

The Homosexual World of Love and Ritual: Love and Painting in Britain, 1860–1920

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History of art – at least the history of modern art – has been much better at desire than love. The bibliography on desire and sexual relations in art is huge and distinguished, but it is much harder to think of pieces of scholarship that engage seriously with love with a similar theoretical and forensic intensity. The reasons for this are no doubt many, but some are obvious. In my own research field of homosexual and lesbian representation, and certainly in my own writing, the politics of activism and scholarship generated an emphasis on sexual arousal, sexual activity, indeed sexuality itself and the challenge to what Adrienne Rich famously called ‘compulsory heterosexuality’.¹ This has been exacerbated by the theoretical models that shaped the field: notably the first volume of Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, but also Freud and psychoanalysis, as well as varieties of Marxist or materialist analysis, all of which took sexuality and the regulation of desire as the central problem; and while love is related to desire, this was always a kind of adjunct or consequence of this central concern. There was also a wish to be radical. To talk of love was soppy or bourgeois or feeble, to talk about genitals and sexual acts was cool, and while more recent identitarian perspectives have adopted a different approach, the emphasis is still on the transgressive, with love remaining in second place.

But this is not just the fault of art historians. This might also reveal something about modern art itself, and its limitations. Visual representation is also better at desire than at love. Painting is ideal for showing the object of desire, the image of the beloved, as well as such matters as prostitution or other provocations to and images of sexual arousal. But when it comes to the subjective experience of love, things are less straightforward. Kierkegaard famously remarked, ‘Everything subjective [...] eludes a direct form of expression’.² For art, this indirectness is problematic. While it can attend to the social conditions and regulation of love, art does not have access to the subjective voice or thought as in literature or theatre or, indeed, music (albeit a fictional voice). Thus, love has to be externalised in the absence of a more direct report of internal feelings.

¹ Adrienne Rich, ‘Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence (1980)’ in *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979–1985* (London: Virago, 1987), 23–76.

² Søren Kierkegaard, ed. and trans. Alastair Hannay, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Crumbs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 67.

Allegory is a common means of representing love. This is less about personal emotion, and more a generalised symbol of power, as in G. F. Watts' *Love Triumphant*, finished in 1898, or pathos, as one sees in Anna Lea Merritt's *Love Locked Out* from 1890. Love is frequently represented through illustrations, as in Arthur Hughes' *St Agnes Eve* from 1856. Many nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century paintings illustrate a text, classical, fictional or historical, allowing a familiar narrative to inform the viewer's reception and so incorporate a voice from elsewhere to articulate love. Moreover, a consequence of this illustrative tendency is that modern art, certainly nineteenth-century art, favoured the Romantic myth of falling in love, presenting its torments and failures, its pleasure and pain. This, after all, is more easily and more excitingly narrativised than less dramatic or tragic instances. The story of Paolo and Francesca, for example, was depicted over and over again in the nineteenth century from Ingres's version in 1819, through Pre-Raphaelite works including Alexander Munro's sculpture from 1851 and Dante Gabriel Rossetti's watercolour triptych from 1855 to Christopher Williams' painting from 1902. This story, taken from Dante, of the tragic pair who were both married but succumbed to their love and so were murdered by Francesca's husband, became an exemplar of love and its vicissitudes.

As John Armstrong has pointed out, we are misled when we consider romantic love to be the paradigm of love. Armstrong argues that '[t]he romantic conception of love focuses our attention on the opening moments of a relationship', moments replete with 'longing, rapture, doubt and the sense that one is in touch with the source of all value'. As such, it identifies falling in love as the essence of love, ignoring the way in which love changes and develops over time as the lovers also change and develop: 'to elevate the beginning of a relationship is to do an injustice to its future'.³ To focus in this way on romantic love, therefore, gives us a very partial and lopsided view. But it is this lopsidedness, this reduction of love to one partial fiction, which allows artists to mitigate the necessary indirectness of visual representation. Those moments of falling in love, those experiences of longing and rapture, can be depicted more easily and more legibly than long-term love or the way in which a lover is loved back over time.

