



## Size matters

A new collection of work by erotic artist Tom of Finland proves bigger is better.

By **Jason A. Heidemann**

Surprisingly, Finnish artist Touko Laaksonen (1920–91), a.k.a. Tom of Finland, was an ass man. According to Dian Hanson, editor of *Tom of Finland XXL* (Taschen, \$200), a new supersize retrospective of the late artist's work, Tom (as he's colloquially called) personally preferred a gentleman's rear end over the gargantuan phalluses that often appear in his sexually charged drawings. Still, when it comes to the tome's mighty size (11.4" x 15.9"), Hanson thinks the gay community's foremost illustrator of erotica would agree that big is good.

At a whopping 666 pages, *Tom of Finland XXL* brings together more than 1,000 pencil drawings from the six-decade career of this graphic artist by day, erotic sketcher by night. The massive book unites never-before-seen images and other rarities that trace Tom's early obsessions with men in uniform, the leather community's

emergence in the '50s, breezy California surfers in the '60s, gay lib, punk rock and the impact of the AIDS crisis.

Augmenting the drawings is a collection of essays written by fans and cultural critics such as Camille Paglia, Armistead Maupin, Todd Oldham, John Waters and Hanson, among others.

Former editor-in-chief for adult magazines including *Juggs* and *Leg Show* (and former girlfriend to cartoonist Robert Crumb), Hanson joined the L.A.-based Taschen staff in 2001. She's worked painstakingly on the book ever since, tracking down reluctant collectors in both the U.S. and Europe to photograph rare works. "It's really frustrating because a lot of the earlier art disappeared," Hanson says. "I had to go on this international quest to find as many collectors as possible and get them to allow us to photograph their collections."

Hanson had help in the form of the Tom of Finland Foundation, an L.A.-based nonprofit cofounded by Tom himself in 1984. An early appreciator, foundation president Durk Dehner helped form the nonprofit to promote Tom's career. "I liked the man," Dehner says. "I found

him to be a very authentic person and a very amazing talent."

*Tom of Finland XXL* offers an opportunity to legitimize the work of an artist still dismissed in both art circles and the queer community. True, the aesthetic is steeped in impossibly chiseled, masculine men with enormous erections engaging in all kinds of sexual play, but *Tom of Finland XXL* goes beyond graphic sex to reveal the artist's sense of humor, his lesser-known drawings of black men and women and his unabashed disregard for so-called top/bottom dynamics. By presenting the bulk of Tom's work, the book reveals his desire to paint an unadulterated (and undomestic) picture of gay male sexuality as both liberating and bonding.

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**"Is there any other artist that we ejaculate to and also have on a coffee table?"**

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"When I was growing up, there was definitely a lot of stigma with being queer; it wasn't very manly," Dehner, 59, says. "He gave all these young guys an identity. He was our frontier guy who led the troops by giving us a visual identity to hold on to."

Still, Hanson acknowledges that a wider scope of Tom's work may not convince any naysayers. "I don't know that the book will change the position of the few people who look at it and only see insertions," she says. "There will always be people who can't see past the explicit content."

The real question is whether the hefty price tag will keep away even Tom's most ardent fans. Hanson admits the price point might keep the hobbyists out, yet Dehner hopes the book will reach an international audience, namely Finland, where Tom lived and worked most of his life.

Dehner also hopes it helps reverse the decline in erotic-art appreciation. "Our community is responsible for increasing its value," he says. "We used to have it on our walls and in our bars. That renaissance became homogenized. It had its high and completed itself." Dehner thinks *Tom of Finland XXL* might ignite another renaissance. "Is there any other artist that we ejaculate to and have on our coffee table?"

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*Tom of Finland XXL is available Wednesday 22 at Unabridged Bookstore.*