitalist fashion, the critic Peyton Boswell noted that the painting must be good

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365 Eakins’s *The Swimming Hole* was exhibited four times in New York: at the Ferargil Galleries (1921), Joseph Brummer Galleries (1923), The Museum of Modern Art (1930), and the Whitney Museum of American Art (1935).

because in hardly more than a decade it had increased ten times in value, rising in price from $700 in 1925 to $7,000 in 1939. Rather than seeing Eakins’s intimacy with the other figures as homoerotic, Goodrich portrayed it as wholeheartedly masculine—a healthy liberation from association with women and thus as a sort of repudiation of anything effeminate or feminine.

Ironically, in recent years it has been argued that Eakins may have been a latent homosexual. A recently discovered statement, written in his own hand, declares that his true love was a naked man who he once laid beside, and many recent writers have viewed The Swimming Hole as homoerotic. In the 1930s, however, this subject matter did not have a place in art history, was not part of public discourse. The Swimming Hole provided sanction for the notion that the male nude could be portrayed in a fashion that was in no way erotic or morally questionable. By the time Cadmus painted Two Boys on a Beach, Eakins’s painting had been exhibited in New York four times. Given this powerful precedent, Cadmus’s Two Boys on a Beach could also be viewed as sexually neutral and socially acceptable.

In retrospect this seeming denial of sexual intentions on Cadmus’s part seems remarkable, for, as noted, one of the figures in Two Boys on a Beach is reclining in a pose that resembles that of an odalisque. In chapter six, I proposed that Sailors and Floozies

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367 Peyton Boswell, “900% Eakins Preferred,” *Art Digest* (July 1, 1939) 3.
370 It was exhibited in New York at the Ferargil Galleries (1921), Joseph Brunner Galleries (1923), The Museum of Modern Art (1930), and the Whitney Museum of American Art (1935).
was controversial in part because one of the figures is shown in a similar pose. In *Sailors and Floozies*, however, the reclining sailor is in physical contact with a “woman,” who looks down at him with a scopophilic gaze. To viewers of the 1930s, the presence of this figure, in physical contact with the reclining one, undermined gendered power relationships. In *Two Boys on a Beach*, the figures are not in actual physical contact and both figures are male. For these reasons, viewers of the 1930s were unbothered by the two nearly nude men. It’s also worth noting that *Two Boys on a Beach* is a diminutive painting, a mere 5 x 7 inches. A work this size was not physically as imposing as *Sailors and Floozies* and could easily be disregarded.

The all-male space of *YMCA Locker Room*, and *Two Boys on a Beach* was revisited in 1935 when Cadmus painted *Gilding the Acrobats*. In the later painting, the artist depicted a black youth painting a nude, muscular acrobat with metallic paint in a private tent. Behind these two main figures are two more acrobats, one of whom intimately reaches around his nude colleague to replenish his paint brush with gold paint. Along with *The Fleet’s In!* this was the painting by Cadmus most commonly reproduced in the 1930s. But whereas *The Fleet’s In!* was reproduced in stories on the scandal surrounding it, *Gilding the Acrobat* was reproduced to illustrate the artist’s mastery of materials and subject matter. The painting was the largest reproduced image in an article on Cadmus in *Life*, reproduced in *Esquire*, reproduced in an article by Emily Genauer about art on the east coast, and it appeared in the 1940 *Encyclopedia Britannica* alongside images by Thomas Hart Benton, Grant Wood, John Steuart Curry, and Edward
Hopper. Unfortunately, none of these articles discussed the painting at length, although the brief commentary on it provided no hint of anything scandalous. *Life* magazine and Harry Salpeter both briefly celebrated the painting on aesthetic terms. The editors of *Life* stated that the painting was “done for a circus exhibition in the Dallas Museum. Cadmus was intensely interested in [the] contrast between natural and gilded flesh.” Salpeter stated that Cadmus: “has since, as in *Gilding the Acrobats*, achieved a technique wherein color is made an integral part of drawing.” Genauer illustrated her article with *Gilding the Acrobats*, but did not address this painting outright. She chose instead to write that Cadmus:

is a satirist, cruel, keen, devastating. He paints the ridiculous specimens of humanity jamming Coney Island beaches, or the pathetic girls of the streets, or drunken sailors crowding Riverside Drive when the fleet’s in. But never does he see them with compassion, only with the hard, omniscient cynicism of the young.

Genauer’s analysis clearly addresses the censored paintings discussed in this dissertation, but her choice to illustrate the article with this example of Cadmus’s work suggests that she anticipated *Gilding the Acrobats* to be more palatable for readers of the academic journal. After all, the circus performer did not belong to respectable American society in the 1930s. The circus was spectacle, and its performers so fascinated the public because they were anything but common, and as such did not need to live by the same moral code.