In this essay, I present two case studies that offer an alternative to the picturing of romantic love: a painting by Simeon Solomon from the 1860s (see Figure 2.1) and one by Clare Atwood from around 1920 (see Figure 2.2). I shall use these to speculate about ways of painting love, how these painters, in very different historical and personal circumstances, tried to mitigate or exploit the

³ John Armstrong, *Conditions of Love: The Philosophy of Intimacy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2003), 3–6.



Figure 2.1. Simeon Solomon, *A Prelude by Bach*, 1868. Pencil, watercolour and bodycolour on paper, 432 x 650 mm. Private collection. Photo: © Christie's Images/Bridgeman Images.



Figure 2.2. Clare Atwood, *The Dining Room at Smallhythe*, c. 1920. Oil on canvas, 550 x 495 mm. Smallhythe Place, Kent, UK. National Trust Photographic Library/Bridgeman Images. © Estate of Clare Atwood.

indirectness of love's visual expression by focusing less on narrative and more on the spaces of love. In doing this, they move us away from both a focus on desire and sexuality and the reductive model of high romance, offering instead a fuller and more nuanced notion of love as it might be lived. Implicit in my speculation will be thoughts about how art history might also mitigate the indirect expression of love, how historians might also challenge the romantic

conception of love and find alternative ways of identifying the representation of love in painting rather than seeing it only in these orthodox subjects, narratives and allegories.

Writing this has made me realise why we art historians have avoided love: it is elusive in the extreme. I should acknowledge at the outset that I have two guides in other fields who have dealt with the subject more successfully. One of these is the American feminist historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, whom I shall cite later. The other is the philosopher Simon May, whose book *Love: A History* opens up and corrects our often sloppy thinking about love with real clarity.⁴ May argues against the familiar clichés of love's being selfless, unconditional, and eternal, instead defining love as something that gives us 'ontological groundedness', a sense of security and of our being at home. He writes:

Love is the rapture we feel for people who (or things that) inspire in us the experience or hope of ontological rootedness – a rapture that triggers and sustains the long search for a vital relationship between our being and theirs. We experience their mere presence as grounding – or as a promise of grounding – because it seems to be receptive to, to recognize, to echo, to provide a powerful berth to, what we regard as most essential about us.⁵

This has a particular resonance for lesbians and homosexual men, for whom it is less obvious how to be in love and at home in the world, certainly in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Although I can hardly begin to do justice to the complexity and nuance of May's arguments, it is this fundamental conception of love that I shall use as a springboard for diving into the representation of love in art historical analysis, conceptually, historically and iconographically.

The promise and failure of love's grounding: Simeon Solomon

I begin with the Victorian artist Simeon Solomon. As a homosexual man, Solomon was acutely aware of compulsory heterosexuality and its sanction; his life and career were largely destroyed after his arrest in 1873 for attempted sodomy. Much of his work is about love, usually in the form of allegorical figures, and often as figures representing the failure, absence or wounding of love. The drawing *Bride, Bridegroom, and Sad Love* (see Figure 2.3) from 1865 speaks for itself.

This is about compulsory heterosexuality; the man forced into heterosexual marriage, an institution that denies the kind of love he feels. In *Love in Autumn*

⁴ Simon May, *Love: A History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011).

⁵ May, *Love: A History*, 240.

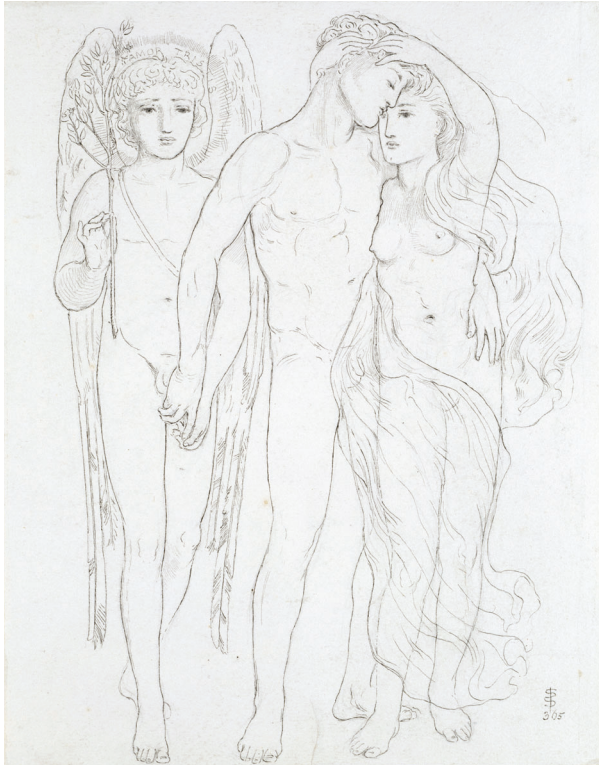


Figure 2.3. Simeon Solomon, *The Bride, the Bridegroom, and Sad Love*, 1865. Pen and ink on paper, 250 x 194 mm. © Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

