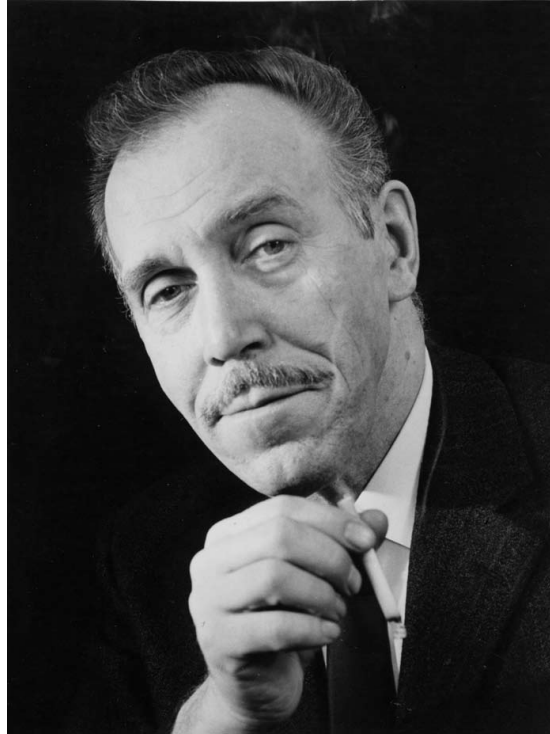


Rose, Aaron, "Tom of Finland," *ANP Quarterly*, no. 10, 2008



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tom of finland

Words by Aaron Rose

Captions by Durk Dehner

Images courtesy of the Tom of Finland Foundation, Los Angeles

I've recently found myself increasingly interested in what I like to call "alternative" art worlds. I use the word *alternative* because I'm referring to networks that exist apart and away from the mainstream art market, a system comprised of auction houses, major museums, etc., but at the same time still hold major social and financial weight in the culture at large. These markets, which are comprised of sizeable networks of galleries, fans, and collectors can be quite substantial (supporters numbering in the millions of people) and quite profitable (grossing millions of dollars) have always been an inspiration to me. It is in this context that I would like to begin talking about the artist Tom of Finland. Not necessarily because I want to focus on his "market value," but more because he is an artist who, via a worldwide underground network, has managed to become perhaps one of the most iconic visual artists of the 20th Century, while still remaining to this day, for the most part, ignored by the mainstream art world.

Tom of Finland fits squarely within the confines of this definition not only because of the highly erotic and controversial nature of his images, but because his prolific career of over 40 years, while not entirely unnoticed (his work is collected widely and held in many museum collections), has still yet to break through into any part of the academic mainstream. Is it the sex? Maybe. Perhaps though it has more to do with the fact that he lived his life and ran his career through a vast subcultural network comprised not only of art galleries and collectors, but also through the venues of comic books, magazines, calendars, posters, and low-cost editions. Plus, in addition to traditional art patrons, especially in his early years, his work was collected just as much by people who were considered by society as lowlifes and sexual deviants. That doesn't always fly with the cocktail set.

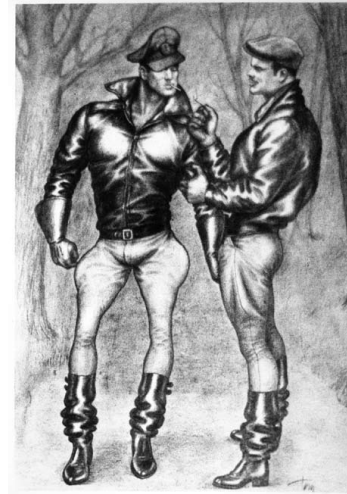
The first time I saw one of Tom of Finland's artworks was on a t-shirt worn by Sid Vicious in a Sex Pistols photo I had as a teenager. I can't remember exactly what the image was, but I believe it depicted two policemen having sex with each other. Like most teenagers I was pretty impressionable and I remember the artwork feeling incredibly dangerous and subversive. Of course I had no idea who drew it, it was just a Sex Pistols shirt to me, but that first viewing experience solidified in me a feeling that this artist was someone that I needed to follow...and each and every time I saw one of those works since then (even as I write this article!), that same "I'm being bad" sensation came back to me.

Years later I was researching the fashion designer Vivienne Westwood and learned that the t-shirt Sid Vicious was wearing in that photo was in fact produced in the late-1970s by Sex, a shop on the Kings Road in London that Westwood ran with her then-husband, Malcolm McLaren. I also learned for the first time that the artist who drew it was named Tom of Finland. Tom of Finland? What kind of name was that? That had to be a joke. Well it turns out that it wasn't, and in fact that funny name belonged to an artist whose personal history is as layered and subversive as his artwork. Upon further research I discovered that over the course of four decades he produced some 3,500 illustrations, mostly featuring men with exaggerated primary and secondary sex traits: heavily muscled torsos, limbs, buttocks and improbably large penises. But that's only part of the story...



(clockwise from top left) *Untitled*, 1947, Gouache on paper. Tom was enjoying the idea of stylizing clothes on men. It reflects the usage of motorcycle and military gear for civilian pleasures...an effete period in Tom's life exploring sexual adventures. *Untitled*, 1954, Graphite on paper. This drawing shows the combination of traditional men's apparel with military influences and Tom's persuasion that clothes look a lot better when they form fit his men. This is the look that soon would be the gear that everyone who was into being a "leatherguy" would have done in black leather across Europe, North America and down under in Australia, South Africa. Touko Laaksonen with his platoon in WWII (on right).

(previous spread, from left) *Sex in the Shed*, 1975, Gouache on paper (The character in the t-shirt is Pekka). *Tom of Finland*, 1977. Photo taken at McCann Erickson's Helsinki Bureau where Tom was the advertising director.