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371 Meyer, 34.
372 “Paul Cadmus of Navy Fame Has His First Art Show,” 47, brackets are mine.
373 Salpeter, 112.
as the rest of society. Cadmus’s unconventional use of the carnivalesque to comment on American society was more tolerable when applied to a circus performer.

Race and homoerotics clearly intersect in *Gilding the Acrobats*, but they intersect in a manner that appears to support a traditional racial binary. The black youth is in a subservient position relative to the circus performers. As Richard Meyer has rightly pointed out, circuses in America did not employ black performers but relegated people of color to “support staff.”

Meyer traces the image through the changes in preliminary sketches to demonstrate that the early drawings did not depict the black figure, but a white youth positioned to erotically suggest fellatio (fig. 8.6). He argues that by perpetuating the stereotype of black servitude, Cadmus anchored the painting in “vernacular codes of contemporary American culture while distancing the picture from the languid erotics of the first preliminary sketch.”

That what looks to us like an obviously homoerotic painting was reproduced so widely in the 1930s, without negative commentary, appears to support Meyer’s claim.

However, it seems as though the artist found the white and black youths interchangeable when depicted before the gray haired acrobat. In this context, Cadmus likely depicted subordination as a quality of youth in opposition to maturity and not as a racial binary. Furthermore, the implication of oral sex remains from the sketches to the finished painting. The black boy’s face, with open mouth, is depicted in lieu of the acrobat’s genitals between his splayed legs. Cadmus may have made the substitution to mask the sexual implications of the figures’ interaction. Dora Apel has argued that in the

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375 Meyer, 82.
376 Meyer, 85-86.
1930s, lynching often resulted from interracial sex. American society often assumed that sex between a white woman and her black partner was rape because “consensual sex could not be officially imagined under any circumstances.”\textsuperscript{377} If consensual interracial sex could not be imagined, then Cadmus’s depiction of a black youth would negate visually any reading of homosexual activity between the two figures.

Interestingly, evidence suggests that the sexual implications of Cadmus’s paintings were recognized (and appreciated) by one group of viewers: homosexuals. Thus, for example, a letter to Midtown Galleries of April 1937, written by a male correspondent, John Scull, reads: “Mr. Cadmus is an admirable draughtsman. I should like to see more of his work—especially his nudes—when you have a good assortment on hand you might send me another selection to look over.”\textsuperscript{378} Scull seems to have been primarily interested in works on paper, but his enthusiasm for Cadmus’s representation of the male nude surely extended to Cadmus’s paintings as well.

Finally, Cadmus’s painting \textit{Greenwich Village Cafeteria} is of particular interest. It helps located the circumstances under which explicit representation of homosexuals could be regarded as acceptable. As described in chapter three, the painting depicts the interior of a café. Figures are claustrophobically packed around a small table. They have a grotesque quality, with big bellies, open mouths, and skin blemishes. They dine without manners. One woman applies make-up while a man stretches and yawns at the dining

\textsuperscript{377} Apel, 67-69. Apel argues that in the Scottsboro case, the girls had questionable morals. By allowing the police to believe that they had been raped, they found sympathy as victims and had their virtue restored. \textsuperscript{378} Letter from John Scull to Midtown Payson Galleries dated April 24, 1937. Archives of American Art reel 5379, Paul Cadmus correspondence, 1936-1950. The response from Midtown Payson indicates that Scull had already purchased a print of \textit{Horseplay}, an overtly homoerotic painting of male nudes complicit in their objectification based on a 1935 painting of the same name. There is no evidence that the painting was ever publicly exhibited, so it is not discussed in this conclusion chapter.
table. Several of the figures have a distinctly non-heterosexual quality. To the far left, Cadmus depicted two men, one with a pearl earring who leans in close to the other, painted with pencil thin eyebrows and mascara. These two men are obviously meant to be read as homosexual. To the extreme right of the painting, a man is depicted entering the men’s room. He is portrayed with red painted fingernails, and seductively glances over his shoulder to meet the gaze of the viewer—an unabashed invitation to a semi-public sexual encounter. This marginal figure is made more prominent because he is the only figure who returns the gaze of the viewer. The intimacy between viewer and queer gaze implicates those outside the painting, and treats them as potential sex partners. Yet this painting was not censored or even criticized in the 1930s.379

George Chauncey argues that Prohibition, and later the Depression, contributed to relaxed rules of decorum in cheap diners and cafeterias in New York. The acceptance of homosexuals and other “deviants” typically took place in the late night hours, after the crowded dinner and theater crowds were finished. He argues that in order for these cafeterias to be profitable, they permitted otherwise illegal activities such as soliciting prostitutes and camping gay men. By providing these groups a safe location in which to gather, the “deviant” clientele loyally patronized the establishment, returning often nightly to the same haven.380 Chauncey notes that two such cafeterias, both on