(see Figure 2.4), a painting from a year later, a standard allegorical figure of love staggers in a hostile landscape; this is homosexual love buffeted by cold winds, and sent into the wilderness, doomed to wither and die.

These works are distinctive in the way that Solomon reshapes the visual language available to him, but nonetheless present an externalised image of love in familiar fashion. He is working in a conventional mode to represent unconventional notions, replacing the ideal form of the orthodox allegory, whether child as in Anna Lea Merritt's work or adult as in Watts', with a younger, more androgynous body. This kind of body was in part a consequence of the pre-Raphaelite manner Solomon adopted and so is determined by his stylistic allegiances. However, it was also an experiment in how to represent a different kind of love. Just as homosexual love challenged the norms of compulsory heterosexuality, so this body challenged the aesthetic, morphological, and, by extension, emotional standards of love's visual representation.



Figure 2.4. Simeon Solomon, *Love in Autumn*, 1866. Oil on canvas, 840 x 660 mm. Barbican Art Gallery, London, UK. Photo © NPL-DeA Picture Library/Bridgeman Images.

A Prelude by Bach (Figure 2.1), though, is perhaps the one work by Solomon that moves beyond the limitations of allegory and considers love in a more complex manner. Viewing the painting in light of May's conception of love, it seems to address the notion of ontological groundedness, of how love can provide a safe harbour for the self, an existential and literal home. For Solomon, though, this is done negatively; he depicts the absence of this for the homosexual man, not the grounding but the elusive promise of that grounding. The painting was originally exhibited as *A Song of Spring* at the Dudley Gallery in 1869; the title by which it is now known was added later.⁶ The image represents a group of young people

⁶ *A Prelude by Bach* was the title given in the catalogue to an exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1906, and so was certainly accepted as the title by the time of Solomon's death in 1905: *Exhibition of works by the Old Masters and Deceased Masters of the British School* (London: Royal Academy, 1906), 42. Colin Cruise, who has perhaps contributed more to scholarship

arranged around one of their number playing the piano. They share stillness as they listen; the music is invoked as a non-narrative analogy for the experience of love (and love in spring rather than love in autumn). The figures are arranged in groups, mostly pairs, but also with the woman at the far right, possibly belonging in a chain of three with the man and woman in the foreground, her hand over the back of the chair, the arms forming a clear single line with the body of the man, unifying of the trio of figures. Here, then, are instances of love, whether intense friendships or erotic connections, but the nature of any specific relationships is unclear. That is the point. Sensuality is evident, the ease or comfort of other bodies enhanced by the setting decorated with tapestries and elaborate furniture, and the curiously eighteenth-century dress offering fabric as a metaphor for love's tactility.

The figure on the left is the exception; this man represents homosexual love. A male-male pairing is missing from the scene. This figure has entered from the left and is holding a branch of blossoming myrtle.⁷ His partner's absence is evident in the matching blue sash and staff on the floor, as well as the crystal globe. These objects are all part of Solomon's personal language of symbols, which is most elaborately laid out in *A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep*, a long prose poem that Solomon privately published in 1871 in an edition of 500 copies.⁸ *A Vision of Love* recounts the journey of a figure searching for elusive love. The narrator, accompanied by his soul, moves through a symbolic world of allegorical figures including Pleasure, Death, Charity, Time and the Spirit of Dreams, among others. In what might be the two most telling incidents, the narrator first meets Love bruised and bound, tormented by Passion, and then at the end, witnesses Love unbound and free. *A Vision of Love* is episodic and repetitive, and written in a self-consciously poetic and symbolist style, alluding to mystical traditions from both Christianity and Judaism; the quotation from *The Song of Songs* on the cover of the book is an example of this. However, this somewhat arch style and weighty symbolism is a means of articulating deviant and criminal desire; following *The Song of Songs*, Solomon uses a particular kind of erotic and symbolic prose poetry in order to legitimize his dream of love.

on Solomon than anyone else, reads the painting as a pastiche of Botticelli's *Primavera*, replacing uxoriousness with diversity: Colin Cruise, 'Allegory and Aestheticism in Pater and Solomon' in Elicia Clements and Lesley J. Higgins, eds, *Victorian Aesthetic Conditions: Pater Across the Arts* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 68–82.