Tom of Finland's real name is Touko Laaksonen. He was born on May 8, 1920, on the south coast of Finland. Finland had been an independent country for just three years when Touko was born, and apart from its few major cities the landscape was still quite rustic. Both his parents were schoolteachers, and they raised Touko indoors in an atmosphere of art, literature and music. Obviously talented, by the time he was five he was playing the piano and drawing comic strips. He loved art, literature and music. Oral history reports that Touko began making sketches at a very young age (some say he was drawing portraits by age five), but unfortunately none of these drawings were saved. He liked the comic-book format, and his earliest works as a child were drawn in this style. As an interesting side note, Laaksonen did say in interviews that his early drawings were inspired by and often depicted the lumberjacks and outdoorsmen that lived around him. It was during these early years that he began to question his sexuality. Both the logger and the cowboy (both of which were in high concentration where Laaksonen lived) are very powerful male stereotypes. When these ultra-masculine archetypes are set as the ideal it can become very difficult for a young boy (especially if he is a creative type) to live up to. This situation became especially complicated because he was attracted to them at the same time. It is quite possible that those early sexual drawings he produced are based in this dichotomy and in the artist's attempt to make peace with those feelings. Still, as a teenager Laaksonen tried to fit in with heterosexual norms, he had girlfriends in high school and even experimented with sex, but his problem was that none of the sex or relationships he had in high school were nearly as exciting as the fantasies he could draw.

In 1939, he made his choice. He was going to be an artist. He applied to the best art school in Helsinki and was accepted. Helsinki at the time was an amazing place for him. The city was a full-fledged modern metropolis and could not have been more different from the place he grew up. Majoring in advertising, he immediately threw himself into his studies. In his mind advertising made sense because he could learn all about art and develop as an artist, while still maintaining a solid foundation for a sensible career. However after a short time he realized that school wasn't all that it was cracked up to be. In his words,

I was so naive! Studying advertising was not what I expected it to be at all. I was burning with desire to be a real artist and all they were teaching me was business, business, business!

He began to withdraw from his schoolmates and sequester himself in his studio making drawings. These were not works for his advertising studies however, they were for his eyes only...what he privately referred to as his "secret drawings" or "dirty drawings." These drawings became his refuge from school, the loneliness of the city, and the harsh reality that life was not always as it appeared in his fantasies. Instead of just drawing farmers and lumberjacks, he began adding city types into his drawings. Construction workers, street punks and policemen became common subjects in his work during this time.

However, soon after he began school, Stalin invaded Finland, and the country became embroiled in the Winter War with the USSR, and then soon after, formally involved in World War II. In early 1940, Laaksonen was conscripted into the Finnish Army where he served as an anti-aircraft officer, holding the rank of a second lieutenant. It was here that his first came in contact with the men in uniform that would play such a large role in his subject matter for the rest of his life. He attributed his drawings and fetishistic interest in uniformed men to encounters with men in army uniform at this time.

Rose, Aaron, "Tom of Finland," *ANP Quarterly*, no. 10, 2008

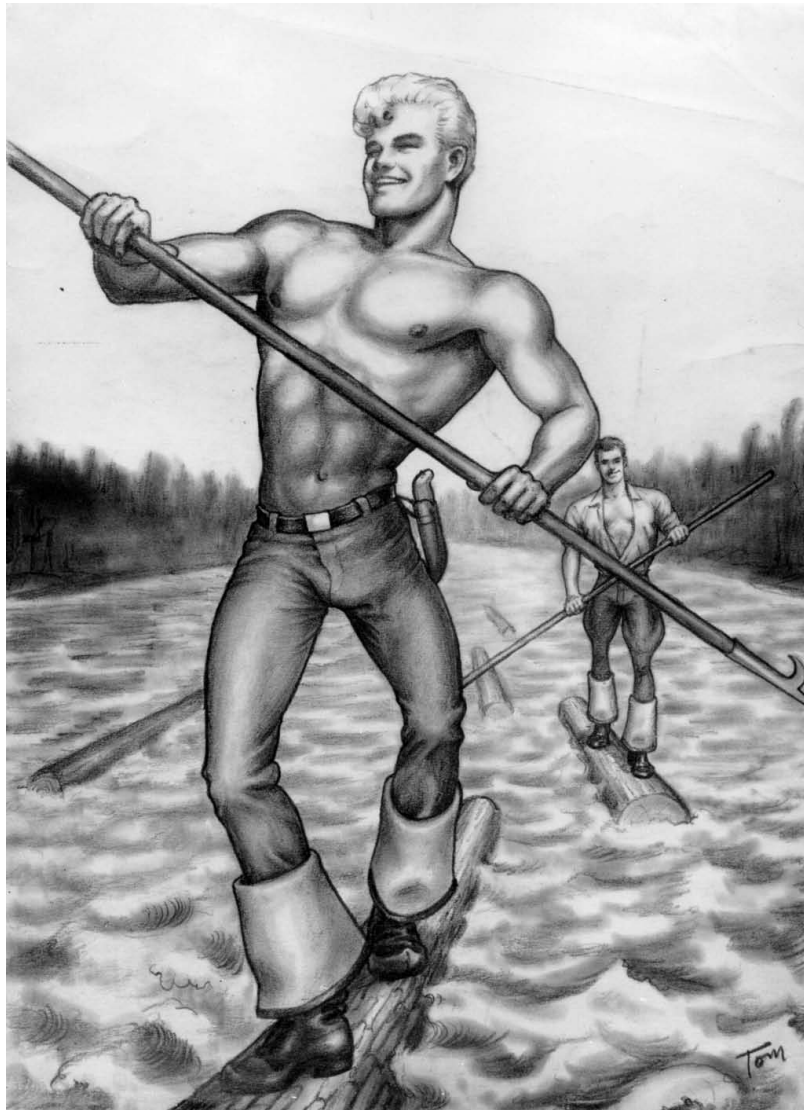
Sometimes the attraction to the uniform is so powerful in me that I feel as though I am making love to the clothes, and the man inside them is just a convenience to hold them up and fill them out—sort of an animated display rack.

Hitler's army at the time was involved in other battles, so Finland was relatively quiet fighting-wise while Laaksonen was in the army. There was ample leisure time to lounge around with other soldiers and he found much inspiration for his drawings at this time. However, because he was almost constantly in the company of his fellow soldiers (sleeping, eating together), he was rarely able to make any of these drawings a reality. They were still "secret" to him, and he dared not get caught. As a partial release, and so as to not let his drawing skills get too rusty, he would from time to time draw pencil and ink drawings of his buddies. Ironically, most of these wartime drawings were sent home to girlfriends, wives and mothers.

