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# Artist who created iconic gay aesthetic

Tom of Finland won global fame through his subversive, funny drawings, says Alex Needham

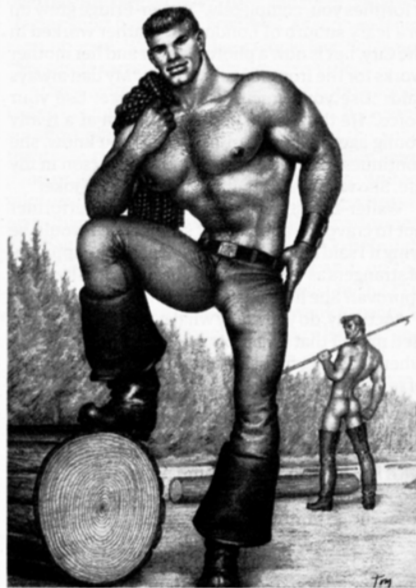
**W**hile sex between men was partially decriminalised 50 years ago in the UK, in Finland it took until 1971. And it wasn't until recently that the Finns openly acknowledged one of their country's most famous exports. In 2014, they put his artwork on a set of stamps; this year, a biopic became a multiplex hit. Almost 100 years after his birth in the town of Kaarina, Tom of Finland had come home.

Tom's real name was Touko Laaksonen. By day, he was a senior art director at an advertising agency. In his spare time, however, Laaksonen drew his sexual fantasies - bikers and lumberjacks, mounties and policemen going at it hammer and tongs in forests, prisons and parks, the smiles on their faces almost as big as their tumescent penises. Initially published in American gay proto-porn magazines, they were disseminated worldwide in dime stores, sex shops or leather bars through an international underground of fans, despite laws against the distribution of such explicit material.

Laaksonen's pictures fuelled both the sexual fantasies and the aesthetic of many gay men. The fetish for police and military uniforms and the leather-clad look - often including a cap, chaps and biker jacket - worn by Freddie Mercury, Frankie Goes to Hollywood and, of course, Glenn Hughes, the leatherman from the Village People, was directly inspired by his work. Initially drawing men in riding breeches and army officers in brown leather bomber jackets, he got into the biker look after seeing Marlon Brando in *The Wild One*. Thereafter, says Durk Dehner, a Canadian friend of Laaksonen's and now the custodian of his work, Laaksonen and the nascent gay leather scene would inspire one another. Laaksonen would draw his fantasies and send them to friends. They would get a tailor to replicate the garments in the pictures, photograph themselves in them, and send the pictures back to the artist. "Then he'd get more ideas - it was evolving," says Dehner.

Yet, while they were avowedly pornographic, there was a subversion to the images, too. "In his drawings he's basically ridiculing the authorities," says Dome Karukoski, director of the Tom of Finland film. "The cops are beating [gays] in the park and then he's inviting them for sex."

"What he represents to us is freedom," says Dehner. He runs the Tom of Finland Foundation, which is based in his and Laaksonen's house in the Echo Park district of Los



Fantasy and humour ... below, Touko Laaksonen in Los Angeles circa 1984; above, his illustrations



Angeles. "There was a French contemporary photographer I saw at an exhibition of Tom's work and she was radiant. I asked her to share what she was feeling and she said: 'Here's a man who did not inhibit what was in his heart.'" Or, indeed, his pants.

While Laaksonen's fantasies were fuelled by his experiences in the second world war (the Finns fought on the side of the Nazis; although he despised the ideology, Laaksonen admitted to loving the jackboots), he was anti-racist, depicting interracial gay couplings when they were taboo.

It's this playful rebelliousness that has made Laaksonen's work resonate beyond the audience for which it was intended. "In Finland, you can see 15-year-old

girls walking around with Tom of Finland T-shirts," says Karukoski. "It's cool, it's sexy, it's edgy, the drawings are magnificent - there's something about the attitude that also entices young women." The audience for his film, he says, was 65% female.

Laaksonen died of emphysema in 1991, aged 71. He had been unknown to most Finns until his obituary appeared in the Helsinki Times. An hour-long documentary, *Tom of Finland: Daddy and the Muscle Academy*, came out shortly after his death; now the artist's story has been told in Karukoski's film. Starring Pekka Strang in what the Finnish actor describes as "the role of a lifetime", the film takes us from Laaksonen's formative time in the army to his later years as a cult hero. "It's almost a Superman story, where the Clark Kent that works in an ad agency wearing a suit comes to LA and puts his leather gear on - the hero's arrived!" says Karukoski.

Like Laaksonen, Karukoski is Finnish; very much unlike the artist, he is heterosexual (as is Strang), although he tried hard to get in the right frame of mind. "In a way, [making the film] was me just watching very hot guys for five years," says the director. "I look at a man differently now. I see different elements in his beauty, his sexuality. Of course I would never understand the appraisal of the dick in an erotic way, but then again ..."

Considering the film's subject matter, it actually contains very little sex. Instead, much of the film focuses on the struggles Laaksonen endured as a gay man in conservative Finland, from facing jail as a young man after a pick-up went awry, to facing constant pressure from his younger sister never to express his true identity, since she believed it would bring shame on the family. "Even when I told her about him being accepted into the permanent collection at MoMA, her response was: 'Well, what were they thinking?'" says Dehner, still hurt by the memory. The film, he says, is "touching - how terrible society has been to us and how conditional the love is from family members".

Dehner fell in love with Laaksonen's work aged 26 when he saw it in a New York leather bar. He wrote a fan letter inviting him to the US. He became, he says, Laaksonen's "business partner, his publicist, his best friend, his confidant, his muse, his pimp, his sex partner". Although not life partner - that was Finnish dancer Veli Mäkinen, with whom the artist spent 28 years until Mäkinen's death from throat cancer in 1981, and whose story is explored in Karukoski's film.

The Tom of Finland stamps issued by the Finnish postal service were a runaway hit. "Finns absolutely love the fact that they could mail a postcard to someone they knew in Russia with a butt on it," Dehner says. "Of course Tom would have been tickled."

He says his main issue with the film, on which Dehner was a consultant but had no artistic control, is that Strang doesn't smile enough - "He smiled a whole bunch more." Laaksonen "was understated but not insecure at all, very self-assured and humour was a big part", Dehner says. Then there's the styling: "I think that Tom's leathers could have fitted him a little tighter, a little better in the film. Jean Paul Gaultier whispered in my ear at the premiere: 'If you do another production, please ask me to be involved.'"

Dehner's dream is for a Broadway musical about Laaksonen's life to be staged. In the meantime, he nurtures gay artists at the Tom of Finland Foundation. Called Tom's House, it is crammed with Laaksonen's drawings and decor. In true Laaksonen style, it also boasts a dungeon, a must-visit for Tom's international army of fans. As Karukoski tells me: "I'm sure if you want to they can show you the games."