⁷ Cruise relates this figure to the Hermes-Mercurius in Botticelli's *Primavera*: Cruise, 'Allegory and Aestheticism', 73.

⁸ While the book was privately published, the publisher F. S. Ellis was involved in printing and distribution: Simon Reynolds, *The Vision of Simeon Solomon* (Stroud, Glos: Catalpa Press Ltd., 1984), 33. Ellis also published Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Christina Rossetti and William Morris and was a friend of Swinburne, Burne-Jones and Ruskin among others.

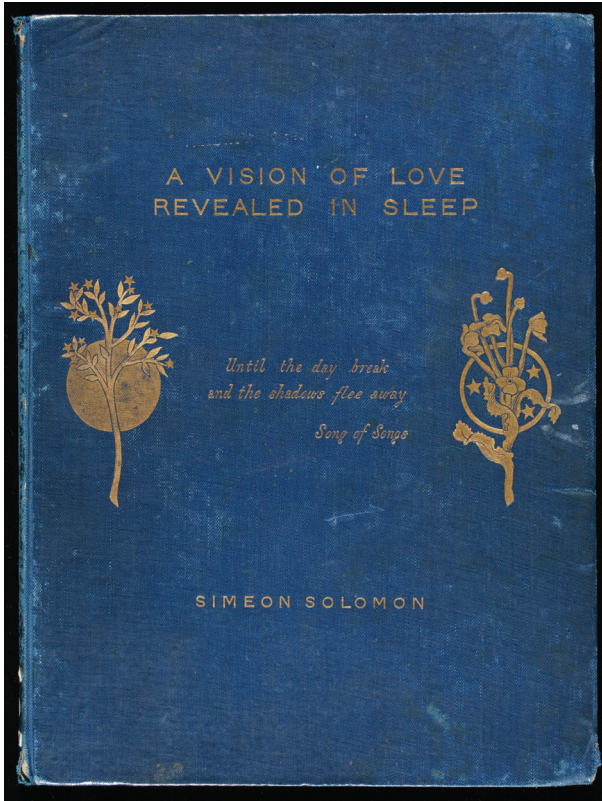


Figure 2.5. Simeon Solomon, Front cover, *A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep*, 1871. Book bound in blue cloth with gilt decoration, 260 x 200 mm. © Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

Solomon's design for the cover of the book uses symbolism closely related to the painting (see Figure 2.5). On one side is a golden globe with a flowering myrtle branch; on the other poppies with a crystal globe. The meaning of these objects emerges in the text. Love wears myrtle in his hair; when flowering, it symbolises love's realisation, when drooping, love's anguish. Poppies, of course, are a familiar symbol, representing sleep, in which the vision is revealed, and death. The two flowers are connected in the text. When the narrator meets Love, bound and tormented by passion, he sees 'poppies mingled with myrtle', the latter stifling the former.⁹ The poppy branch wound around the myrtle is thus the suppression of love by Death or Sleep; or, as the text has it, 'Love imprisoned

⁹ Simeon Solomon, 'A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep', in Reynolds, *The Vision of Simeon Solomon*, 66.

in an alien land of oblivion'.¹⁰ At the meeting with Love at the end, however, 'the stars of the living myrtles burned fresh upon his hair'.¹¹ The task Solomon's symbolic narrative presents is how to separate the myrtle from the poppy.