379 It was not shown at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington when The Fleet’s In! was removed. However, each artist was instructed to submit two paintings, only one of which was to be exhibited. Given the attention garnered by The Fleet’s In!, it is most likely that was the canvas selected to represent Cadmus. I do not count it as censorship because there is no evidence of an agreement to show the painting.
380 Chauncey, 163-167. Chauncey reports that many of the travel guides explicitly identified the gay cafeterias for would be visitors to the city.
Christopher Street, were notorious as New York tourist sites: Life and Stewart’s.\textsuperscript{381} The spectacle generated by the large crowd of gay men, prostitutes, and criminals attracted gawkers. Chauncey quotes a 1936 psychology journal writing on the cafeterias as follows:

\begin{quote}
The Park Avenue deb with the Wall Street boy friend nibbles cheap pastry and stares and jibes at the “show.” . . . Wide eyed school girls and boys from neighboring parts of the city gape at the unbelievable sight—boys with rouge on!—and drunken parties end their carousing here . . . Once I heard one say:

“That queen over there is camping for jam.”\textsuperscript{382}
\end{quote}

Chauncey emphasizes the performative nature of camp. He argues that by publicly acting the characteristics of women, gay men undermined gendered conventions as if on a stage. Their performance required, and found, and audience in the straight crowds gathered outside the windows to witness the spectacle.\textsuperscript{383} However, the off-color entertainment enjoyed by the audience of onlookers tended to bolster social norms as the onlookers kept a distance from the camp performers, and viewed them as carnival, spectacle, and in a way reinforced their position as Other than the onlookers.

Cadmus’s viewer is permitted to look in on the cafeteria with the same carnival spirit as the actual Christopher Street onlookers. If \textit{Greenwich Village Cafeteria} is viewed in this context, and with the viewer as passive onlooker/audience, then the

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{381} Stewart’s Cafeteria is of particular significance to this analysis because Cadmus made a print after the painting, but titled the series of prints \textit{Stewart’s} instead of the more ambiguous \textit{Greenwich Village Cafeteria}.
\item \textsuperscript{382} “Degenerates of Greenwich Village,” \textit{Current Psychology and Psychoanalysis} (December 1936), reprinted in Chauncey, 167. “Jam” was a camp term used to describe heterosexuals.
\item \textsuperscript{383} Chauncey, 168.
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painting is less threatening, and less offensive. The artist statement accompanying the Midtown Galleries show in 1937 signaled the viewer to read the painting in just this context. Cadmus wrote that his “credo” was as follows:

> There are, in general, two ways to approach an expression not only of individuals’ reactions to society, but also to approach society itself in all its complex inter-relations. One: to choose the finest and noblest expressions of people and society and to demonstrate them as unalloyed goodness; two: to choose the subversive, selfish and deadening expressions and to display them in all their destructive malignity. Each viewpoint, I believe, presupposes a moral germination. There is, back of every true artistic endeavor, love of life, desire for continuance of life, desire for a better life, etc., and any move toward these goals is moral.384

Cadmus here describes a binary between the moral ideal and adulterated morals and it is clear that the artist prefers to image the latter. However, he follows this statement by claiming to depict the immoral to prevent the degradation of society. He further argues that the strength of his satire lies in the specifics of figural types. “Particular people, people molded by their environment and contacts, the actions of these people not only as expressions of their own nature but as products of their attempts to conciliate and ameliorate this environment: these are of the utmost concern to me.”385

While the artist takes a moral position in depicting “destructive malignity,” he finds empathy for his subjects as victims of their environment. In this context, the homosexual characters in *Greenwich Village Cafeteria* are to be read as a satirical

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critique of the cafeteria culture to which they belong. But the artist’s intent is more likely a critique of the broader system of cultural norms that ostracized these characters. If “this environment” is to be read as that outside the cafeteria, the onlookers, then camp and gender inversion is the subject’s attempt to “conciliate and ameliorate” the broader environment outside the cafeteria to which they belong marginally. A 1937 photograph of the artist standing before *Greenwich Village Cafeteria* supports this interpretation (fig. 8.7). As Meyer has argued, Cadmus stands before the painting with the same slicked back hair as the painted gay man entering the men’s bathroom. Further demonstrating the artist’s allegiance with the gay figures in this photo, his physical presence blocks most of the painting, leaving only the marginal gay figures on the extreme right and left, visible. Cadmus is photographed with his back to the painting, implicitly demonstrating that he is not the onlooker, outside of the cafeteria environment, but rather an insider among the crowd at Stewart’s.

