



Schwules Museum [Gay Museum]

by Andrew Leblanc

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Berlin's Schwules Museum, established in the late 1980s, is a private institution dedicated to preserving, exhibiting, and discovering homosexual history, art, and culture. Located in the Kreuzberg district of former West Berlin, long the center of gay life in the city, the museum is composed of three main divisions: archives, library, and exhibitions.

The Mission

The Schwules Museum was founded as a "living collection" to present to the public exhibitions, catalogues, essays, lectures, and film screenings. Its targeted audience includes everyone--gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, transsexuals, and heterosexuals--who would like to inform and be informed, in a professional and scientific manner, on all topics relating to homosexuality, both historically and contemporarily.

The museum is a repository for diverse collections--including records of self-help groups, public institutions, and churches, as well as memoirs, oral histories, and literary and artistic works. It is the mission of the museum to build from such diverse sources a continually expanding chronicle of gay social history and to document the history and development of gay liberation movements.

Although the museum is interested in all aspects of homosexual history and culture, it has a particular concern with the persecution of gay men and lesbians under fascism. The treatment of gay men and lesbians by the Third Reich is a topic of specialization and continuing research.

This topic is dealt with extensively in museum publications and exhibitions, including the famous 1997 exhibit entitled "Goodbye To Berlin? 100 Jahre Schwulenbewegung" [Goodbye to Berlin? 100 Years of the Gay Movement].

"Goodbye To Berlin? 100 Jahre Schwulenbewegung"

The beginning of the early European gay rights movement is generally dated to May 15, 1897, when four courageous individuals met for the first time in Berlin to initiate resistance to Paragraph 175 of the German Penal Code, which imposed severe penalties on individuals convicted of homosexual acts.

The exhibit "Goodbye to Berlin" opened at the Academy of Art in Berlin, under the co-sponsorship of the Schwules Museum, on the one hundredth anniversary of this signal event.

The exhibit documented every significant milestone in gay and lesbian history of the 100 years between 1897 and 1997. Although the scope of the exhibit was global, the focus was on German culture and history. The title of the exhibit, alluding to Christopher Isherwood's *Berlin Stories*, suggests the pivotal role of Berlin to glbtq history in the years between the world wars.

On view were art works, photographs, letters, and other documents that illustrated the lives of glbtq

people at various epochs from the era of Bismark and the Kaisers to the Golden Age of the Weimar Republic (when German culture itself reached its artistic zenith), and from the bleak period of suppression and persecution in the Third Reich to the time of recovery and organizing in the post-World War II years, culminating finally in the gay liberation movement sparked by the Stonewall Riots of 1969.

The exhibit was a great success. Fortunately, the beautifully produced, richly illustrated, and deeply informative catalog provides a permanent record of the exhibit and itself constitutes a valuable history of the gay rights movement.

Recent Exhibitions

The Museum currently has two exhibition rooms in which it presents exhibitions on topics ranging from art and history to the everyday lives of gay men and women. Unfortunately, a lack of exhibition space prevents the Museum from installing a permanent exhibit on the history of gay persecution and gay liberation.

Recent exhibitions have paid homage to the anniversaries of two international German celebrities: "Marlene und das Dritte Geschlecht: Hommage zu Marlene Dietrich's 100. Geburtstag" (December 5, 2001-April 15, 2002) [A retrospective in commemoration of Marlene Dietrich's 100th birthday]; and "Fabrik der Gefühle: Hommage an Rainer Werner Fassbinder" (May 29-October 28, 2002) [A retrospective in commemoration of the twentieth anniversary of the death of accomplished filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder].

The Dietrich exhibit shed light on the actress' relationships in several spheres, especially her role as gay and lesbian icon. Among many other documents, the exhibit featured photographs by Cecil Beaton, letters, costumes, props, and numerous objects from the Dietrich Estate, many of which were exhibited for the first time in this homage to Germany's unique contribution to film and glbtq culture.

The Fassbinder exhibit brought together photographs, film clips, and posters to document the director's life and work, and the centrality of his homosexuality to both. Drawing from private collections as well as from material loaned by the Fassbinder Foundation and other museums, the exhibit centered on the role of women in Fassbinder's films, illustrating how the director's own life experiences influenced these parts.

Another recent exhibition at the Schwules Museum was entitled "C'est mon homme" ("It's My Man"). The exhibit consisted of a collection of male nude photographs from the French artist association, "Passage à l'acte."

Research

Besides collecting and exhibiting documents of gay culture, a major interest of the Schwules Museum is research. Assembling, writing, and documenting a living gay history is a formidable task and an area in which much work needs to be done.

The museum is interested in becoming a repository for university research, such as doctoral theses, and also in assisting scholars in using its archives for research purposes. Memoirs and records from the 1920s, the Nazi era, and the 1950s and 1960s constitute a large portion of the Schwules Museum library and may be used for research.

Volunteers and Support

As a private institution, the Schwules Museum is largely dependent upon donations and endowments, since it receives a subsidy of less than 5,000 Euros annually from the Berlin Senate and has monthly expenses in excess of 3,000 Euros.

Not surprisingly, the Schwules Museum is dependent on a cadre of dedicated volunteers with diverse interests and talents. It also welcomes the donation of books, magazines, objects, documents, and art, to increase its holdings.

With volunteer help and a dedicated staff, the Museum hopes to educate the public, foster understanding, dismantle prejudice, and open new dialogues with members of the majority culture.

Located at Mehringdamm 61, in a courtyard adjacent to the gay restaurant-bar, Café Melitta Sundstrom, the Schwules Museum is open every day except Tuesdays. Generally, two exhibitions run concurrently and are open to the public. Access to the library and archives is by appointment only.

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About the Author

Andrew Leblanc earned his M.A. in German at Schiller International University, Heidelberg, Germany. His post graduate studies and degree in education were completed at Tulane and Loyola Universities in New Orleans. He teaches German and French for New Orleans Public Schools and heads a German school exchange program with the German-American-Partnership Program.