The globes are rather less straightforward symbols. The golden globe is held by Love, at an intermediate point in the narrative. Having earlier seen Love bound and wounded, the narrator now comes upon Love 'seated upon a throne lowly and poor, and not worthy to bear him, – no longer, indeed, wounded and bleeding, but still bereft of his perfect glory'. Love is poised between weeping and laughter, the myrtle and poppies entwined on a branch he holds, and in his other hand 'a golden globe whose brightness was obscured and shamed by dust'.¹² The golden globe signals the potential victory of love. Although love is still mired in a world of dust and weeds and shame, the globe may be radiant and shine once love is no longer 'shamed by dust'. The crystal globe is the attribute of Eternal Silence. The narrator's Soul tells him: 'Seek not to look upon the globe, for thou assuredly knowest it is given to no man to search its depths and live'.¹³ A similar globe is held by the figure of Sleep. This figure, who 'rose impalpably from the heart of the poppies' fixes his gaze upon the globe 'wherein I knew [...] he saw pass the dreams of those who sleep beneath the stars', his face 'overshadowed by the exceeding sadness of one who knows the thoughts of men'.¹⁴ While the symbolic range is very wide in the case of both Eternal Silence and Sleep, the connection to Solomon's homosexuality is clear; the crystal globe connotes the necessity of silence and the sadness produced by the dreams of love.

The presence of the crystal globe in *A Prelude by Bach* is thus explained as a clear reference to same-sex love. Indeed, the text as a whole serves in some respects as a key to the symbols of Solomon's art. When the artist wrote to Swinburne asking him to review the poem in *The Dark Blue*, he suggested that Swinburne might use the poem as a vehicle for a discussion of his drawings and paintings.¹⁵ Similarly, John Addington Symonds, reviewing the book in *The Academy*, described the poem as 'a key to the meaning of [Solomon's] drawings'.¹⁶

¹⁰ Solomon, 'A Vision of Love', 70.

¹¹ Solomon, 'A Vision of Love', 70.

¹² Solomon, 'A Vision of Love', 66.

¹³ Solomon, 'A Vision of Love', 55.

¹⁴ Solomon, 'A Vision of Love', 63.

¹⁵ A. C. Swinburne, 'Simeon Solomon: Notes on his "Vision of Love" and Other Studies', *Dark Blue* (July 1871), 568–77. For more about this see: Reynolds, *The Vision of Simeon Solomon*, 33–6.

¹⁶ John Addington Symonds, 'Solomon's "A Vision of Love"', *The Academy*, 2:21 (1871), 189. See also Sidney Colvin, 'Critical Notices', *The Fortnightly Review*, 15 (1871), 674–5.

The only illustration in the book, apart from the cover, is a photogravure/albumen print by Frederick Hollyer of one of Solomon's drawings: *Then I knew my Soul stood by me, and he and I went forth together*. This represents the narrator of the text and his Soul, shown in half-length, at the moment at which they embark on their journey. This is the body and soul of the same person, explaining the similarity in appearance, even if this is a facial type that Solomon uses again and again and can be found in *A Prelude by Bach*. The Soul points to a myrtle branch that he holds, further emphasising the plant as a symbol of love, that which they shall seek on their journey.

While *A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep* helps us to explain the presence of the unexpected objects in the painting, it is, in fact, a bodily absence that most forcefully marks homosexual love in the painting: the empty space where the sash and globe lie. In an oblique complement or even challenge to the reliance on conventions, whether they be age-old such as allegory or more recent such as Aestheticism, Solomon manipulates space to represent love; space itself becomes a symbol. There are three supervenient spaces in the painting. First is the space of the room, the literal setting. Second is the musical space, the conceptual space created by the song of spring, which is an analogy for the feeling of love. In his review of *A Vision of Love*, Symonds remarked that the prose poem had 'a vague yet intense yearning, a *Sehnsucht*, which belongs to music'.¹⁷ This is the familiar Aestheticist notion of art aspiring to the condition of music, but Symonds' comment points to something beyond that, which is not formal but experiential; the painting is not like music in trying to make form and content inseparable, but is representing silent music and its effects, the yearning and love-like feeling it produces in the listener. In Solomon's painting, music also serves as a ritual of collective experience. Finally, there is pictorial space, which serves to synthesise the other three. They are all linked through the composition, not just in the bodily interactions, but crucially also in the grid that the figures create. One might imagine a ground plan locating the different bodies. Such a plan will be at an angle to the ground plan of the room itself, the receding parallel lines marking the figures' locations at odds with the square frontality of the room itself.