As I have demonstrated throughout this dissertation, homoerotic images were clearly acceptable for exhibition in the 1930s despite the hegemonic argument that this was a conservative decade in American art, perhaps because they were invisible to most viewers and critics. Historic precedent and satire protected many of Cadmus’s more explicit depictions of homosexuality that were further reproduced in popular magazines. Much of Cadmus’s first solo exhibition was gay themed and drew very large numbers. Edward Alden Jewell positively reviewed the exhibition by stating: “it is the artist’s splendid draftsmanship, so lusty and firm yet so full of unforced subtlety, and his quite as

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386 Meyer, 59. The photograph described was reproduced in the *Life* article of 1937 announcing the artist’s solo exhibition.
splendid sense of design.” There is no record of any controversy developing out of the subject matter from critics or the popular media, which is a testament to the acceptability of these images.

**Conclusion:**

This dissertation is important and original in several ways. Until recently, the figurative painting of the 1930s has been viewed somewhat monolithically as a conservative, even reactionary art form, out of step with the development of modern art and modern life. By looking at the art of Cadmus more analytically, it becomes clear that there were artists of this decade who were at the cutting edge of social change, and what they produced in many ways prefigured the postmodern cultural critiques of the late twentieth century. At the same time, this study provides new insight into the ways in which the art scandals of the 1930s are not directly parallel to those closer to today, because social norms were very different and therefore moral standards of acceptable imagery differed as well.

Most precisely, this study contextualizes the censored paintings of Paul Cadmus—looking at them as a group—to demonstrate that homosexuality alone is insufficient to explain why they were controversial. While I do not dispute that homosexuality contributed, I return to the more blatant criticisms of the 1930s that focused on other issues, such as public drunkenness, the sexual behavior of women, the representation of social class, and even issues of dress like whether it was appropriate for

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387 Edward Alden Jewell, “Cadmus Canvases Hung at Midtown,” *New York Times* (March 27, 1937). Jewell criticized Cadmus’s use of color in the earlier canvases from 1933-34, but found the artist to have matured by 1935 in his use of color.
a voluptuous young woman to wear shorts when walking down Main Street.

Paradoxically, images that today would seem threatening because of the fairly obvious homosexual undercurrents, often passed by unchallenged in the 1930s.

Certainly, Cadmus’s sexual identity placed him on the margins of society, and likely informed his way of dealing with these issues. But viewers were distressed not so much by the homoerotic elements of his paintings as by the fact that he looked at society with an apparently disturbing skepticism and disdain for conventional social frameworks. This social critique was often mistaken for a disdain for humanity.

While other artists of the 1930s often employed satire in their work, Cadmus’s art seems to have been particularly disturbing to viewers of the period because his artistic approach was essentially “carnivalesque”—that is to say, free from firm moral judgments. Cadmus belonged to a generation that preferred to pursue issues of gay identity through covert strategies—and he never directly mentioned homosexuality in his statements about his lifestyle or his work. While one can doubtless criticize the element of concealment that this entailed, on the positive side this meant that he never allowed his art to be reduced to the single issue of homosexual desire. Instead, his identity as a gay man became a platform for examining humanity as a whole.

As evident from the historiography I provided at the start of my study, my work draws on influential texts by two of the most distinguished scholars in the field of American art and queer history, Jonathan Weinberg and Richard Meyer, but diverges from their approaches in significant respects. Essentially both Weinberg and Meyer viewed Cadmus from the viewpoint of our own contemporary American culture and to
deepen their arguments about other historic figures. They found the gay figures and sexual undercurrents plainly obvious, and implied that these images were as obvious in the 1930s. As is apparent from the bibliographical summary in Chapter II, Cadmus’s work came to the fore in the 1980s, after decades of silence, when gay liberation became a battle waged on many fronts. Gay liberation came under attack in 1989 through federal funding of the arts. Senator Jesse Helms vilified the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in the media for sponsoring Robert Mapplethorpe’s retrospective exhibition, *The Perfect Moment*. Helms, the media, and Congress focused attention on AIDS, homosexuality, and sadomasochism, claiming that Mapplethorpe’s controversial photos were the standard images supported by the NEA. Furthermore, Helms implied that the exhibition was solely devoted to sadomasochistic gay sex despite the fact that of the 175 photos in the exhibition only five had such subject matter. At the time the Congressional balance between Democrats and Republicans was extremely close. Helms clearly sought to picture the Republicans as the defenders of “family values,” and to vilify the Democrats by aligning them with perverts and degenerates. Not surprisingly, the Mapplethorpe scandal roughly coincided with several others art controversies, involving Andres Serrano, Karen Finley, and Richard Serra. All of these controversies challenged traditional American values and asked viewers to rethink their personal “truths.” Not surprisingly, these artists were met with opposition for their cultural critiques. The Mapplethorpe controversy, however, was the only one in which homosexuality was specifically addressed.

