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Queering Display

LGBT History and the Ancient World

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A small display of Ptolemaic and Roman terracottas from Memphis sit in the corner of a case in the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, University College London (UCL). Amongst the terracottas are eight that can be described as depicting sexual activity or fertility rites. One (Figure 2.1, museum number UC75914) depicts a naked woman moving a phallus tip towards her vagina; another (UC33595) shows a procession of priests carrying an enormous phallus; and another (Figure 2.2, UC38343) is a hollow mould-made phallus with the shaft tapering slightly at the lower end, possibly to facilitate holding. These objects are usually overlooked in the densely packed display cases, though more attention has been paid to them in recent years. The attention is partly due to the growing interest in Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt as well as increased understanding of the visual representation of sex and sexuality in antiquity. Like most of the collection, there is little interpretation of these objects beyond a museum number and brief description on a small typed label, though they feature in two museum trails: *Alexander and the Greeks in Egypt* (Challis (2011)) and *Beyond Isis and Osiris: Alternate Sexualities in Ancient Egypt* (Johnston (2010a)). These objects are therefore positioned within the Greek occupied and Roman ruled period of Egypt and used as evidence for ‘alternate sexualities’, alternate to the Judeo-Christian tradition of repressing representation of sex and emphasis on sexual intercourse purely for the procreation of children within heterosexual marriage.



Figure 2.1. Limestone figurine of naked woman, short hairstyle, phallus tip visible towards vagina; remnants of pigment (UC75914) © Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, UCL.



Figure 2.2. Hollow mould-made terracotta phallus in brownish-buff clay, the shaft tapering sharply at the lower end, perhaps to facilitate holding (UC38343) © Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, UCL.

Sex and sexuality have been ‘almost uniformly ignored’ in displays on human activity, ancient and modern, in museums and exhibitions until the last decade.¹ If sexuality had been recognized as an important function of humanity, museums generally assumed that it was ‘straight’, in the sense of heterosexual, straightforward, and easily

¹ Liddiard (2004): 22.

understood. In 2002 Angela Vanegas could argue, with good evidence, that lesbians and gay men were not adequately represented within museums due to ‘institutional homophobia’.² One of the main reasons for the lack of response within museums to addressing issues and histories around sexuality has been the lack of willingness or expertise to research and recognize relevant material in collections due to poor resources (time, money, and skills) combined with an unconscious prejudice within the museum profession to the importance of these issues. Heterosexism and homophobia generally filtered the collecting and exhibition strategies of museums, though these attitudes were not recognized as existing or as discriminatory. Richard Sandell uses the term ‘discriminatory’ to describe a ‘discursive rather than individualist understanding of prejudice’, which more fully describes a ‘socially structured’ assumption rather than attributing blame or prejudice to individuals.³ It is this kind of socially structured assumption that has been prominent in museums until the last two decades.

Vanegas described how her own institution, Croydon Museum and Heritage Service, actively sought out oral histories and collected objects relating to gay and lesbian identity, which culminated in an exhibition in the late 1990s and a trail around the museum that is still prominently available at the entrance today.⁴ Croydon did this despite concerns of local councillors about being prosecuted under Section 28 of the 1988 Local Government Act that forbade the ‘promotion’ (sometimes taken to mean discussion) of same-sex desire and lifestyles in schools and educational contexts. Arguably, a shift in thinking around sexuality only significantly affected museum institutions in the UK after the repeal of this notorious legislation in 2003.⁵ Gay rights activism, combined with discourse around sexuality within academia, had already reached a more mainstream audience and assisted in changing cultural attitudes. Public interest in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) history has driven more museums to address ‘alternate’ sexualities through more research on these objects, putting such material on public display for the first time and programming public events.⁶ There has also been

² Vanegas (2002): 98.

³ Sandell (2007): 209 n. 8.

⁴ Vanegas (2002).

⁵ Mills (2010): 81.

