

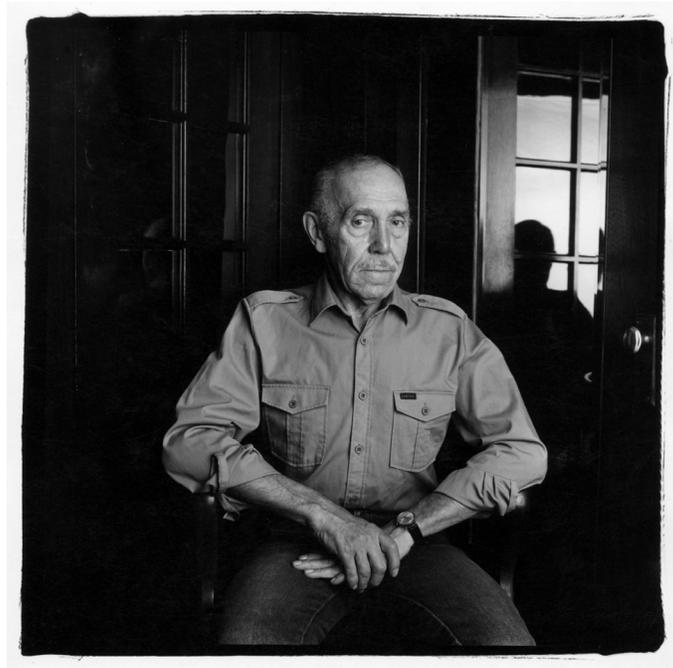
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Eight Artists on the Influence of Tom of Finland

Touko Valio Laaksonen, who would have been 100 this year, transformed depictions of queer eroticism in art through his hyper-real, hypermasculine style.

By John Chiaverina | July 23, 2020



The artist Tom of Finland at his house in Los Angeles in 1984. Photo by Jack Shear

Tom of Finland's influence is so vast that it can be hard to calculate. Through sheer force of imagination, the artist was able to manifest a hyper-real, hypermasculine style of queer erotic illustration that would end up inspiring not just legions of visual artists but entire subcultures. Any time a stylist puts a young pop star in a leather biker cap for a magazine shoot, the impact of Tom of Finland is not far-off.

The year 2020 marks the centennial of the birth of this artist, born Touko Valio Laaksonen, who died in 1991. Exhibitions, both virtual and in reopened spaces, have been staged or planned in locales as far-flung as Los Angeles, London, Tokyo, Paris, Berlin and Tallinn, Estonia. These commemorative shows are part of a larger, slower shift over the past few decades, one that has seen the artist's leather-clad figurative work recast more firmly into an institutionally approved art cannon.

In 2013, the artist's work was included in a two-person exhibition with the gay erotic art trailblazer — and, as it happens, the originator of Laaksonen's famous pseudonym — Bob Mizer at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Tom of Finland drawings are in the permanent collection at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Even Laaksonen's home country and namesake, in which homosexuality was criminalized until 1971, has come around to the artist's importance: In 2014, it made a series of stamps honoring Tom of Finland, and a successful 2017 biopic was produced in the country.

But the artist's work has had a long road to wider acceptance. From a young age, he took an interest in leather and uniforms — particularly those of local loggers and farmers — which would become his primary stylistic touchstone: Sailors flex and embrace in his work, and bikers touch bulges. This early attraction was amplified during a stint in the Finnish military, in which Laaksonen saw action in Finland's 1941 Continuation War against the U.S.S.R., which landed his country on the wrong side of World War II history until it switched sides late in 1944, and later through the emergent biker subculture, inspired by Marlon Brando in the 1953 film "The Wild One." (It should be noted that though the uniforms of the German military were an influence on the artist, Laaksonen was decidedly anti-racist.)