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388 Seven of the photographs were considered “obscene,” but two were photos of nude children and were sexualized in the context of the surrounding images.
These art world scandals coincided with another social controversy that engaged gay issues: the question of whether gay individuals could serve in the military. Today this issue remains far from resolved, although in their period a blanket prohibition against homosexuals in the military was replaced by the current “Don’t ask, Don’t tell” policy, which allows gay people to serve in the military so long as they don’t publically proclaim their sexual identity.

As will be described in more detail shortly, in slightly different ways, both Weinberg and Meyer felt that the scandals around Cadmus’s work during the depression mirrored the art scandals of the 1980s. My approach has been fundamentally different. While to some extent I too have looked at Cadmus’s paintings of the 1930s in a way informed by modern queer theory, I have re-considered the contemporary criticism to determine what was said of other marginalized groups. Certainly gay subjects, and the larger issues of “gay identity,” played some role in the controversy—albeit a silent one. Whereas Weinberg and Meyer read between the lines of critics contemporary to Cadmus to determine what was implicitly said about homosexuality, I analyze what was said to better understand the status of Others in the 1930s.

Weinberg’s major scholarly book, *Speaking for Vice: Homosexuality in the Art of Charles Demuth, Marsden Hartley, and the First American Avant-garde* maintains that in the early decades of the 20th century it was not permissible for homosexual themes to be represented directly. Consequently, homosexuals, and artists expressing homosexual themes, developed a secret coding system to alert fellow homosexuals of their sexual identity. As previously described, according to Weinberg’s theory, Cadmus’s *The Fleet’s
In! was controversial because the artist represented gay themes too overtly. He further argues that the navy was particularly sensitive to these issues because of a scandal in Newport, Rhode Island involving homosexual activity among sailors that had occurred a decade before. Consequently, the navy not only condemned the painting, but stole it off the walls of the Corcoran.

Interestingly, there is much evidence to indicate that sailors in this period were associated with promiscuity, and specifically with “queerness.” As Weinberg argues, “the sexual prowess of sailors . . . was an important aspect of their appeal to the popular imagination.”389 Sailors were thought to be unusually free and undiscriminating in their choice of partners when they arrived on shore. One aspect of this appears to have been a willingness to engage in sex with men as well as women. Notably, sailors have featured prominently in gay imagery of the 20th century, whether one considers the watercolors of Charles Demuth (fig. 3.3), the photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe, the drawings of Tom of Finland, or gay themed films such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s Querelle (1982).

Essentially, Weinberg read backwards from the art-world scandals of the 1980s, particularly the Mapplethorpe scandal to argue that society had changed little in the fifty years separating the Cadmus scandal from Mapplethorpe. Indeed, Weinberg’s article, “Cruising with Paul Cadmus,” which was also published in 1992, made explicit his notion that there was a direct parallel between the scandals surrounding Cadmus’s work and those of Mapplethorpe. In this text he specifically praised Cadmus as a “heroic precursor” of the controversial photographer, while noting that his work was much less sexually explicit: in Cadmus’s work gay themes are expressed merely through the subtle

389 Weinberg, Speaking for Vice, 38.
exchange of glances whereas Mapplethorpe’s work often represents the genitals and even explicit sexual acts.\textsuperscript{390}

Weinberg admits that his theory has one significant problem: it is not supported by evidence contemporary to Cadmus. Media reports of the scandal in 1934 do not mention gay figures or gay issues. While Weinberg argues convincingly that such topics could not be explicitly discussed in a public forum, he nonetheless asks his reader to accept the unspoken cause for censorship. Of course, as we have seen, it appears that most viewers of the time would have missed the homosexual undercurrents of the painting. Indeed, Weinberg’s argument contains an interesting tension. Much of his analysis of Cadmus’s work is devoted to identifying gay coding systems—such as the use of a red tie—which even today are probably unfamiliar to most viewers. At the same time he insists that the sexual messages of the painting must have been legible to a general audience despite the lack of evidence to support that view.