⁶ LGBTI or LGBTIQ can also be used as a descriptive term, but following most of the texts and websites quoted in this paper LGBT is shorthand for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and querying.

recognition within the museum profession that the way in which society constructs knowledge and social constructionism within museums themselves (e.g. collecting policies and interpretation) should be made clearer to visitors in interpretation of historical and cultural material.⁷

This chapter explores how recent social and legal changes affecting LGBT people have transformed the construction of knowledge around sex and sexuality in the ancient world through the display and discussion of material culture in museums. The Petrie Museum, which I work at, will be used as a case-study to illustrate this transformation of attitudes to sexuality and how events are programmed to meet the public desire for more information on LGBT history. I examine how, building on the legislative and social changes, LGBT History Month has acted as a catalyst for exploring and exposing sexual knowledge in museum collections. Driving this new understanding of collections is the interest of audiences, and not just people defining themselves as LGBT, in how sex has been constructed within different societies and contexts throughout history and the impact of those sexual constructions on personal identity today. I examine how the construction of past and present sexual identity is an important factor for people attending and involved in LGBT history events as well as some inherent tensions for museum institutions and academics researching these areas. The often celebratory focus on key personalities and objects is due to widespread repression of LGBT identity and expression until recently, though feedback from audiences attending events during LGBT history month shows that people identify with well-known people from the past, such as Sappho and Antinous. I argue that museum professionals need to expose the marginalized histories within their collections but also need to consider cultural differences in the construction of sexual knowledge today and in the ancient past. I conclude by asking how we can question heteronormativity more widely in museum displays and challenge ourselves to provide informative public engagement that queers our perspectives on sex in the ancient world.

⁷ Fisher & Langlands, General Introduction: 00.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF SEXUAL KNOWLEDGE FROM ANTIQUITY IN MUSEUMS

A relief from a temple at Koptos on display in the Petrie Museum shows the pharaoh Senusret I (c. 1971–1926 BCE; Figure 2.3, UC14786) dancing in front of the creator god Min, who is depicted with an erect penis. This erect penis used to be covered over with a label for the entire slab, which was later removed and a text panel, entitled ‘Censorship of the Past’ explaining why such images used to be covered up, placed next to the slab in the 1990s. Of course, Egyptologists knew what the sign covered over and that Min was commonly shown sexually aroused due to his function as the maker of men and materials. The current fame of this scene is such that in Rachel Howard and Bill Nash’s *Secret London: An Unusual Guide* (2009) the Petrie Museum is listed as the ‘Min’s Penis Museum’. There is no shortage of erect phalluses in the material culture of ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome, especially in scenes depicting fertility or creation rites. Exhibiting them, given the taboos in modern Western society about publicly showing an erect penis, has been problematic and often such objects have been ignored or censored. The censorship of Min,



Figure 2.3. Limestone wall-block with sunk relief depiction, internally carefully modelled, showing King Senusret I with oar and hepet-tool, running the sed-festival race before the god Min (UC14786) © Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, UCL.



Figure 2.4. Warren Cup. 15 BCE–CE 15, British Museum, ~~1999.0426.1.~~

the removal of the sign, the attention drawn to such censorship, and now an interpretation panel merely explaining the scene is representative of how museums have reacted to such objects.

The taboos around showing a man with an erect penis have been more problematic if shown in sexual intercourse with another person, particularly another man. The purchase of the Warren Cup (Figure 2.4) by the British Museum for £1.8 million in 1999 is considered to be one of the museum's most important acquisitions in recent times. The silver cup graphically illustrates two scenes in relief work of a young man or boy being anally penetrated by an older man or youth and dates from the Roman world in the first century AD.⁸ In 1952 the British Museum had turned down purchasing the cup, mainly for ethical reasons around the explicit homosexual sex scenes.⁹ Knowledge about such objects was shared among an elite, usually male, group of scholars and art collectors, and so when such material was publicly displayed it often had censored or little interpretation 'increasing the opportunity for viewers to misunderstand what they see'.¹⁰ The British Museum has displayed the Warren Cup

⁸ Williams (2006).

⁹ For more on the both repressive and reforming climate around anti-homosexuality laws in the 1950s, see Chapter 12 by Waters.