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Tom of Finland's "Buddies" (1973). Photo by Brian Forrest. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles



The artist's "Untitled (From Kake Vol. 20 — 'Pleasure Park')". Courtesy of the Tom of Finland Foundation, Los Angeles, and David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles

An initially secretive postwar art practice begun while the artist was working a day job at an advertising agency developed into a career, spurred on by a successful submission, in 1956, to Mizer's magazine, *Physique Pictorial*, which had to be branded as a fitness magazine as a cover, though that didn't always work (Mizer was charged with obscenity in 1954). Early pieces published under the Tom of Finland moniker were more suggestive than explicit, but the artist's work evolved with the loosening of both legal and social constraints. Even so, many of Laaksonen's later, more explicit drawings retained the winking affability seen in his more formative work.

In 1978, Laaksonen made his first trip to Los Angeles, where he would end up establishing the Tom of Finland Company with his muse and close friend Durk Dehner, in order to fight rampant copyright infringement. That company would expand into the nonprofit Tom of Finland Foundation, which to this day retains headquarters in an Echo Park Craftsman house and continues to be an important community hub.

Throughout this timeline, Tom of Finland has remained a quintessential artist's artist. In the early 1960s, the pioneering, boundary-pushing gay artist Robert Mapplethorpe, according to Patti Smith, discovered Tom of Finland's work in a used bookstall in Times Square. Mapplethorpe would become a crucial link in exposing Laaksonen's work to the contemporary art world. Mapplethorpe attended Laaksonen's debut San Francisco exhibition at the pioneering queer art gallery Fey-Way Studios. Dehner facilitated the show, and Mapplethorpe's enthusiasm helped the artist land an exhibition at Robert Samuel Gallery in New York two years later.

In 1985, the artist Mike Kelley brought Tom of Finland to CalArts, the legendary Southern California art school, to give a talk. In his introduction, Kelley called Tom of Finland "an incredible inspiration in my work." In context, it was a bold statement. "CalArts was steeped within the dogma of conceptual art, and Tom, of course, was anything but that," the gallerist David Kordansky, who represents Tom of Finland's work through the foundation, says.

S.R. Sharp, who is the vice-president and curator at the Tom of Finland Foundation, says artists like Kelley revered Tom because his art did nothing less than offer permission to explore sexuality and explicit imagery in their own work. "And they always have remembered that," Sharp says. "And they've carried his legacy for many, many, many years."

T talked to a wide range of artists about Tom of Finland's influence for what would have been his 100th birthday.

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Tom of Finland's house in the Echo Park neighborhood of Los Angeles, which is now the headquarters of the Tom of Finland Foundation. Photography from the Rizzoli book "Tom House: Tom of Finland in Los Angeles" (2016). Photo © Martyn Thompson

Elmgreen & Dragset, Berlin-based artist duo

Tom of Finland's art is unabashedly gay and celebratory of a subculture and sexual rituals that were considered perverse when his drawings first appeared in public. It seems absolutely devoid of the Protestant reservedness, darkness, angst and pietism that has otherwise affected the Nordic culture. In spite of the depictions of rough sexual practices, there is something almost innocent and sweet about Tom of Finland's drawings, like it's all playacting. Seen in today's light, his leather-clad muscle men don't seem that different from Tove Jansson's Moomintroll fantasy figures.

When we curated the Nordic Pavilion at the 53rd Venice Biennale in 2009, we installed a whole wall with Tom of Finland drawings. Even at that time his art was considered controversial. It's funny to think that only a few years later Tom of Finland's drawings appeared on national stamps and on bedsheets and cushion covers from the traditional Finnish textile company Finlayson, founded in 1820.

Cassils, Los Angeles-based performance artist

Tom of Finland's is probably the only artwork that I've ever jerked off to. Those hot drawings scalded an impression onto my tender, young queer brain fairly early on. I lived in Echo Park from 2009 to 2016. Visiting Tom's house was a refuge; knowing that it is still care taken by his former lover enacts and makes present a rich, deep history. Its like a portal to the queer culture I always aspired to but has mostly been erased these days by digital platforms and capitalism.