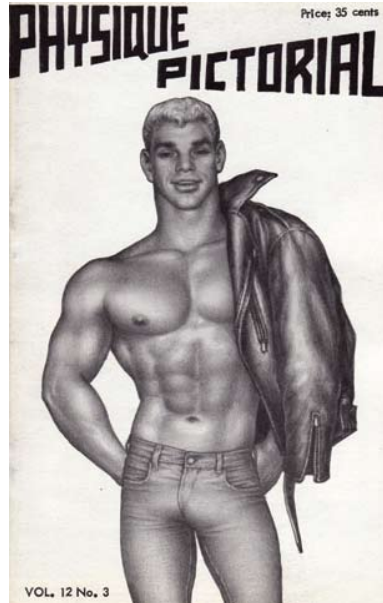
Strict curfews were imposed over most of Europe at that time, so the darkness became a sort of playground for Tom. For some

reason, war and the threat of death are aphrodisiacs for many people, so many indulge in behavior that in peacetime would be considered promiscuous. In the streets of the pitch-black city, he began to have anonymous sex with other soldiers, many of whom were officers in Hitler's army. As a result of these experiences he began to feature Nazi officers in his drawings. This led to some controversy later on in his life, some calling him a Nazi sympathizer. This however could not have been further from the truth. The basic fact is that he drew them because he liked the uniforms.

In 1941 America entered the war, and by 1945 the war was all but over in Finland. After the war, Laaksonen returned to civilian life and after a brief period of indecision, enrolled himself back in school. He had always had a love for music, so he would study advertising by day and music at night. He even took a job playing piano at a local cocktail bar. The best of all the things that peacetime brought for Laaksonen was privacy. Finally he could get back to his drawings! He had over five years worth of ideas stored up inside him and he was eager to let them out.



Cover drawing for *Physique Pictorial*, Spring 1957. This next piece is the first published work of Tom's. Bob Mizer, the man behind *Physique Pictorial*, was a man of honor and integrity with Tom. (See *Beefcake* the documentary). Bob Mizer and Tom of Finland had many aspects in common. Both were master craftsmen in their respective fields. Mizer was an excellent and talented photographer, and Tom in his ability to bring men alive through the pencil. Both men had great humor which they used in their work.



Assorted *Physique Pictorial* Covers (1957-1959) by Tom of Finland

(opposite, clockwise from top left)
Back cover of *Physique Pictorial* Volume 13, number 4

Haberdashery, 1959, Graphite on paper.

Bar Scene, 1964, Graphite on paper.

It was almost as though there were a separate spirit inside of me, urging me back to work, back to my art. I would feel this spirit again in the future, always coming to me when I was depressed, pushing me back to life.

Homosexual behavior and other "acts against nature" were still highly illegal in almost every country in the world at that time. To avoid arrest many gay men affected effeminate roles for themselves. A cop could not bust you for "acting" female, so many gay men hid behind this facade. Laaksonen began to frequent the bars in Helsinki that catered to these types, but he never felt completely comfortable there. He was interested in "real" men, both sexually and for artistic inspiration and he was not finding it in the bar scene. Again, feeling lost and out of place he retreated back into his room, preferring to live with his pencil and paper fantasies.

Out of school and now entering his thirties; He was working in two professions, music and art. By day he freelanced in advertisement illustration, magazine and newspaper layout, and window display. At night, on the piano, he became one of Helsinki's most popular entertainers. The 1950s had begun, and although still quite repressed by today's standards, some things were beginning to open up.

Due to his frequent travels for his advertising work, he became very familiar with the gay cruising areas found in every major city. Covert liaisons with men became a part of his life and through these encounters he began to feel more comfortable to share his "dirty drawings" with men he met. It was through these men that Laaksonen received his first positive feedback for his artwork. Erotic art drawn with skill was practically non-existent at the time, and one could not help but be amazed by the incredible talent this man possessed. When he traveled, he carried two suitcases. One for his clothes and one filled with drawings. Wherever he went, they went...often times sneaking them through customs. Many times he carried them simply as a seduction tool, but slowly but surely, while still very underground, his work began to build up a devoted private audience of international fans.

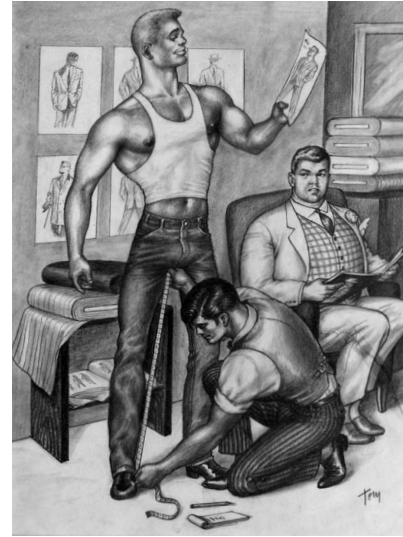
While pornography (especially gay porn) was still outlawed, a few small publications had begun to surface. These magazines, which were really no more than mimeographed and stapled pamphlets, were quite hard to come by, but still, change was in the air. Also, the 1950s brought a new type of publication to the mainstream...muscle magazines. Bodybuilders like Charles Atlas had been offering photographs of muscle-bound men since the 1920s, but in the 1950s the culture went mass-market, creating a voracious appetite and a plethora of magazines dedicated to the subject. While these magazines were (at least on the surface) geared towards straight men, it was the gay community who were perhaps their biggest subscribers. Laaksonen would vigorously search for these magazines, sometimes traveling all over Europe just to find them.

At the end of 1956, at the urging of a friend, Laaksonen submitted some of his homoerotic drawings to the influential American muscle magazine *Physique Pictorial* for publication consideration. However, being cautious in those paranoid times, and thinking that "Touko Laaksonen" was too tough a name for American audiences, he signed them under the pseudonym "Tom," as it resembled his given name "Touko." Bob Mizer, the editor of the magazine loved the drawings and chose a few for publication. In fact, it was Mizer who changed his name to Tom of Finland. The rest is history. The cover of the spring, 1957 issue of *Physique Pictorial* featured a Tom of Finland drawing of a laughing lumberjack. Needless to say, it was a sensation. The response was immediate, electrifying and international. Drawings such as these had not been seen before on a mainstream level and legions of gay men immediately stood up and took notice. His work spoke to developing young men who were queer and spotted Tom's work like a beacon, from New York City on newstands to the smallest little drugstores in remote towns in Texas. Tom gave them the clear message that they were healthy and natural and would develop into men like their heterosexual friends and brothers. Some described their first viewing of Tom's drawings as a "watershed moment" in their lives. Why? Although certain types of gay erotica did exist before that point, the subjects were not pictured in the same loving way as straight porn. There was always shame attached. It was very important to Tom that his subjects be proud of themselves and he always portrayed them as having a good time. His ability to make a drawing simultaneously sexy and funny was a real talent, and when it hit, it hit hard. In his words:

In those days, a gay man was made to feel nothing but shame about his feelings and sexuality. I wanted my drawings to counteract that, to show gay men being happy and positive about who they were.