¹⁰ Frost (2010): 139.

in its permanent galleries with full interpretation and in 2006 it was the star of an ‘Object in Focus’ exhibition (11 May–2 July 2006), which attracted over 92,000 visitors, including celebrities Oprah Winfrey and Kim Cattrall.¹¹ The history of the cup is a history of the changing ‘attitudes of the museum to similar artefacts’ and sexual identity more generally.¹² It is also a useful example of how meaning is constructed around artworks or an ‘object biography’ in which the object’s meaning and importance are ‘created through social interaction with people’.¹³

The different cases of ‘Min’s Penis’ and the Warren Cup in the Petrie Museum and British Museum respectively illustrate a more frank response to the representation of sexual acts and the construction of sexuality in museums and public culture more generally. Besides the repeal of Section 28, the shift in attitudes is driven by a number of reasons. Commercial and marketing strategies are one reason; Mark Liddiard has observed that the purchase of the Warren Cup meant that ‘the British Museum enjoyed many column inches of free coverage by virtue of an intrinsic public and media interest in the issue’.¹⁴ In addition, increased emphasis on developing new and existing audiences has stressed the responsibility of museums to the public in collecting and displaying objects that reflect the experiences of all their potential visitors. Museums have also increasingly reorientated themselves as agents of social and cultural change rather than passive reactors to such change. Over the last two decades many museums have focused on audiences and processes of reception, creating constructivist exhibitions which allow multiple viewpoints to be reflected and utilize visitors’ own life experiences within the process of interpretation.¹⁵ Thus there has been an emphasis more generally within museum interpretation and display on personal stories and identity. Identity-led constructions of sexuality and LGBT history can snugly fit into such interpretations, whether around ancient or modern objects.

Changing trends in scholarship have also influenced collecting strategies and how objects showing or referencing sexual acts should be displayed. Kenneth Dover’s *Greek Homosexuality* was published in

¹¹ *British Museum Review* 2006/7 (2007): 25.

¹² Frost (2010): 143.

¹³ Fisher & Langlands, Chapter 4: 00, n. 8.

¹⁴ Liddiard (2004): 25.

¹⁵ Sandell (2007): 11.

1978 and Michel Foucault's first volume of *History of Sexuality: An Introduction* in the same year, with his subsequent volumes on Greek and Roman constructions of sexuality *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self* in 1983 and 1985 respectively. The publication of these seminal works has been followed by a stream of material on sexuality, sexual difference, and sexually explicit material (textual and visual) in classical antiquity. Work on the representation of sex and sexuality in material culture since Dover and Foucault has varied in approach and analysis, reflecting trends in critical thinking. Contemporary scholarship, from Dover to James Davidson, has attempted to shatter the myth in popular consciousness that the ancient world was 'up for anything' or was 'decadent'. There is usually a link, albeit often a belated one, between academic discourse and museum display, for example the Museum of Sexuality (MoSex) in New York was created in part to 'make academic discourse on sexuality' more accessible to the general public.¹⁶ Museums have in recent years utilized the scholarship around ancient sexuality and the history of limited access to sexually explicit objects from classical antiquity has meant that when open access for the public is enabled, new assessments of these objects and Greek and Roman sexuality have had to be made. Museums displaying material from the ancient past, therefore, need to address different constructions of sexuality, particularly if they have related objects, to make sex in the classical world more understandable to modern audiences.

LGBT HISTORY MONTH AND ANTIQUITY

Ali Nobal Ahmad's article 'What's the point of LGBT History Month?' featured one of the Petrie Museum's objects (a winged phallus from the Roman period) to illustrate the museum's desire as a 'mainstream organization' to get involved in LGBT History Month since 'small and medium size galleries appear to have spotted an opportunity to attract visitors drawn by the freshness of diversity and sexuality as a theme'.¹⁷ LGBT History Month takes place in

¹⁶ Dennis (2006): 13.

¹⁷ Ahmad (2008).

February and has been running in London since 2004. Now nationwide, the month celebrates the achievements of LGBT individuals and movements with the aim of ‘Claiming our history, celebrating our past, creating our future’; it looks to the past for hidden histories in order to claim an inheritance for LGBT people. Ahmad pointed out that the repeal of Section 28 does not mean that institutional and individual homophobia has been repealed, and so LGBT History Month should also be considered as part of equality activism.¹⁸ There is an element of tokenism as LGBT history does not cease to exist in the other eleven months of the year. However, the dedication of one month to LGBT history means there is a focus within the LGBT community as well as opportunities to make new partnerships between organizations.