His formal mastery as a draftsman is really remarkable. You don't see people with that kind of skill set anymore. Forget about the subject matter, the ability to draw that well is a pleasure to witness. Also, the absurdity of Tom's house as a living, breathing kinky institution: I recall going there, and seeing this huge, huge butt plug holding open the front door with this ancient Lab snoozing on the mat, and then, looking up to the ceiling and instead of fixing a crack, they'd hired a young queer artist, Hector Silva, to come in and paint a facade that's as if you're looking up somebody's kilt. That incredible amount of detail and labor and eroticism went into absolutely every part of his life.

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An installation view of “The Collectors,” curated by Elmgreen & Dragset, at the Danish and Nordic Pavilions during the 2009 Venice Biennale.
Photo by Anders Sune Berg

For a long time, there was no language around transness, or folks that were gender nonconforming or nonbinary. And I think, similarly, perhaps when Tom of Finland was forging this iconic style, he really took ownership over his definition of what it was to be a homosexual, which was perhaps, at that time, a term that was viewed as weak or derogatory. For him to manifest this totally fantastical, empowered erotic vision, it was completely contrary to that. So, I think that aspect of his imagining is something that has definitely influenced me as an artist, in terms of me being able to understand and forge a possibility for myself.

John Waters, Baltimore-based filmmaker

Peter Berlin, Kenneth Anger, Joe Dallesandro, Jeff Stryker, Jim Morrison, James Bidgood, John Rechy, even Elvis and James Dean. None of them could have existed without Tom Of Finland’s art coming first. He took the word “butch” and turned it into a lifestyle. No, a reason to live.

Richard Hawkins, Los Angeles-based artist

Working for the Tom of Finland Company for several years, I was able to see firsthand not only the breadth and amazing development of Tom’s characters and story lines but also how widely seen the work became — through distribution of Tom’s own publications but, more important, hand to hand and fan to fan. I take from that a very valuable lesson about artistic practice: By pursuing and portraying the particulars of your own personal desires — as idiosyncratic, abhorrent, irresponsible or far too subjective as your current situation may make it seem — you might just someday inspire the lives of others, many of whom may be worlds and lifetimes away.

Catherine Opie, Los Angeles-based photographer

As a longtime Angeleno and definitely someone who has been a part of a larger queer leather community here, I know how important Tom of Finland was in terms of brotherhood. So even though it wasn’t necessarily for me, Tom’s house always provided an amazing community resource. But for me as a dyke, I could not find myself in Tom of Finland’s work beyond drag.

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A portion of the ceiling inside Tom of Finland's Los Angeles home. Photography from the Rizzoli book "Tom House: Tom of Finland in Los Angeles" (2016).
Photo © Martyn Thompson

In a certain way, there was always a position of separatism with the leather men compared to the leather dykes. Which is why I'm so interested in the influence that Tom of Finland had on [the Canadian artist and publisher] G. B. Jones. For the first time within G. B. Jones's zines, in which she adopted the style of Tom of Finland, I was able to see my own community and my own self, versus the fantasies that many of us carried of being leather daddies.

Tom of Finland, what he modeled for us in his drawings, was actually a butch drag. We ended up adopting this — it was a way for us to do drag as a community. But G. B. Jones, with her drawings, all of a sudden made it part of our queer culture — we could think of ourselves as being women and leather dykes versus just doing drag.

Simon Haas, of the Los Angeles-based artist duo the Haas Brothers

My college boyfriend gave me a Tom of Finland Kake comic for my 21st birthday, when I was studying at the Rhode Island School of Design. I was a recently out-of-the-closet painting student filled with angst about my sexuality and my art, and this was my first exposure to art that made me feel like I belonged. Tom of Finland's deft pencil work and the immediate eroticism are enough to make any young gay boy a quick fan, but after a decade of looking at his drawings, I understand that his work transcends pornography and occupies a space of queer spirituality. I came for the giant phalluses and stayed for the joy of being a gay person. Tom's drawings are unapologetically happy and have not a shred of shame in them — an incredible rarity in any depiction of homosexuality, even now. Tom had the fortitude of spirit to celebrate men at play at a time when most of the world considered gay people to be an abomination. I am 64 years his junior, and I have yet to discover within myself the kind of fearless happiness that Tom manifested in his work. Tom had such an abundance of radical self-acceptance that his work continues to impart the spirit of self-love onto gay men everywhere. I will never know Tom, but I can sincerely say that I love him with all my heart.