Meyer expanded Weinberg’s argument in his acclaimed book \textit{Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth Century American Art}, which won the 2003 Charles C. Eldredge Prize for the best book on American art for the year. The book examines censored images by Cadmus, Andy Warhol, and Robert Mapplethorpe—scandals of 1934, 1964, and 1989 respectively—arguing that they represent phases of the struggle for public representation of homosexual themes, and were censored for that reason. Like Weinberg, Meyer incorporates the idea of “secret codes,” although in a somewhat different fashion. His notion is that the navy sought to defend the “manly” image of its sailors, but was undercut by Cadmus. The artist insisted

\textsuperscript{390} Weinberg, “Cruising with Paul Cadmus,” 104-105.
that the sailor who never indulged in promiscuity or drunkenness was a “sissie.” Like Weinberg, he assumes that the controversy was really about whether it was permissible to exhibit a painting with gay themes, despite the fact that gay issues were never mentioned at the time.

Weinberg and Meyer more narrowly focus their texts on the most famous of Cadmus’s censored paintings: The Fleet’s In!. However, when one considers the equally controversial paintings that did not prominently feature gay themes, it becomes clear that the artist threatened social mores beyond potentially deviant sexuality. Furthermore his unconventional use of the carnivalesque as satire was largely misunderstood by his contemporaries and led them to name him an “enfant terrible.”

Criticism of Cadmus in the 1930s provides interesting clues to the reasons he was contentious. Critics recognized that the strengths and weaknesses of Cadmus’s images largely rested on an understanding of traditional satire, and therefore located him in the historic European traditions of William Hogarth and Honoré Daumier. However, traditional satire required negative consequences for immoral behavior and required immorality to explain unpalatable depictions of the human form. These writers objected to Cadmus’s paintings because they lacked clear moral lessons and subordinated the need for social improvement. Consequently, it was agreed that his paintings were pointless and vapid. However, the artist seems to have played a game of inversion in his paintings. Traditional binaries are repeatedly subverted or confused in order to challenge the validity of social hierarchies. For example, it was common in the 1930s to represent violence by management against labor and the lynching of African-Americans by whites.
Both forms of imagery, while horrific, were justified because they supported socially progressive causes: the right of labor to organize and unionize, and the right of African-Americans to vote and enjoy the rights of free citizens. In *The Herrin Massacre*, however, Cadmus represented organized labor murdering other workers, and portrayed an African-American carrying out a lynching against a white man. Viewers of the time were puzzled and appalled, since they could draw no clear moral from the scene. In fact, it seemed to go against a form of imagery with which they were familiar, and of which they approved.

While critics of the 1930s did not make this creative leap, as I have argued, it is clear that Cadmus’s mode of representation belongs to a specific and peculiar traditional of satire: it aligns with a tradition that the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin has labeled “the carnivalesque.” It is apparent that Cadmus’s paintings of the 1930s were troubling to viewers because of their adaptation of a carnivalesque viewpoint. Viewers of the 1930s were concerned that Cadmus’s paintings expressed a general hatred of humanity. But Cadmus’s artistic intention seems to have been more complex. Essentially, he seems to have felt that normative society singled out and persecuted certain groups, such as homosexuals. Cadmus paints all of humanity as vulgar, oafish, and immoral in support of greater tolerance of difference. Like Rabelais, Cadmus was challenging traditional social hierarchies, morals, and values rather than simply expressing contempt for humanity itself.

Both Weinberg and Meyer were doubtless correct in believing that Cadmus’s art is notable for the courage with which he expressed a gay viewpoint. But in limiting their
analysis of his work to gay issues, they have read the controversies through the lens of queer history and missed the potential power of Cadmus’s creative scope. They have not articulated the way in which, using his gay identity as a foundation, Cadmus went on to take a more broadly satirical view of human relationships, and to look a male and female identity, social class, race, and other issues in an irreverent way.

Jeff Weinstein of the *Village Voice* wrote in 1982, “If Paul Cadmus is a significant artist and is to be remembered as important, it’s because he is obsessed with the male body. Cadmus is an important artist because he is gay.” This dissertation is in part the result of my negative reaction to Weinstein’s statement. Cadmus’s identity was more extensive than his sexuality—he was also an artist, a member of the middle class, raised in an intellectual family with little money, a New Yorker, and an American of Basque and Dutch origins. Divorcing him and his work from these identities takes an essentialist approach to his sexuality. His disdain for dominant American culture was imaged through other marginal groups than simply gay men. I questioned why it was possible for an otherwise complimentary article on Cadmus to so entirely reduce him to a single-minded agenda.