The homosexual figure is in an uncertain relationship to those three spaces: his belonging in the room is in question; he seems not to share the musical experience, given the tension in his entrance, so unlike the relaxed manner of the others, or the more serene movement of the woman on the other side, and the fact that his love is an absence; and he disrupts the pictorial space as he teeters into the otherwise stable composition. He is not fully able to enter this world of

¹⁷ Symonds, "Solomon's "A Vision of Love"", 189.

love, and spatial dislocation is Solomon's metaphor for lack of rootedness; for not having or being denied a secure position in the world of love; for not being permitted to realise the promise of grounding that love offers.

Solomon often pits love against desire in his work, a tension that further enforces this problem. This is exemplified in *A Vision of Love* when the narrator comes across Love bound and wounded by Passion, a motif that Solomon also used in drawings, such as the watercolour *Love Bound and Wounded* (1870) and the pencil drawing *A Vision of Wounded Love* (1893). Love and Passion are at odds, and while Love is degraded by desire, so Passion also 'was grievously wounded and tormented in strange, self-devised ways'.¹⁸ This tension was symptomatic of his own life, where the space of love was quite distinct from the spaces of sex, which for Solomon were often public toilets, such as the gents in Marylebone in which he was arrested for attempted sodomy in 1873 or the pissoir close to the Bourse in Paris, where he was arrested again the following year.

Putting the Prelude and the pissoir side by side, we see the dream of rootedness and the reality of the unrooted, marked by the failure of love and the strange self-devised torment of desire. Contact in the pissoir may have been a necessity, and for some – perhaps including Solomon – a source of excitement; the sense of precariousness and danger is well known in cottaging, but this is a sexual thrill, and one that is not of necessity accompanied by love.

One of the important historical aspects of this is that Solomon unwittingly presents a challenge to the emerging world of sexology. If sexual science conceived the homosexual as a man who desires other men – 'a species' as Foucault famously termed it – Solomon wants to insist on a man *loving* other men.¹⁹ The gents' lavatory was where Solomon sought arousal and desire. As his arrests demonstrate, this was a site where the precepts of sexology appeared to be confirmed. In contrast, *A Prelude by Bach* depicts Solomon's imagined place for the possibility of love. Just as the narrator in the Vision travels from witnessing Love wounded and bloodied by Passion to the moment at the end when Love triumphs in a blaze of glory, so Solomon's painting asks how he might travel from one place to the other; from the unanchored space of cruising and sex to the glorious groundedness of love.²⁰

¹⁸ Solomon, 'A Vision of Love', 50.

¹⁹ Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité. 1: La volonté de savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 59.

²⁰ A few years later, this insistence on love rather than sex as the basis of conceiving homosexuality emerges in the work of other writers, most notably Edward Carpenter, for whom 'homogenic love' is far more important and politically far more significant and radical than homosexual activity: Edward Carpenter, *Homogenic Love and Its Place in a Free Society* (Manchester: The Labour Press Society, 1894).

The reality of love's grounding: Clare 'Tony' Atwood

This brings me to my second case study: a painting of the dining room at Smallhythe Place by Clare Atwood, made around 1920 (Figure 2.2). It is an unassuming painting, to say the least, but I shall argue – perhaps somewhat recklessly – that this develops Solomon's spatial strategy and in a more thoroughgoing manner offers us a representation of love in its ontological groundedness. Here same-sex love is less a victorious blaze of glory and more a warm glow of replete intimacy, but that, as we shall see, is the point.

Atwood is not a well-known artist, but she had a comfortable, if not stellar, career. She was well connected, being friends with such notables as Edmund Dulac and Charles Ricketts and Charles Shannon. After studying at the Slade School of Art, she went on to exhibit regularly in London and elsewhere. She showed work at the New English Art Club, becoming a member in 1912, and was involved with such organisations as the Women's International Art Club and the Allied Artists' Association.²¹ She exhibited works in the British exhibition at the Venice Biennale in 1912, 1914 and 1928 (in the years when the Biennale had a Salon-style format rather than the single-artist or group model that emerged later).²² She also received other important commissions, not least in 1917 from the Canadian War Memorials Committee, to paint a large picture showing the Canadian Expeditionary Force in England. For this, Atwood depicted Canadian soldiers in a YMCA canteen at one of London's stations, awaiting trains to take them to their camp in Folkstone or further, to the front. The painting is now in the Senate Chamber of the Canadian Parliament in Ottawa.²³