‘Ancient Egypt to Japan’, a trail around the British Museum by Kate Smith, was written for LGBT History Month in 2007 and is still available on the Culture24 website. The trail looks at how ‘same-sex desire has been packaged in very different ways’ throughout different cultures and historical epochs. Beginning with a sexually explicit funerary papyrus from ancient Egypt, it encounters Greek and Roman forms of sexuality through images on an Athenian Bell Krater, portraits of Sappho, the Warren Cup, and the personalities of Hadrian and Antinous. The examination of ancient as well as more modern objects contributes to an understanding of how terminology around sexual identity has been constructed:

The end effect is to leave us pleasingly at sea—to realise that the markers for ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’ that have served the community very well in achieving rights in the last hundred years, may in themselves be a passing cultural phenomenon. The fashionable use of new words like ‘queer’ indicate a new tide coming in.¹⁹

This trail usefully introduces the idea of using LGBT History Month as a focus for looking at ancient objects and thinking about ancient and modern constructions of sexuality and communicating this to a broader public.

In 2008 as the newly appointed member of staff with responsibility for audience development at the Petrie Museum, I felt that running events for LGBT History Month would enable us to explore pertinent aspects of our collections as well as place academic scholarship

¹⁸ Ahmad (2008).

¹⁹ Smith (2007).

around sexuality in a wider public forum. The Petrie Museum is, despite the size and range of its collections, a small museum in terms of space and resources but can draw on the expertise of UCL staff and students.²⁰ I asked John J. Johnston, a PhD candidate at the Institute of Archaeology working on mortuary aspects of personal identity and display in the Ptolemaic period, to give an overview of Egyptian Sexuality with reference to relevant objects in the Petrie Museum on 7 February 2008. The Petrie Museum was fortunate to have the backing of Camden LGBT Forum and their active involvement in supporting the event through ideas and marketing. In 2008 we were the only museum involved in LGBT History Month in Camden, and now almost every museum in the borough takes part. Despite target marketing the LGBT community, I was surprised by the amount of phone and email inquiries we received prior to our event. There was clearly an interest in learning about LGBT history and the construction of sexuality within the ancient world. A small museum would not normally have the time or budget to cultivate such publicity, such as listings in *Diva*, *Boyz*, or the *Pink Paper*, for example.

Johnston's talk was entitled 'Beyond Isis and Osiris: Alternate Sexualities in Ancient Egypt' and was both scholarly and accessible. Drawing on the work of Thomas Dowson, Johnston introduced the concept of 'queer archaeology' and looked at 'Creation Myths' in Egypt, the myth of Horus and Seth, the joint tomb of two royal manicurists at Saqqara during the Fifth Dynasty, various historical figures such as Hatshepsut and Alexander the Great, and the impact of Greek colonization and Roman rule in Egypt, finishing with the death of Antinous in the Nile.²¹ Johnston compiled a list of relevant objects and their locations in the museum, which was given to the audience so they could go and look at them before the talk. These included, for example, a kohl pot that had a cartouche of Queen Hatshepsut (UC15872), a woman who ruled as a pharaoh and was often depicted in male dress and with male characteristics; a Roman terracotta showing Bes figures carrying a phallus (UC33601); and a coin showing the figure of Hadrian (UC39383). The Petrie is a small museum that can only comfortably fit about forty people at such an event, and on that night we got an audience of around sixty for 'Beyond Isis and Osiris'. The combination of highlighting relevant

²⁰ Challis (2012): 34.

²¹ Johnston (2008); Dowson (2000).

objects with a talk was evidently popular; one visitor commented that they liked 'looking at the objects as well as hearing about them'.²² Overall visitor evaluation was positive, and reflected a sense of both 'discovering' a museum and engaging with an aspect of Egyptian history rarely covered in the public domain. In addition the museum attracted publicity such as Ahmad's article and began establishing a reputation as an interesting and safe place to go for LGBT visitors.

It was clear from the visitor feedback and from our partners Camden LGBT Forum that there was public hunger for more events on sexuality in the ancient world and that learning about the past in this way was important for establishing a history for peoples' own sexual identity. In 2009 an exhibition entitled *Legacy* by artist Andrew Prior, whose work was inspired by the Roman mummy portraits, went on display in the museum. Dominic Montserrat has commented on the beauty and sexual identity of the portraits of ephebe (or young male) mummy portraits and pointed to the adulation of such portraits within gay subcultures from the time of their modern discovery in the 1880s.²³ Twenty works by Prior were on display in the same room as the Hawara Roman mummy portraits, including portraits of Hadrian and Antinous. In reaction to responses in mainstream and LGBT media to the *Hadrian: Empire and Conflict* exhibition at the British Museum (24 July–26 October 2008), I scheduled two talks under the title 'Antinous: Gay Icon?' for 26 February 2009. Responding to comment from Camden LGBT Forum that there were not enough events in the borough about women, I also gave a talk about the discovery of fragments of poetry by Sappho in Egypt, which, though well attended with about over thirty people, did not attract the publicity and interest accorded to Antinous.