Why is this big guy getting an old fashioned spanking? He has just wrecked his buddy's motorcycle! See page 2 of this book for details about the Tom series "The Corleau Cycle"



Also, because Tom's drawings were not overtly "sexual" in the pornographic sense, he could get them past censors...but they were certainly identifiably homosexual to anyone who had inklings towards that way of life. Previous "physique art" had always tried to pretend that the world and everyone in it was heterosexual, but not Tom's. It was almost as though they spoke in a secret code, a code that most certainly resonated with viewers all over the world. Suddenly collectors and fans worldwide wanted Tom of Finland drawings and the editors of *Physique Pictorial* began to field numerous requests for private commissions of his work.

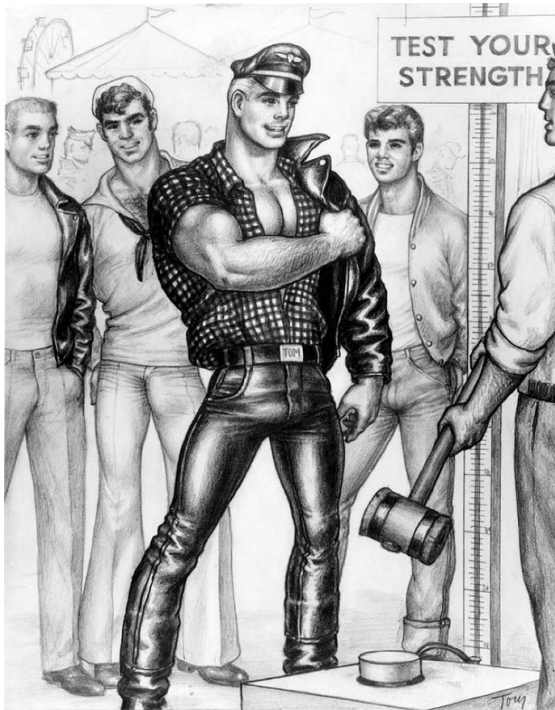
However, neither erotic art nor homosexual art paid very well in the Fifties. He eventually stopped playing the piano in order to devote more time to his drawing, but he continued to work in advertising, living a double life as commercial artist by day and Tom of Finland by night. Still, his private commissions grew. In addition to sales to wealthy collectors, Tom created drawings for numerous publications around the world. His largest commission of the time filled the entire long wall beside a swimming pool in a luxurious bathhouse in Hamburg. Works for private collectors could be as wild as Tom's (or the client's) imaginations could muster, but still, drawings intended for publication had to be "desexualized." Tom loved to push the envelope of just how much he could get away with...constantly challenging the censorship board...but he found this very frustrating.

Following other people's rules was always hard for me. I already had my own set of rules, my own limits. No blood, no cutting of the body or breaking bones, etc. I had enough of that in the war.

This was the era of Marlon Brando, James Dean and films like *A Rebel Without a Cause*. These new biker/rebel stereotypes were very exciting for Tom and he began to draw characters that looked like these movie stars. Tom always added a little twist though, changing small details in a humorous fashion. For instance, instead of drawing a specific type of policeman, he would change his badge to say things like "Tom's Cops" or he would change the brand insignia on the gas tank or license plate of a motorcycle to a logo of his name. His work was constantly filled with little inside jokes like these. Elements that added again to the lighthearted humor and fun that permeates his works.

Because the censorship rules in England were more lax than the rest of Europe, some of Tom's biggest collectors during this time were in Great Britain. One of Tom's most frequent patrons was the physique photographer Tom Nicoli. When Nicoli offered Tom a chance to visit London, he quickly jumped on the offer. Upon arriving in London, the two embarked on a series of collaborations with a "biker" theme and it was in fact, in London that Tom bought his first leather motorcycle jacket. His exposure to Nicoli, and his use of photography inspired him to begin drawing from photographs of live models. The two of them would go to Hyde Park together and ask subjects to pose for them. Once Tom began drawing from photographs his improvement as an artist was so dramatic that he rarely went back to drawing solely from his imagination.





Test Your Strength, 1961,
Graphite on paper.

Untitled (from Kake), 1962,
graphite on paper.

(opposite)
Untitled (from Kake), 1962,
graphite on paper.
The Cop writing the ticket
has such defined exactness.
Its rendering and the
characterization of the biker
are so easy to interpret.
In Tom's stories almost
anything could happen.
Since he was a child he
could tell a story without
words in only a few panels.

While Tom's career as an artist was taking off, he still wasn't making as much money as he probably could have been. He fit the standard artist stereotype of the "unworldly fellow with no head for business." Because of this his financial dealings suffered. Tom never knew what to charge for a drawing, so many times he would put the decision of how much to pay for a work in the hands of the buyer. As a result of this he was constantly underpaid. That said, he still remained on the defensive about the prices he charged, claiming that he felt like he didn't expect more than he was getting. Because homosexuality was still forbidden in the Western world, and dealing these drawings was illegal, secured only on the black market, he didn't think he could ask for more. Although he wished he could be making enough from his artwork to do it full time, it just wasn't possible in his mind. In 1958 he made a decision. He put on a suit and tie and took a full time job as an artist for McCann-Erickson, a major advertising agency. While there he worked on graphic arts for major accounts such as Coca Cola and Phillips. His specialty, of course, was drawing people and many times, because of advertising trends at the time, he was asked to execute illustrations of "happy families." It was not uncommon however for the clients to send back his drawings for re-rendering because the daddies were "too sexy." Nevertheless, as would be expected with a talent like his, he excelled in that world and was eventually promoted to head art director for the company.