The painting of the dining room is related closely to her life. Smallhythe is where she lived from 1916 to her death in 1962, as part of a remarkable *ménage-à-trois*. Here she cohabited with Edy Craig, the daughter of Ellen Terry, and the writer and suffragist Christabel Marshall, who went by the name of Christopher St John.²⁴ Craig and St John had been a couple since 1899. St John was a great

²¹ Mengting Yu, *London's Women Artists, 1900–1914: A Talented and Decorative Group* (Singapore: Springer, 2020), 100–111; Kenneth McConkey, *The New English: A History of the New English Art Club*, (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2006).

²² Sophie Bowness and Clive Philpot, eds, *Britain at the Venice Biennale* (London: The British Council, 1995), 70, 72, 82.

²³ *The War Paintings in the Senate Chamber – Les tableaux de guerre de la chambre du Sénat* (Ottawa: Library of Parliament, 2002), 13; *Art & War: Canadian War Memorial* (Published for the Canadian War Records Office by Colour Ltd, London, 1919), 38.

²⁴ Marshall changed her name to Christopher Marie St John when she converted to Catholicism. She chose St John as her surname on account of her devotion to John the Baptist; Marie clearly signals the Virgin Mary. I assume that the choice of Christopher, as with the surname, was because of St Christopher's importance. According to Michael Holroyd, she legally

devotee of Ellen Terry from an early age and met Edy when she was granted an audience with the great actress after a performance that year. By the autumn, the two of them had set up a home together. Atwood became part of the family in 1916 when she first rented two rooms in Terry's London flat and then joined the others at Smallhythe.²⁵ After Edy's death in 1947, Tony and Chris continued to live together.²⁶

Ellen Terry bought Smallhythe in 1899, and it became her home in the country. As well as the main house there were two cottages, including the Priest's House, where the three women lived, and a barn that was converted into a theatre after Terry's death in 1929. The three women were part of both a broad artistic and theatrical network. Given that Ellen Terry was the sun around which they orbited, this is hardly surprising, but theatre was also the basis of their professional lives. As a young woman, Edy had a career as an actress and costume designer, and in 1911 set up the Pioneer Players with Ellen Terry as President, Edy as director, and Chris as secretary.²⁷ Christopher St John wrote plays, most famously the suffrage drama *How the Vote Was Won*, co-written with Cicely Hamilton and first produced in 1908.²⁸ Tony also had theatrical connections. She designed sets and props for

acquired the name by deed poll in 1910: Michael Holroyd, *A Strange Eventful History: The Dramatic Lives of Ellen Terry, Henry Irving, and their Remarkable Families* (London: Vintage Books, 2009), 329.

²⁵ *Ellen Terry's Memoirs, with a preface, notes and additional biographical chapters by Edith Craig and Christopher St John* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1932), 313. The women also shared the flat at 31 Bedford Street in London. This was Atwood's official address as an artist, as shown by Royal Academy exhibition catalogues. Edy Craig allowed the actress Sime Seruya to use a room in the flat for her International Suffrage Shop from 1910 to 1913.

²⁶ There is no substantial scholarly account of the ménage; the fullest is Clair Glynis Roberts, *Lesbian Identities – A Comparison of Two Sets of Female Friends in the Early Twentieth Century*, PhD thesis, (University of Hull, 2003). Julie Holledge seems to be the scholar who first recognised the women as a lesbian threesome, although she makes it clear that this is distinct from sexual activity among all three women: Julie Holledge, *Innocent Flowers: Women in the Edwardian Theatre* (London: Virago, 1975). Since then, the group has been routinely acknowledged, not least in biographies of Edy Craig and Ellen Terry, and as such discussion of Atwood has been limited: see, for example, Joy Melville, *Ellen and Edy: a biography of Ellen Terry and her daughter, Edith Craig, 1847–1947* (London and New York: Pandora, 1987), 228–31 260–1; Holroyd, *Strange Eventful History*, 472–4, 533–35.