About seventy people came to hear John J. Johnston talk on Antinous' impact in the Roman world and Egypt and Cathie Bryan talk on the reception of Antinous in the modern world from the eighteenth century onwards. Despite extremely cramped conditions, visitors enjoyed the session and questions and debate continued long after the lectures finished. We found from the discussion and evaluation comments that many of the people who attended wanted to know more about Antinous after visiting the *Hadrian* exhibition at

²² Petrie Museum Public Programme Evaluation (2008): 7 Feb. 2008.

²³ Montserrat (1993); Montserrat (1999).

the British Museum.²⁴ It was clear that the *Hadrian* exhibition and its use of the Warren Cup to provide context for Hadrian and Antinous' relationship stimulated interest in these famous Roman lovers.²⁵ In fact, the LGBT History Month blog had announced the opening of the exhibition as Hadrian was the 'first openly gay Emperor'.²⁶ The most interesting feedback to the Petrie Museum event was that recorded on *The Antinoopolis Gayzette* as 'representatives of the religion of Antinous' attended the event; including HERNESTUS the priest of Antinous who travelled to the event from Hamburg:

Those of us who were present at the Petrie that evening in London were keenly aware that we were witnessing an event of historic proportions in the long story of Hadrian and Antinous. There we were 'in a city that the Emperor had visited as a provincial outpost and which was now a major centre of Western Civilization' and the story of the Blessed Boy was still being told. And his followers were still faithful to the Emperor's command to spread the RELIGION OF ANTINOUS throughout the civilized world.²⁷

This, perhaps unexpected, reaction indicates the depth of interest in sexuality and the classical world and the importance attributed to key individuals and their sexual identity. It underpins how constructions of these individuals from antiquity contribute to the 'sense of history' that groups, whose identity has not been represented in normative accounts of the past, seek to reposition as of fundamental importance.²⁸

In order to answer criticism of the cramped conditions for the Antinous talk and to facilitate more general discussion, I asked John J. Johnston to turn his lecture 'Beyond Isis and Osiris' into an in-depth trail on attitudes to sexuality in ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome that led visitors to different objects in the Petrie Museum for 2010. The trail is online on the Petrie Museum website and Johnston recorded an introduction to the trail and LGBT History Month at the Petrie Museum for UCL TV on Youtube.²⁹ Johnston introduced the trail at an open evening that was deliberately programmed to

²⁴ Petrie Museum Public Programme Evaluation (2008–9): 26 Feb. 2009.

²⁵ Frost (2010): 146.

²⁶ 'Hadrian's Life Uncovered in a New Exhibition', 24 July 2008, <http://lgbthistorymonth.org.uk/hadrians-life-uncovered-in-new-british-museum-exhibition/> (accessed 2 Feb. 2015).

²⁷ HERNESTUS (2009). ²⁸ Fisher & Langlands, General Introduction: 00.

²⁹ Johnston (2010a) & (2010b).

enable people to discuss and meet, given the popularity of such events and questions raised over the last two years. The more informal and discussion-led evening was a recognition that visitors are not passive receivers but active participants in such events, forming part of the museum interpretation themselves.³⁰ This strategy worked with over ninety people attending throughout the evening. February 2010 was also marked at the museum with a talk by Andrew Lear on Greek Pederasty and the differences from Ancient Egypt, to mark the publication of his co-authored book with Eva Cantarella, *Images of Ancient Greek Pederasty: Boys Were Their Gods* (2009). Visitor feedback ranged from surprise at seeing images of gay sex and attraction on vases to appreciation of the nuanced scholarship and theoretical analysis that Lear brought to discussion of such scenes.³¹