Enter the 1960s. While the fabled "hippy counterculture" did not really come into existence until much later in the decade, the seeds of the sexual revolution were already beginning to sprout as early as the late 1950s. Perhaps the most recognizable side effect of this was the loosening of censorship laws. This was felt first in Europe and then in the United States. In 1965, a small magazine called *Drum* published the first full-frontal male nudity and by the end of the decade the only major publishing restrictions that were enforced were laws against child pornography. Ironically, none of this change of tide had much effect on Tom's subject matter. He had already been drawing sexually graphic illustrations for years and the fact that the world was catching up didn't really faze him. However, one benefit of these loosening of restrictions was that Tom could freely publish his drawings. In 1957, he was approached by the Danish printing firm D.F.T., who was one of many small publishing houses who took advantage of the loosening of laws to publish small comic books of a sexual nature. Tom was asked by the company's

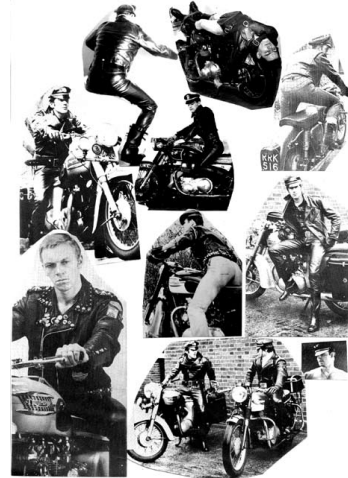
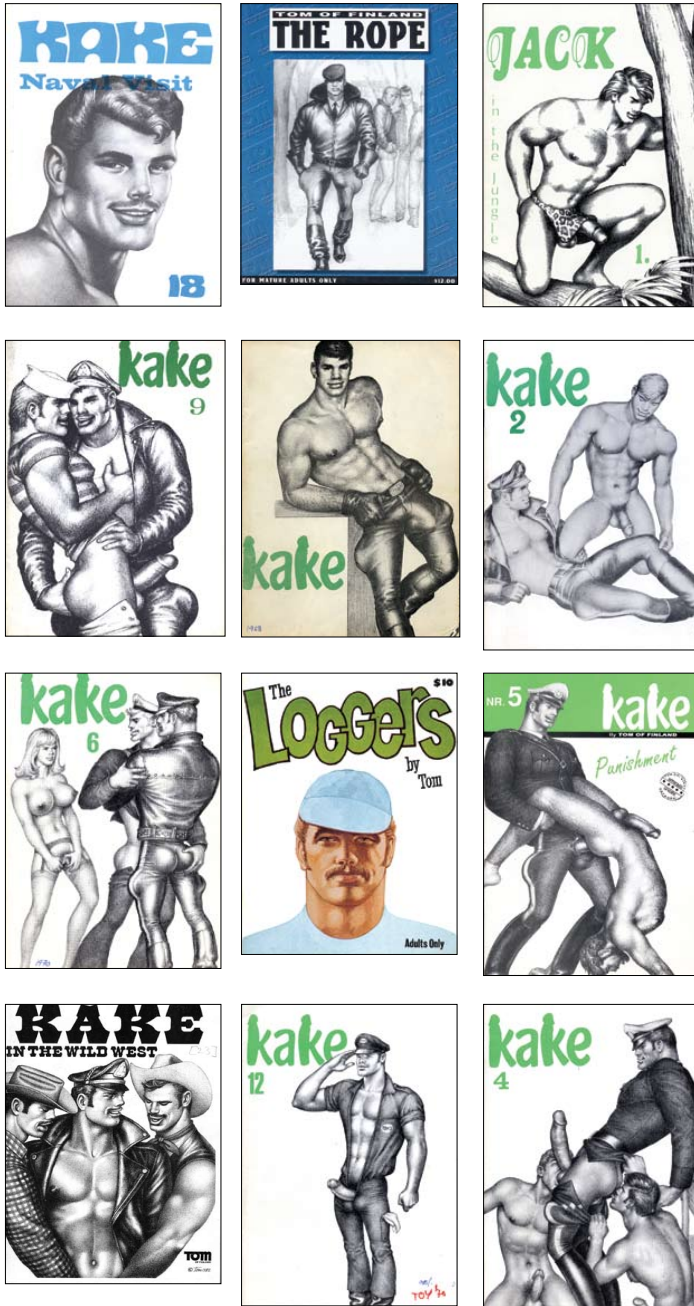
president to create a collection of comic books. The series, which Tom titled *Kake* (pronounced KAH-keh), featured the adventures of an oversexed, over-endowed motorcycle rider dressed head to foot in black leather. The books were an immediate international success and, Kake, the story's main character became a pin-up icon for the gay culture worldwide. By the end of the 1960s, Tom had produced over fifteen thirty-two-page stories. Surprisingly, all this loosening of restrictions and new publishing ventures did not necessarily translate to an increased income for Tom. The *Kake* comics paid quite poorly, and although the laws had loosened in terms of subject matter this did not necessarily mean that more drawings were commissioned. In spite of the sexual revolution Tom was still stuck at his day job in advertising in order to make ends meet. This, however, would soon change.

In 1970, Michael Holm, who had been Tom's editor at D.F.T. started a new company called Revolt Press. He immediately asked Tom to create a series of comics for this new company and Tom was ecstatic. Under the new banner of Revolt Press, he was promised considerably better pay and his originals were to be well cared for. He made three more *Kake* comics, this time going for a larger, full-color format and also began a new series featuring a sex-crazed lumberjack named "Pekka." Because these new publications were in color, they required much more time to execute and Tom was beginning to feel the pressure of balancing his new art career with his day job. In 1973, he took a careful survey of his finances, and because he was now making more money, decided to quit his job in advertising and devote his life full time to his artwork.

Once he could devote his efforts full-time to his drawing, his work grew exponentially. Tom combined photorealistic attention to detail with his wildest sexual fantasies to produce a body of work that, for sheer technique and eroticism, surpassed anything he had done prior. He developed a three-step process for creating his works. The first stage consisted of very generalized sketches to play with ideas for the picture's story and to work out the composition. These were done extremely free-hand, sometimes consisting of just a few pencil strokes. Second, the individual details of a piece were worked out. Sometimes this was done in a series of small, separate drawings, which were later applied to the composition. Many of the inspirations for these drawings came from what Tom called his "archive." The archive was essentially a series of scrapbooks

Rose, Aaron, "Tom of Finland," *ANP Quarterly*, no. 10, 2008





Assorted Covers from 1960s-1980s

Assorted Collage Works

These collage pages are as Tom made them, as reference binders, mixed with some photos of models and some clipped directly from magazines. Some very sexy guys are in these binders dedicated to the learning of the form and expression of the body and soul of the male.