Brontez Purnell, Oakland, Calif.-based writer and artist

We kind of take Tom of Finland for granted, because, let's be honest, as gay men, do we really need any more images of super muscular white dudes? No, of course not. But, also, he was an excellent portraitist, probably the last of the greatest of them, in a world where the camera has become omni-accessible.

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Tom of Finland's "Sailor's Dream" (1959). Photo by Brian Forrest. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles

Also, when he was creating, I don't think anybody really understood how out of vogue or how hyper-questioned hypermasculinity would become. But the thing that was absolutely radical was that he was doing this in the '40s. When you do the residency [Purnell was a resident at the Tom of Finland Foundation in 2019], you get access to his room, and I saw drawings from when he was like 8 years old, and he's doing these little comics about cops and robbers. So, he was definitely all about dudes in uniforms.



G.B. Jones's "Girls Who Are Fans of Sailor Moon" (1996). Courtesy of the artist and Cooper Cole Gallery, Toronto



Jones's "Tom Girls Go West" (2001). Courtesy of the artist and Cooper Cole Gallery, Toronto

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Tom of Finland's "The New Biker Stud" (1969). Courtesy of the Tom of Finland Foundation, Los Angeles, and David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles



Tom of Finland's "Untitled (Preparatory Drawing for Kake Vol. 16 — 'Sex on the Train')" (1974). Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles

When I was the artist in residence there, it says Tom of Finland, so you would expect a bunch of German dudes in leather, but it was a pretty diverse group of people. The people who run that organization are very, very near and dear to me. I think they still have a very, very deep and intentional hand in L.A. queer radical art. The month I was there, I saw that house be a welcoming spot for so many different people — so many walks of queer life.

It's a thing that I think is seemingly dead in San Francisco — the house is maybe the last bastion of the radical, queer, underground meeting place. But also through the filter of these still amazing drawings. With Tom of Finland, it's important to be able to place him in his time period. He was definitely doing something that was going to get his ass killed, but he said, "This is my art. This is the type of beauty I want to enact in the world," and there is no way to not be in awe of that.

Tom Bianchi, Palm Springs, Calif.-based photographer

In the pocket-size Physique Pictorial magazines, I first saw Tom of Finland drawings. As a frustrated, horny adolescent thinking myself alone in my perverse desires, I reveled in his mind-blowing sex fantasies. But I never thought those men or what they were up to could be real. In the late '50s and early '60s, few men had the physiques he idealized. And I saw no evidence that Tom's world existed beyond his imagination. But that didn't stop me from joining in his adventures with my dick in hand. Years later, I learned that Tom drew with one hand and held his dick in the other. That revelation speaks to the authenticity of his art.

Tom wanted us to feel the charge of his desires in our loins. I agree with Richard Ellmann's observations on Oscar Wilde, that life would repeat itself tediously were it not for the daemonic changes art forces upon it. I also agree with Ellmann's idea that the artist makes models of experience that people rush to try out. Tom of Finland perfectly exemplifies this observation. Before Tom, the homosexual stereotype was a narrowly limited negative one. But Tom opened a door to an alternate, robust way of being queer. He invited us to dress and play with hypermasculine images of ourselves and illustrated myriad sexual adventures we could realize. Tom of Finland expanded our vision of what was possible for us to experience. How many artists' work has changed our culture so profoundly? That we celebrate Tom's 100th birthday today is a testament to the transformative power of his work.

These interviews have been edited and condensed.