LGBT History Month gives the Petrie Museum the platform to generate new audiences, form sustainable partnerships and explore related areas in our collection. It is now an important part of the museum's calendar. The success of the events we have run has also been useful for internal advocacy around LGBT history and representation within UCL's staff and student population; the museum's events now form part of a wider response from the UCL Equalities team. A themed series around Alexander the Great took place in 2011 with a talk by Johnston on Alexander and Hephaestion and Homeric Love and a trail on the Greeks in Egypt that was linked to a Friends of the Museum visit to the Hermitage in Amsterdam to see the Alexander the Great exhibition. In 2012 Johnston returned to the theme of Antinous, having kept in touch with high priest Hernessus, and I invited writer-performer Sophia Blackwell to do a performance of Sappho's poetry in a modern setting. Both attracted large and enthusiastic audiences, as well as ever growing publicity in LGBT and mainstream media. The programming has often focused on key individuals with a connection to ancient Egypt, partly because they are obvious exemplars within the framework of LGBT History Month and easy to market to a wider public audience. However, I have become aware that such programming is in danger of reflecting 'transitional cultural unity' responsible for uniting these figures; a similar overarching universal narrative to that which originally

³⁰ Levin (2010): 5.

³¹ Petrie Museum Public Programme Evaluation (2009–10): 2 Feb. 2010.

downplayed their sexual identity and ambiguity.³² A step to combat this is to embrace a different form of presentation and collecting; utilizing gossip (ancient and modern), cult histories, and drawing attention to the impact of contemporary terminology and norms that are applied to these figures from the ancient world. In his talks on Alexander and Hephaestion in 2011 and Antinous in 2012, Johnston examined the need for these figures as heroes of identity politics amongst the contemporary gay community and how their sexual identity has created their cult status.

CELEBRITY OBJECTS AND PEOPLE FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD

The 2010 LGBT History Month was themed around museums, and a prelaunch was held at the British Museum on 19 November 2009. The evening was also the occasion of a new trail on ‘Same-Sex Desire and Gender Identity’ based on Kate Smith’s 2007 trail with many of the same objects featured, such as the Warren Cup and portrait busts of Antinous and Hadrian. If the Warren Cup is *the* object that celebrates homosexual culture in the Roman world then Antinous and the Emperor Hadrian are *the* celebrity homosexual Roman lovers. Of course, neither the Cup nor Antinous and Hadrian fit such modern categorizations so simply. As we have seen, the British Museum did not shy away from considering Hadrian’s romantic and sexual relationship with Antinous in the 2008 *Hadrian* exhibition, though this did not generate universal approval. William Langley wrote in the *Sunday Telegraph*:

The handbook accompanying the new exhibition states unequivocally that Hadrian was ‘gay’ and he has long been embraced as such by homosexual rights groups. Yet, many scholars, including Anthony Everitt, author of biographies on Augustus and Cicero, caution that the modern concept of homosexuality didn’t exist in the classical world, where love between men was generally considered both normal and noble.³³

³² Mills (2010): 86.

³³ Langley (2008).

Langley indicates that he ~~thinks~~ love between men in the modern world is not ‘normal and noble’ and his assumption illustrates why defining and celebrating the sexual identities of Hadrian and Antinous is politically charged. Thorsten Opper, the curator of *Hadrian*, does state that Hadrian was ‘gay’ in the catalogue, but places Hadrian and his sexuality within an historically Roman context.³⁴ The tension caused by defining ancient sexual identity through alien contemporary terminology reflecting a more modern sense of the self as a political and personal entity is almost impossible to resolve in interpreting sexuality for audiences today.

The response to Petrie Museum events for LGBT History Month illustrates that people search for LGBT ancestors, whether Hatshepsut as a powerful woman who took on masculine iconography or Antinous as a gay man who became an imperial cult god. Although it is the case that Hatshepsut was depicted as a male pharaoh and that Antinous was the lover of Hadrian in the ancient world, the universal definition of sexual identity implied by such a search for ancestry is questionable, as most contemporary scholarship on constructions of sexuality in the ancient world stresses. The classical world, and ancient Athens in particular, has long been used as evidence for aesthetics of and legal reform around homosexuality by activists, as Blanshard and Matzner illustrate in chapters 1 and 9. John Pollini has pointed out that it has often been overlooked that Hadrian, for example, also had affairs with married women, and that ambisexuality was the norm for Roman men, not homosexuality in its modern sense.³⁵ Therefore an emphasis on ‘opposition to the normative’ that much of the construction of a ‘queer’ or LGBT identity is based is irrelevant, since potentially Hadrian was following normal Roman practice.³⁶ There is a question about how much museum practitioners, such as myself, should define the ancient world within a modern image to suit contemporary audiences, even when we are drawing attention to such constructions. Museums and the people who work in them are products of the culture and society in which we operate and so inevitably we institutionalize and codify sex in antiquity in a way that has more to do with contemporary identity politics.³⁷ The repression of histories illustrating ‘alternate’ sexualities to heteronormative experience has marginalized people that define

³⁴ Opper (2008): 168–9.