No doubt Cadmus’s homosexuality affected his outlook as he defined gender, nationality, and social class with a non-essentialist approach and on his own terms. What is impressive about his work is how he did not simply focus on gay themes, but cast his critically observant eye over the behavior of humanity as a whole, picturing not just gay men, but men and women of all social classes and ethnicities in new and in provocative ways with social agendas. It was his expansive and systematically irreverent outlook on
human affairs that made his paintings so challenging to the audience of the 1930s--and
that makes them remarkably relevant to contemporary American culture today.
Figure 1.1, Diego Rivera, *Man, Controller of the Universe*, 1934, Mural at the Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico. Image repainted in Mexico after *Man at the Crossroads with Hope and High Vision to the Choosing of a New and Better Future*, 1933 at Rockefeller Center was destroyed.
Figure 1.2, Joseph Hirsch, *Justice as Protector and Avenger*, 1938. Court House, Aiken, South Carolina.
Figure 1.3, Paul Cadmus, *Pocahontas and John Smith*, 1938. Painted for the Parcel Post Office in Richmond Virginia, currently housed at Lewis F. Powell, Jr. United States Courthouse, Richmond, Virginia.
Figure 1.4, Thomas Hart Benton, *America Today: City Building*, mural painted for the New School of Social Research, New York, 1930. Currently housed at the AXA Gallery, New York.
Figure 1.5, Reginald Marsh, *East Tenth Street Jungle*, 1934. Ink and oil wash on masonite, 29.5 x 40 in. Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut.
Figure 1.6, Reginald Marsh, *Holy Name Mission*, 1931. Tempera, 35.5 x 47.5 in. Private Collection.
Figure 1.7, Ben Shahn, *Tom’s Mother, Tom, and Tom’s Wife*, 1932. Gouache, 16 x 23.5 in. ACA Galleries, New York.
Figure 1.8, Ben Shahn, *Handball*, 1939. Tempera on paper over composition board, 22.75 x 31.25 in. Museum of Modern Art, New York.
Figure 1.9, Thomas Hart Benton, *Arts of the City*, 1933. Murals painted for the Whitney Museum of Art Library in New York.
Figure 1.10, Reginald Marsh, *Star Burlesque*, 1933. Tempera, 48 x 36 in. Private Collection.
Figure 1.11, Reginald Marsh, *Hudson Bay Fur Company*, 1932. Egg tempera on muslin mounted on board, 30 x 40 in. Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, Ohio.
Figure 1.12, Ben Shahn, *Apotheosis*, 1932-33. Tempera, 18 x 48 in. Private Collection.
Figure 1.14, Reginald Marsh, *Down at Jim Kelly’s*, 1936. Tempera on board, 36 x 30 in. The Chrysler Museum, Norfolk, Virginia.
Figure 1.15, Ben Shahn, *Women’s Christian Temperance Union Parade*, 1934 (above) and Ben Shahn, *Parade for Repeal*, 1934 (below). Both egg tempera and gouache on masonite, 16.5 x 31.75 in. Museum of the City of New York, New York.
Figure 1.16, Paul Cadmus, *Shore Leave*, 1933. Oil on canvas, 33 x 36 in. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.
Figure 2.1, illustration for “Famous American Painters,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 14th edition, volume 17, plate 24, 1941.
Figure 2.2, Paul Cadmus, *Aviator*, 1941. Egg tempera on panel, 12 x 6 in. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.
Figure 2.3, Paul Cadmus, *Mallorcan Fishermen*, 1932. Oil on canvas, 22 x 20 in. Private Collection.
Figure 2.4, Paul Cadmus, *Playground*, 1948. Egg tempera on panel, 23.5 x 17.5 in. Georgia Museum of Art.
Figure 2.5, Paul Cadmus, *Venus and Adonis*, 1936. Oil and tempera on panel, 28.6 x 32.5 in. Forbes.
Figure 3.1, Paul Cadmus, *The Fleet's In!,* 1934. Oil and tempera on canvas, 30 x 60 in. Navy Historical Center, Washington, DC.
Figure 3.2, Paul Cadmus, *Greenwich Village Cafeteria*, 1934. Oil on canvas, 25.5 x 39.5 in. Museum of Modern Art, New York.
Figure 3.3, Charles Demuth, *Dancing Sailors*, 1917. Watercolor over graphite, 8 x 10.1 in. The Cleveland Museum of Art.
Figure 3.4, Munsingwear’s “Stretchy Seat” underwear advertisement found in *Life* (March 17, 1941).
Figure 3.5, Lucky Strike advertisement featuring Gary Cooper found in *Life* (July 26, 1937).
Figure 3.6, John Sloan, *The Old Wigwam*, 1934. Tempera with oil varnish glaze on panel, 30 x 25 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
Figure 4.1, Paul Cadmus, *Coney Island*, 1934. Oil on canvas, 32.44 x 36.3 in. Los Angeles County Museum of Art.
Figure 4.2, Reginald Marsh, *Coney Island*, 1935. Tempera, 30 x 40 in. Private Collection.
Figure 4.3, Photo by Reginald Marsh of Coney Island beachgoers, c. 1935. Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C.
Figure 4.4, Reginald Marsh, *Coney Island Beach*, 1934. Tempera, 36 x 40 in. Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven.
Figure 5.1, Paul Cadmus, *Aspects of Suburban Life: Golf*, 1936. Oil and tempera on fiberboard, 31.75 x 50 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC.
Figure 5.2, Paul Cadmus, *Aspects of Suburban Life: Polo Spill*, 1936. Oil and tempera on fiberboard, 31.5 x 45.75 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC.
Figure 5.3, Paul Cadmus, *Aspects of Suburban Life: Public Dock*, 1936. Oil and tempera on fiberboard, 31.5 x 52.5 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC
Figure 5.4, Paul Cadmus, *Aspects of Suburban Life: Main Street*, 1936. Oil and tempera on fiberboard, 31.8 x 73.4 in. The Regis Collection, Minneapolis.
Figure 5.5, Paul Cadmus, *Commuter Rush*, 1935. Oil and tempera on paper, 5.5 x 12 in. The Regis Collection, Minneapolis.
Figure 5.6, Paul Cadmus, *Regatta*, 1935. Oil and tempera on paper, 5.1 x 8.8 in. Collection of John P. Axelrod, Boston.
Figure 5.7, W.H. Brown, “Missouri Legs,” *Life* (December 28, 1936).