Rose, Aaron, "Tom of Finland," *ANP Quarterly*, no. 10, 2008

bursting with photographs he had cut from newspaper clippings, magazines, or any other source that had a face, a butt, or any other body part that Tom thought he could use later. Many times Tom worked directly over these archive images with a pencil, comically adding such elements as a moustache, boots, clothing and bulging erections.

When I have been commissioned to do a portrait, I take or get several photographs from various angles because even though the drawing will be done only from one angle, one photograph doesn't give you all the information you need.

Once Tom was satisfied with all the various components of a composition, he would combine all the individual elements onto the final work. He would then render the finished drawing in graphite (his favored medium), pencil, ink, watercolor or tempera depending on what the subject called for. The finished drawing was then signed and dated.

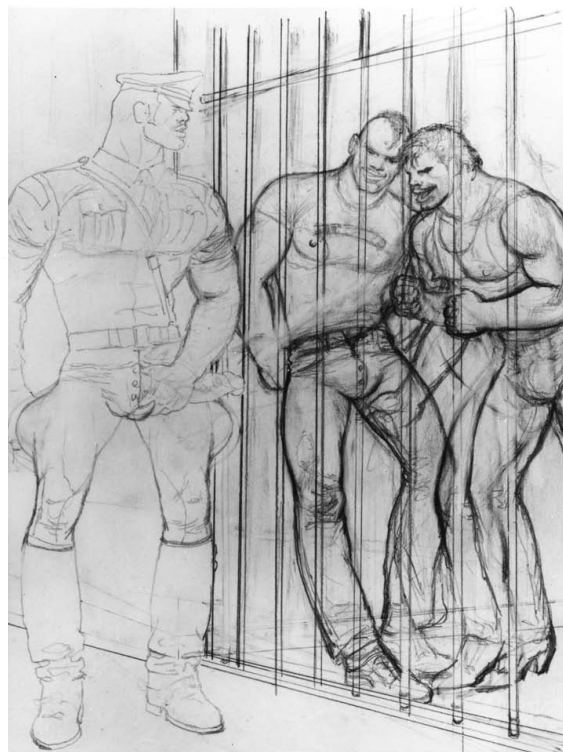
Around this time, Revolt Press opened a small bookstore in Hamburg's red-light district. In a small back room of the shop, Tom was asked to exhibit the original drawings from his *Loggers* series. This would be his first public exhibition and although the show was badly installed and poorly lit, he was excited to display his works for a public audience. Unfortunately his excitement was short lived. The guy who ran the shop thought it too dangerous to keep the originals there, so he took them somewhere in Düsseldorf for "safe-keeping." This would be the last Tom ever saw of these originals (it was discovered much later that the works were all sold behind Tom's back). As a result of this it would be five years before he consented to another exhibition.

This setback aside, Tom's career did not appear to be slowing down. Soon after his exhibition in Hamburg, two wealthy German collectors asked him to do several large-scale wall murals for a bar they were opening. Christened "Tom's Saloon" in honor of him, the walls of the establishment were essentially covered in huge blow-ups of Tom's drawings. The bar quickly became an international sensation and led to the murals being copied worldwide. In fact in the late-1970s, a Tom of Finland drawing was quickly becoming almost essential decoration for any gay bar around the world. One could even credit Tom with inadvertently influencing a worldwide dress style for gay men. Starting in the 1970s, just after the historic Stonewall Riots of 1969, many gay men began wearing leather and denim as a de rigueur outfit. There is no doubt that Tom of Finland's drawings played a huge part in this cultural phenomenon. This was a "new" gay man, not feminine like the gay stereotypes of the past...these guys were real men, just like the characters Tom had been drawing for years and this masculine style for homosexual men continues today.

Through a work contact in Europe, Tom was introduced to two men in Los Angeles that ran a small art gallery called Eons. They approached him with the idea of creating a Tom of Finland calendar for the year 1978. Of course Tom accepted the offer...it was too good to pass up. One of the conditions of the offer was that Tom travel over for an exhibition of the original drawings in Los Angeles. He created thirteen original drawings (twelve months plus the cover) for the calendar and got ready to go. At the age of fifty-seven, Tom was able to finally make his first trip to America. He had fantasized about the United States since he was very young and he was thrilled to arrive. When he landed in Los Angeles, he was completely blown away by the size of the city! He had traveled extensively throughout Europe, but this city was a whole different ballgame. While in the city, he was to stay with Durk Dehner, a complete stranger who Tom had only met through correspondence. Dehner was a young model that worked under the pseudonym "Jonathan From Hawaii." He was muscular, blonde, and looked very much like someone Tom would have been drawing. Needless to say, Tom was thrilled. Dehner's home in the Silverlake area of L.A. was in Tom's mind "very Hollywood" and the two spent most nights hitting the leather bars in the area. Durk also arranged to have custom leather gear made for Tom, which was ready for him just in time, the day before his gallery opening.

On the night of Tom's exhibit at Eons Gallery, crowds converged on the little space. He was a bonified celebrity amongst the gay community in Los Angeles and supporters came out in droves to catch a glimpse of a Tom of Finland original. It was all very exciting. Soon after, Feyway Studios, a gallery in San Francisco asked Tom to exhibit the thirteen drawings. Durk offered his hospitality again and for the second time in six months, Tom was back in America. For the exhibition's opening, the director threw a small preview party. One of the attendees was the artist who was scheduled to have the show following Tom's, a young photographer from New York named Robert Mapplethorpe. Mapplethorpe asked Tom to sit for a portrait and urged him to come to New York for an exhibition. Tom was growing quite fond of America and an offer to come to New York City was just too good to refuse.