³⁵ Pollini (1999): 24, 26.

³⁶ Voss (2000): 184.

³⁷ Dennis (2006): 16.

themselves as LGBT, but ignoring ambiguous conceptions of sexuality can risk repeating the same ahistorical unity that made these histories marginal until recently.

Another way of constructing objects or people as icons of sexuality is defining them by the people who consider them iconic. The Warren Cup is, after all, named after Edward Warren who lived as openly as a gay man as it was possible to do in early twentieth-century Britain. Warren collected antiquities, including many that illustrated men engaged in same-sex sexual activity and ‘without Warren we would know much less than we do about homosexuality and ancient art’.³⁸ Arguably, Warren’s collection of material culture illustrating the aesthetics and normative behaviour of homosexuality in the Greek and Roman worlds can be compared with J. A. Symonds’s survey of Greek culture in *A Problem in Greek Ethics* (1883).³⁹ In this way, though still subscribing to the cult of personality, modern definitions and constructions of sexuality may be ascribed to objects from the ancient world. The Warren Cup is gay, therefore, not only because it depicts gay sex but also because it was collected by a gay man and is an icon for the gay community. The exhibition *Gay Icons* (2 July–18 October 2009) at the National Portrait Gallery (NPG) displayed sixty portraits of ‘icons’ put forward by ten different people who define themselves as gay or lesbian and are prominent figures in the cultural life of Britain. The ten selectors for *Gay Icons* were Waheed Ali, Alan Hollinghurst, Elton John, Jackie Kay, Billie Jean King, Chris Smith, Ian McKellen, Ben Summerskill, Sarah Waters, and Sandi Toksvig, who chaired it. *Gay Icons* did not try and present queer history or LGBT representation through portraiture; it offered a variety of personal responses to sexuality and creative freedom from people who defined themselves as LGBT. The choice of icons was not without controversy as some people felt that they did not reflect the ‘usual’ people associated with gay and lesbian identity. Bernard Horrocks, the NPG staff member who proposed the exhibition, explained the concept behind *Gay Icons*:

I thought it would be more interesting to have ten people’s perspectives of a gay icon rather than a single person’s. I also thought it would make the exhibition more diverse and inclusive. It really does contain a vastly contrasting selection, from the personal to the political to the high-

³⁸ Davis (2001b): 86.

³⁹ See Blanshard, Chapter 1: 00–00.

profile. By asking for personal selections, it's given us more to get our teeth into—and it's made an excellent springboard for both our public and educational programming.⁴⁰

Horrocks' proposal emphasized the personal nature of sexuality and sexual identity as well as its political ramifications, while pointing out that this approach was necessary within the scope of the NPG collection. Ben Hoyle in *The Times* commented that the exhibition coincided with the fortieth anniversary of Stonewall:

Even 15 years ago there would have been howls of indignation at a leading national institution spending public money on a show designed by, partly for and largely about, gay people. Now, in more tolerant times, *Gay Icons* is an intellectual rather than a political provocation.⁴¹

The intellectual provocation also side-steps the problematic application of contemporary constructions of sexuality to people and objects belonging to different historical periods and cultures from contemporary liberal Western society.

The 2013 LGBT History Month event at the Petrie Museum followed the *Gay Icons*' concept of defining objects through the identity of people who choose them. In *Every Good Thing* on 26 February 2013, John J. Johnston put together a panel of prominent members of the gay community and asked them to choose objects that furthered their understanding of the ancient world and sexuality. The panel included writer and artist Tom Allen, artist Andrew Prior, writers James Goss and Joe Lidster, public astronomer Marek Kukula, editor of *Gay Star News* Tim Reid-Smith, and Camden LGBT Forum Director Lou Hart, while members of the audience members were invited to take part. The evening culminated in a cabaret performance of part of *Get Hur*, a mock historical musical hall take on the love story of Antinous and Hadrian, by artist Bette Bourne and Bloodlips partner Paul Shaw, and a riotous dance around the museum. It should be noted that this event concentrated on 'alternate' views of male sexuality and it is clear to me that more work in terms of marketing, research and programming needs to be made around constructions of female sexual identity. At the time of writing it is too soon to comment on the reaction and any intellectual provocation generated by the event. Of course, defining objects through the

⁴⁰ Horrocks, email to Challis, 28 Sept. 2009.

