

# Larger Than Life

Erotic masculinity on display  
in "Tom of Finland XXL"

BY KAT LONG

One can hardly separate Tom of Finland's iconography from that of Western gay male culture in general. His sexual symbols and motifs have become our vocabulary for gay masculinity. Our definitions of male beauty are Tom's ideals, while the familiar stereotypes of over-muscled gay he-men are indistinguishable from Tom's pantheon. Which came first: Tom or everyone else?

Additionally, Tom's impact on gay identity and pride can't be overstated. Beginning in the 1940's, his prodigious output of drawings and paintings gave gay men the visual language with which to recognize themselves. (Even if you weren't built like a Tom's Man, you probably wanted to be).

"Tom of Finland XXL" (Taschen), a colossal compendium of Tom's work numbering 666 pages and weighing about 20 pounds, can still barely contain the energy and sexual excitement of the work. The volume is organized by decade, from the 1940's to the 80's, with a prologue by Tom of Finland Foundation founder and president Durk Dehner. Essays by Helsinki Art Museum director Berndt Arell, Camille Paglia, Armistead Maupin, Todd Oldham, John Waters and other luminaries describe how Tom's work affected their lives and gay identities. Art

historian Edward Lucie-Smith contributes an introduction and annotated captions for each plate.

Arell writes, "[Tom] created a world that affirmed his longing, a world where men, with all their needs, live together with other men like themselves." This utopian world nonetheless fits into a chronological and historical context, so the motifs that so clearly come from Tom's own sexual desires can be viewed as nonetheless related to the development of gay culture in America.

"Tom's Men"—cowboys, cops, sailors, working-class boys, businessmen, military officers, bikers—share a common physique that remains incredibly consistent throughout Tom's 50 years of drawing. An enormous solar plexus supports thickly muscled arms, descends to a slim, almost girlish waist, and then blooms into two spherical globes representing an ass. The top-heavy silhouette is braced by legs resembling tree trunks encased in leather jackboots. And then, of course, the cock: whether swinging in the breeze or merely outlined by skin-tight trousers, erect or pliant, the male member is constantly on display as an object of worship.

Themes recur in his compositions: figures exchange

dominant and submissive roles; characters commit a petty crime or offense and are punished sexually; men have sex *al fresco*; men enact a variety of working-class occupations. Each theme unleashes masculine power, yet there is a noticeable absence of brutality. Tom presents a male image that is strong and confident, yet unafraid of erotic vulnerability.

Because of the physical repetition, the incidental details in the drawings are signals. His early work, while definitely homoerotic, reveals shyness congruent with the tentative coalescence of gay male culture that developed during World War II. His images of sailors and military officers in exaggeratedly sexy uniforms possess a bashful quality that begins to evaporate in his 1950's work. The burgeoning sexual revolution is evident in his drawings and comics from the 1960's, but it's in the 1970's that his iconography and that of the "Castro clones" in San Francisco dovetail completely.

Tom's designs are an integral part of our gay unconscious, and "XXL" puts all of the evidence on glorious display.