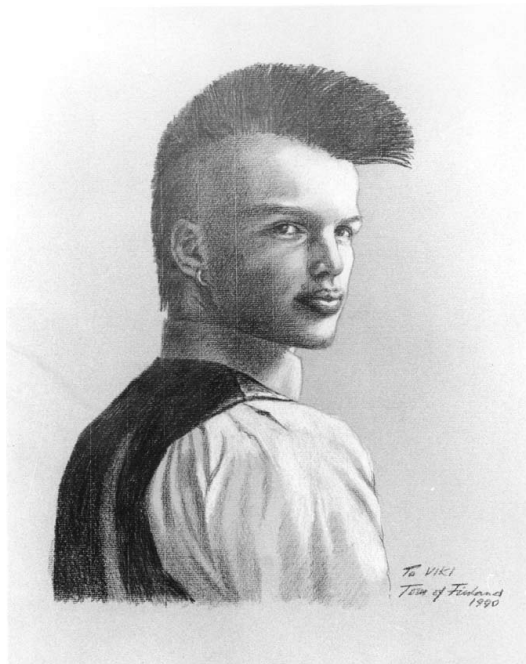
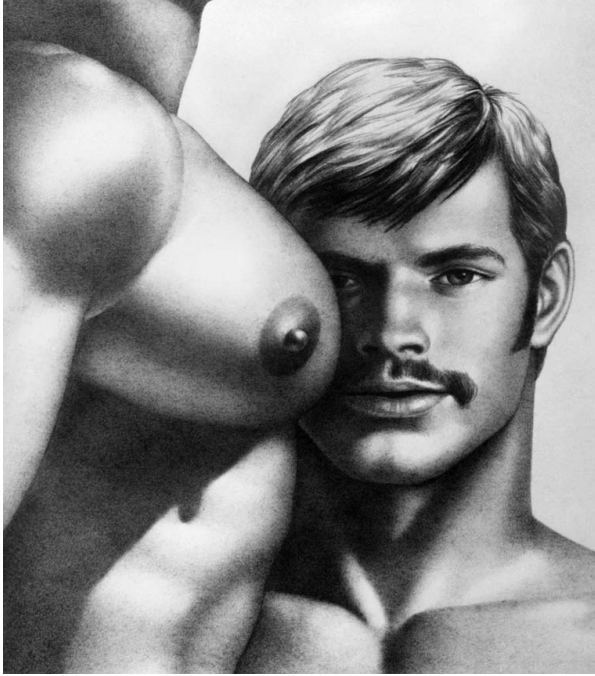
In 1978, upon arriving in New York, Tom was greeted at the airport by Durk Dehner and an entourage of bikers in full leather gear. They had all come on bikes, so driving into the city he felt like he had a full motorcycle escort. Dehner had arranged Tom's New York exhibition and Tom was to share the gallery with one of his heroes, the artist Etienne (another erotic artist who had much fame at the time). When Tom arrived at the gallery he saw that the exhibition space was, again, not much more than the back room of a store called Stompers which sold new and used boots. However, this time he was in the heart of Greenwich Village, the center of New York City's gay scene. When he saw the guest list he couldn't believe it! Celebrities like Andy Warhol,



Untitled (Peter Berlin), 1978. Rough sketch
This rough sketch was done with Peter Berlin having commissioned Tom to do a four-panel set of him being the sexy narcissist that he was, strutting the streets of Europe and America in pursuit of himself.

Jailhouse, 1987. Rough sketch.

Rose, Aaron, "Tom of Finland," *ANP Quarterly*, no. 10, 2008



The drawing (left top) was done in 1979 and was displayed at the Robert Samuel Gallery exhibition in New York. The boy with the officer's cap was done in 1981. He was a Finnish model of Tom's. The other two are very special for they are of Viki, who I found tending bar in Helsinki and he became the one person who attended to Tom's needs for companionship and errand running, and was the guardian of Tom's well being when times were such that I couldn't stay in Finland and care for Tom during his slow demise to death's door. I honor Viki for being dependable to Tom and myself. Tom truly adored the boy for all he gave to Tom freely. They enjoyed each other's company a lot.

(opposite) *Untitled*, 1973. Graphite on paper. The "three bikers" was contemporary then and still is today. Tom was known for putting his name or a sign of himself somewhere in his drawings...so there was a whole universe created with Tom's name or one of his character's names branded in the uniform, the vehicles, the town. *Untitled*, 1970. Graphite on paper. The leather jailor was the first Tom image I ever saw. It was being used as a flyer to promote a bike run of a NYC Motorcycle Clubs function. I compulsively took the last flyer off the bulletin board and coveted it for it was the sexiest image I had ever laid my eyes on and it eventually lead me to meeting Tom.

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Gore Vidal, and Halston were scheduled to attend. Apparently Warhol already owned quite a few Tom of Finland originals. He met up with Robert Mapplethorpe and he showed Tom around the city as well as the wild bar scene of Greenwich Village. The exhibition opened to great success. So much so, that he was asked back to do a solo show the following year at Robert Samuel Gallery, a large space on Broadway.

Tom returned to Finland and began busily working on new works for his show. While in New York, he had turned the tables on Mapplethorpe and taken a photograph of him, which he then transformed into a drawing for the upcoming exhibition. Tom was very excited about the work he was doing. It was not long before Tom was back in New York preparing the exhibition. His last trip had been a wild time, hanging out with Mapplethorpe and going to bars. However, this trip was different. The gallery was the most professional Tom had ever exhibited in. He was treated "first class" all the way, put up in a fancy apartment and invited to expensive dinners. The opening night of Tom's exhibit at Robert Samuel Gallery was a black tie event and most of the works had pre-sold before the exhibition had even opened. Tom was on top of the world. He returned to Helsinki in very good spirits feeling like he was finally being treated with the respect he deserved.

I was very productive and I think that the forty-eight works that were exhibited in that gallery were among the best that I have ever done.