⁴¹ Hoyle (2009).

identity of the person who chooses them as an exemplar can be problematic and the ancient context entirely ignored.

Most objects relating to sexuality from the ancient world are hard to define within the limited constructions around sexuality in contemporary culture, for example the age difference in the lovers on the Warren Cup could potentially make it, by the norms of contemporary society, an icon of paedophile sexual behaviour. However, I feel that it is better to recognize and try to address anxieties about positioning modern notions of sexuality onto ancient practices than to not put on related events and exhibitions at all. There is a bigger issue with separating these areas as belonging to ‘minority’ groups rather than considering the wider implications across society. The construction of sexual knowledge in and around antiquity is not just pertinent to ‘alternate sexuality’ but also to heterosexuality and our understanding of family dynamics.

Amongst the terracottas on display in the Petrie Museum that this chapter began by considering is a red terracotta plaque (Figure 2.5, UC35953) showing a female nestling on the lap of and possibly being entered by a male while she is nursing an infant. This image offers us a construction of male–female sexual relationships and the close proximity of children in Roman Egypt that museum audiences find far more difficult to comprehend than the Warren Cup. The scene is not untypical for the period and does not fit into the ‘hidden’ LGBT histories, yet hardly subscribes to contemporary heteronormativity. The terracotta is on display in the main museum, not separated out into a special exhibition, such as the historic ‘secret museum’ at the Archaeological Museum in Naples or the more recent display ‘The Garden of Delights—The Art of Love in Antiquity’ at the Altes Museum in Berlin. ‘The Garden of Delights’ displays votives of phalluses, phallic religious emblems, statues of hermaphrodites, Roman lamps, and Greek vases mixing sexual acts, medical care, and religion together simply because of the sexual iconography on the objects. There are valid historical reasons for the ‘secret museum’ form of display, yet it serves to make these objects seem an aberration and separate from day to day life in the ancient world, whether they represent sexual activity or fertility rites.

Museums in the UK are often constrained in how they present the ancient world by the focus on school education, particularly Key Stage 2 on the National Curriculum (ages 7–11 years), and there is a perception that objects showing sexual scenes and body parts



Figure 2.5. Red terracotta plaque—male figure to left; female figure to right with face in three-quarter view, nestling on his lap. She nurses child standing on her left knee (UC35953) © Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, UCL.

should be avoided. The curriculum is shortly to change and the ancient world deleted from the curriculum of primary age children, with huge implications for museum interpretation and education. Family friendly interpretation also generally avoids discussion around sexuality or constructions of sexual identity.⁴² There are reasons for this as parents often complain about such material

⁴² Liddiard (2004): 17.

being highlighted. For example, the trail I wrote for on Alexander and the Greeks in Egypt received a complaint and request from a visitor to cut out the sexually explicit terracottas; she felt their inclusion was inappropriate since she wanted to use it as a guide with her children in the museum.⁴³ Thomas Dowson has pointed out how representations of family structures within museums displaying archaeological material reinforce the dynamics of the modern nuclear family and power as androcentric and heterosexist.⁴⁴ Arguably, assumptions about the 'origin of marriage' and gender roles formed in the late nineteenth century, that Manias identifies in Chapter 8 about the prehistoric period, still predominate in museum displays. This is unsurprising given representations of the family in school textbooks. In Latin teaching the *pater familias* model of Caecilius in the first book of the Cambridge Latin Course series represents a typical household in Pompeii as a father, mother, and son with slaves attached. The family was the conscious model for the 2008 television programme *Doctor Who: The Fires of Pompeii*, to which was added a daughter, thus making the family more nuclear. It is clear that such popular constructions of the Roman household inform and are informed by interpretation around Roman daily life. Museums need to reconsider the dynamics of gender and sexual identity and construction across all areas of the ancient world, including displays on the home and family. The recent efforts of many museums and galleries to recognize LGBT audiences and histories in their collecting practice as well as in their public programmes have created an impetus for museums that display objects from the ancient world to address issues around sexuality and gender identity. More work needs to be made on how museum practitioners and academics present as full a picture as possible of Greek and Roman sexuality and gender identity to a broad audience.

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⁴³ Challis (2011).

⁴⁴ Dowson (2009): 7–8.