Missouri Legs

Sir:

Not Florida bathing beauties, not Broadway chorusines, not professional models, but American college girls have the most beautiful legs in the world. I have been on the campus of the University of Missouri and I know. This picture is just an average sample. She’s Jean Campbell taken as she rests between rehearsals for a Missouri School of Journalism musical comedy. Had it not been for me, the world would never have seen those legs, because, at the “suggestion” of the dean of women, co-ed dancers in the Missouri U. show wear below-the-knee skirts.

W. H. BROWN

Columbia, Mo.
Figure 5.8, Edward Hopper, *Office at Night*, 1940. Oil on canvas, 22.25 x 25 in. Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota.
Figure 6.1, Paul Cadmus, *Sailors and Floozies*, 1938. Oil and tempera on panel, 33.5 x 48.5 in. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.
Figure 6.2, Paul Cadmus, *Seeing the New Year In*, 1939. Oil and tempera on linen laid on panel, 30 x 38 in. Private Collection.
Figure 6.3, Peter Paul Rubens, *Venus and Adonis*, middle to late 1630s. Oil on canvas, 77.75 x 95.5 inches. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
Figure 6.4, Photo of artists at the costume partying closing the “Art in Action” exhibition at the San Francisco World’s Fair dressed as Sailors and Floozies, found in Life (October 14, 1940): 67.
Figure 6.5, *Barberini Faun*, late 3rd or early 2nd century BCE. Glyptothek, Munich, Germany.
Figure 6.6, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Odalisque with a Slave*, 1842. Oil on canvas 29.9 x 41.3 in. Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore.
Figure 6.7, Henri Matisse, *Reclining Odalisque or Harmony in Red*, 1927. Oil on canvas, 15.1 x 21.6 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
7.7, Isamu Noguchi, *Death (Lynched Figure)*, 1934, monel metal. Monel metal, 39 x 29.3 x 21 in. Isamu Noguchi Foundation, New York.
7.8, Photograph of George Hughes, 1930, Sherman, Texas. Bettman/CORBIS.
7.9, Reginald Marsh, *This Is Her First Lynching!*, 1934. Drawing, Wayne State University, Detroit.
Figure 8.1, Paul Cadmus, *YMCA Locker Room*, 1933. Oil on canvas, 19.4 x 39.3 in. Collection of John P. Axelrod, Boston.
Figure 8.2, Paul Cadmus, *Gilding the Acrobats*, 1935. Oil and tempera on wood panel, 36.5 x 18.5 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
Figure 8.3, Paul Cadmus, *Two Boys on a Beach*, 1936. Oil and tempera on linen on panel, 5 x 7 in. Collection unknown.
Figure 8.4, Luca Signorelli, *Damned Consigned to Hell*, 1499-1502. Fresco cycle for the Chapel of San Brizio in Orvieto, Italy.
Figure 8.5, Thomas Eakins, *Swimming (The Swimming Hole)*, 1883-85. Oil on canvas, 27.3 x 36.3 in. Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth.
Figure 8.6, Paul Cadmus, preliminary drawings for *Gilding the Acrobats*, 1935. Ink with white chalk on paper. D.C. Moore Gallery, New York.
Figure 8.7, Photo of Paul Cadmus standing in front of *Greenwich Village Cafeteria*, published in *Life* March 29, 1937.
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