Soon after returning, Tom was approached by Dehner with an idea. Apparently there were hundreds of unsold Eons calendars left over in Durk's basement. What if they cut off the calendar parts and broke them up into sets? They could sell the prints as editions via mail order. Tom didn't know much about mail order, but Durk promised to take care of everything. Tom agreed and the sets were produced. Small

advertisements were placed in gay publications announcing the project. Called "Duos", the print sets were an immediate success and sold out almost immediately. Tom and Durk decided to try to print some editions on their own. Since Durk and Tom had been spending so much time together, Durk had learned quite a bit about Tom's career. He was saddened to hear from Tom that throughout his life he had not been treated very respectfully as an artist. Tom had rarely been paid what he deserved and many of Tom's greatest originals had been either stolen, pirated or lost. In addition, after over a year of waiting, Tom had never been paid for any of the work that he sold from his huge Robert Samuel Gallery show in New York. His many attempts at contacting them only produced dead air. To add insult to injury, it turned out that the "Robert" in Robert Samuel Gallery was in fact his supposed "friend" Robert Mapplethorpe, who was equally unresponsive to Tom's inquiries.

Durk wanted to change all this. He truly felt that Tom of Finland's art was important not only because of Tom's incredible talent, but that it was historically important to gay history. The first step was trying to secure the rights to Tom's past work. However, this was not as easy as it sounds. Many of Tom's originals had been sold direct from Tom without documentation. Additionally, the erotic publishing business attracted its fair share of scoundrels and mafiosos and a good majority of the works Tom had sent for publication over the years had never been returned. In response to this, in 1984, Tom and Durk decided to start the Tom of Finland Company, a publishing venture dedicated to producing only *official* Tom of Finland publications. Tom began spending more and more time in Los Angeles, working with Durk on new projects. Their first venture was a new comic, *Kabe in the Wild West*. It sold out quickly and more books were printed including reprints of older books *Highway Patrol* and *Service Station*, which were produced under the title, *Tom's Archives*.



It was an exciting time for Tom, he felt like he was being taken seriously and, in Durk, had found a real partner in arms.

Though at the time Tom was still spending half the year in Finland, his trips to Los Angeles became more and more frequent. The top floor of Durk's house in Silverlake was set up as Tom's room, with a corner set up with a desk for drawing. By 1985, the Tom of Finland Company was doing so well that Durk decided to try to expand and focus on another goal...a foundation. He wanted to start a non-profit organization that would concentrate solely on preserving Tom's works for history. The Tom of Finland Organization was established with three main goals: Preservation, Restoration and Exhibition of Tom's works. Over the years, Tom estimated he had created over three-thousand pieces, most of which were scattered around the globe. They certainly had their work cut out for them. Not only were the works lost or stolen, but even if they could track them down they had other obstacles. Because to many people who had them, the works weren't considered important art, many had not been cared for. Many drawings had been stapled, folded, taped or plain destroyed. Plus, Tom did not always use the most archival of materials, so the many times the paper had deteriorated significantly. That said they were able to rescue a considerable amount of works and as a result published a book called *Tom Of Finland: Retrospective*. For the book, Tom chose almost two hundred of his favorite works that spanned the years 1946-1987. It was a huge undertaking, but in the end it paid off. The book went on to sell over 25,000 copies... large numbers for any art-related book let alone one with subject matter as controversial as Tom of Finland!

The publication of the retrospective book boosted Tom even more into the spotlight. In a short time, his fans grew from what were for years primarily patrons in the gay community, to adulation from the establishment art world at large. He was offered more gallery exhibitions,



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each time in a more and more professional situation. One dealer in particular named Hudson, from the acclaimed Feature Inc. gallery in New York took a strong interest in Tom's works and became Tom's primary dealer. Additionally, during this time, Tom of Finland works appeared in the catalogs of Christie's auction house and were displayed at the Whitney Museum. Still, even with this growing success, in the 1980s' conservative art world, Tom's subject matter was many times too controversial to garner any real mainstream acclaim.

I know my little "dirty drawings" are never going to hang in the main salons of the Louvre, but it would be nice if—I would like to say 'when,' but I better say 'if'—our world learns to accept all the different ways of loving. Then maybe I could have a place in one of the smaller side rooms.

In 1987, Tom was diagnosed with emphysema. He was a chain smoker for over fifty years and it had finally caught up with him. His prognosis did not look good. Upon receiving this news he became more and more aware that his habits would have to change. He decided stop traveling the way he had and spend his last years back in Helsinki. He continued to draw, but due to his illness and the side effects of the drugs he required to treat it, his output became less and less. This pained him very much as drawing was his primary source

of enjoyment. In 1990, his emphysema coupled with the Finnish winter found Tom hospitalized. He was eventually released, but in a very frail state. He switched mediums from pencil and ink to pastels because they were easier to work with. He continued to produce for another year before being hospitalized again in 1991. After spending some time there he finally succumbed to his disease. On November 7, 1991, Tom of Finland died of an emphysema-induced stroke. He was 71 years old.

Though not widely spoken about, except in the company of close friends, Tom had always been interested in the spiritual side of things. Just before his death, he became even more interested in the supernatural. For an artist whose subject matter had always dealt so much with things in the physical plane this is very interesting. While for most people art is judged primarily on the basis its beauty or physical/aesthetic merit, it is important to remember that there are always other forces at play. He would often speak of a spirit that followed him around, watching him, guiding his life and his art.

Whenever I was depressed or disgusted, I would feel him, that spirit inside, urging me back to living, back to drawing. I believe there is a lot to the world that can't be seen or touched, and if you turn away from all that—especially if you are an artist—you are avoiding and important part of life, maybe the very heart of it.

Tom of Finland lived a life outside of the system...a system that, even though it has been over fifteen years since his death, is still reluctant to accept. Though there has definitely been a resurgence of interest in his work (recent book monographs as well as this article are case in point), Tom of Finland's works still seem to exist within the realms of this "parallel market" that I spoke of at the beginning of this article. For me this is a shame, because I truly believe he is one of the most interesting and inspiring artists of the 20th Century. His works do belong on the walls the Louvre, as well as on postcards, t-shirts, calendars, coffee mugs, perfume bottles, in books, magazines and anywhere else that art can invoke and inspire.

All images (c) The Tom of Finland Foundation. The *Tom of Finland Foundation* is still based in Los Angeles and managed by Durk Dehner. They are not only dedicated to preserving and promoting the work of Tom of Finland, but work hard to nourish the works and careers of younger artists who, even today, face many of the same issues that Tom faced in his life. You can learn more about them by visiting their website at: www.tomoffinland.org.

Untitled, 1981, Pastel on paper.

(opposite)
Untitled (*Punker*), 1987,
Graphite on paper.

