



Tom of Finland's erotica helped foster gay pride

BY PAUL VARNELL
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

When Tom of Finland visited Chicago in 1983, this then-young leatherman recognized him at a local leather bar, and walked over.

"I like your pictures a lot," I said, then hesitated before adding, "Sometimes I have jacked off to them."

"Oh," said Tom reassuringly, "that's what they are for!"

Late last year, Taschen Publishing Co., in conjunction with

the Tom of Finland Foundation, issued 40 of Tom's well-known erotic comic books collected in five small volumes, "sized to fit conveniently in one hand," as the company's catalogue points out.

The name "Tom of Finland" may sound like an exotic pseudonym; but Tom was indeed Finnish. He was born Touko Laaksonen in 1920 in a small town at the southwestern tip of Finland. As early as age eight he was drawing stories in panel sequences like comic

books. Within a few years he was drawing pictures of the lumberjacks and manual laborers he admired near his semi-rural home.

At 19, Tuoko moved to Helsinki to attend art school, where he began adding other types of masculine-looking men—policemen, construction workers, sailors—to the repertoire of drawings that he made largely for his own amusement. He was particularly impressed by the uniforms of the German soldiers stationed in Finland.

The fetish for uniforms and shiny black boots became a frequent theme in Tom's drawings, though purged of the German military associations.

In 1956 a gay friend urged Touko to send some of them to "Physique Pictorial," an early gay-oriented American magazine featuring semi-nude shots of handsome young men and drawings by an artist named George Quaintance. Publisher Bob Mizer liked Touko's drawings and put one of a youthful logger on the cover of the Spring 1957 issue.

Because Touko Laaksonen sounded too foreign for American ears, Mizer dubbed him Tom of Finland. It was the beginning of Tom's career as an erotic artist. From then on few issues of "Physique Pictorial" were published without a Tom drawing.

His emphasis was always on an affirmative presentation of homosexuality: Good-looking, well-built men engaging in gay sex and enjoying what they were doing. In his engaging biography of Tom, Valentine Hooven quotes Tom as saying, "In those days a gay man was made to feel nothing but shame about his feelings and his sexuality. I wanted my drawings to counteract that, to show gay men being happy and positive about who they were."

Even the men who are depicted as surprised and resistant to gay sex end up delighted and wanting more.

The panel stories, later to become independent comic books, were inaugurated in 1961, and by 1965 Tom began experimenting with the idea

of an ongoing main character. First he used a beefy man in a muscle-shirt named Mike, then a Tarzan-like character named Jack, and finally in 1968 settled on the priapic and incredibly endowed Kake, a husky, leather-clad motorcyclist. Kake, pronounced "Kah-keh," is Finnish for "butch."

The new Taschen collection includes reduced-size versions of six of those early Mike comics and three of the Jungle Jack series, but the main draw is 26 of the Kake comic books produced between 1968 and 1986. We never learn much about Kake except that he lives at Number 69 on an unnamed street. His chief activities are riding his motorcycle and having sex.

Kake finds a wide variety of partners, allowing Tom opportunities to express all his fantasies. Sailors, lifeguards, cowboys, lumberjacks, construction workers, policemen, TV repairmen, gas station attendants—all are invariably handsome, brawny and enthusiastically gay when Kake comes along. The frequent group scenes with anywhere from three to eight participants also give Tom a chance to include several different activities simultaneously—the usual sucking and fucking, but also boot-licking, rimming, kissing, tit-sucking and occasionally whipping, fisting and watersports.

One feature of Tom's drawings not often enough highlighted is the humor, often involving a sudden reversal of roles that surprises the characters. A Canadian Mountie accosted by Kake and a lumberjack manag-

es to put his handcuffs around their testicles, locking them together for a night before returning the next day to release them. Or Kake is caught by the father of a young man he is having sex with and taken advantage of by the father.

Other times the humor is in Kake's facial expression. When he is about to board an airplane, security personnel notice his genital bulge and suspect him of carrying contraband. As they start to open his pants, Kake looks at the reader out of the corner of his eye with a sly, conspiratorial smirk.

As with all pornography, there are elements of unreality that go well beyond the invariably handsome bodies, the outsized body parts and the instant arousability, but the erotic charge generally blocks reader disbelief, at least temporarily.

In his later years, Tom drew fewer comic books and fewer scenes of sexual activity, focusing his art instead on depictions of individual handsome men. "The urges coming from inside me now are to make simple drawings of fine-looking, masculine men," he said. "I just want to draw handsome bodies and faces. I've gotten romantic in my old age."

After a lifetime of smoking, Tom died of emphysema in November, 1991.

Tom of Finland: The Comic Collection, ed. Dian Hanson. Los Angeles, Taschen Publishing Co. Five volumes, 4" by 6," in flex cover with slip case. Price: \$39.99.