²⁷ See Katherine Cockin, *Women and Theatre in the Age of Suffrage: The Pioneer Players, 1911–1925* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001). Other important accounts of the Pioneer Players include: Holledge, *Innocent Flowers*, 121–52; Christine Dymkowski, 'Entertaining Ideas: Edy Craig and the Pioneer Players', in Vivien Gardner and Susan Rutherford, eds, *The New Woman and Her Sisters: Feminism and theatre, 1850–1914* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 221–33.

²⁸ Cicely Mary Hamilton and Christopher St John, *How the Vote Was Won: Text of the Play* (London: Woman's Press. 1909).

the Pioneer Players and, later, for productions at Smallhythe; she also appeared in productions staged at Rye and elsewhere with her fellow Smallhythians and their circle.²⁹ In 1922, she was part of the selection committee for a major exhibition of international theatre design at the Victoria & Albert Museum.³⁰ Her painting, too, often dealt with theatres, rehearsals and figures from the stage, including Ellen Terry and Herbert Beerbohm Tree.³¹ Moreover, there are paintings that represent the close relations of homosexuality and theatre, such as her portrait of Vita Sackville-West dressed in the costume Ellen Terry wore to play Portia, one of her most famous roles. In this painting, the network collapses into a single figure; the worlds of same-sex bonds and theatrical endeavour to coalesce in a single body. Thus, the three women, known by some of their theatrical chums as ‘The Three Musketeers’, lived a life theatrical both in substance and in style.³²

They were also bound into the leading lesbian art circle; friends and visitors included Virginia Woolf, Radclyffe Hall and Una Troubridge, Vita Sackville-West, composer Ethyl Smyth and others. This inevitably raises the question of whether Smallhythe was a *ménage-à-trois* in a sexual sense, in merely companionate terms, or whether there was a specific set of relationships among the women. Here I turn to Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s pioneering article ‘The Female World of Love and Ritual’, from which I take my title.³³ This was published in 1975, so appeared in a very different context, historiographically, politically and socially; fifty years later much has changed but Smith-Rosenberg still has something to teach us. She was dissatisfied with what she saw as psychosexual readings of women’s history. Women’s friendships were always framed by the question of lesbianism: were they, or weren’t they? Too often the aim was to identify lesbianism as a distinct form of love or love as a diluted form of lesbianism. Smith-Rosenberg, instead, addressed

²⁹ Sabretache, ‘Pictures in the Fire’, *The Tatler*, 920 (12 February 1919), 174, reports and provides a photograph of ‘an early-English Nativity play’ produced at Rye, in which Terry played the Prologue, and Edy and Tony played monks.

³⁰ *International Theatre Exhibition: Designs and Models for the Modern Stage* (London: Victoria & Albert Museum, 3 June – 16 July 1922), 3.

³¹ See, for example, *Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree rehearsing ‘Henry VIII’ by William Shakespeare at His Majesty’s Theatre*, 1910 and *The Saloon Bar at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane*, n.d.: Geoffrey Ashton, *Catalogue of Paintings at the Theatre Museum, London* (London: Victoria & Albert Museum in association with The Society for Theatre Research, 1992), 94–5; *Oil Paintings in National Trust Properties. V: South* (London: The Public Catalogue Foundation, 2013), 78.

³² Norman MacDermott, *Everymania: The History of the Everyman Theatre, Hampstead, 1920–1926* (London: The Society for Theatre Research, 1975), 30.

³³ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, ‘The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America’, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 1:1 (1975), 1–29.



Figure 2.6. Clare Atwood, *The Terrace Outside the Priest's House*, c. 1919. Oil on canvas, 595 x 495 mm. Smallhythe Place, Kent, UK. National Trust Photographic Library/Bridgeman Images. © Estate of Clare Atwood.

the terms in which women understood themselves and their emotional and social lives, accounting for the rich range of female friendships and relationships, including lesbian ones. In essence, Smith-Rosenberg urged the historian to move her focus from desire to love; from thinking of love as a by-product of desire, or as its adjunct, and to place love – in personal and social terms – at the centre.

Smallhythe is very much a world of love and ritual and could be taken as emblematic of Smith-Rosenberg's thesis. Atwood's painting *Outside the Priest's House*, painted in 1919 represents this (see Figure 2.6). Here we see Christopher St John inside the house, and on the terrace, in the right foreground Edy Craig and, enthroned, Ellen Terry herself, along with some other family members and friends, including Ellen's niece and great-nephew, Olive Morris and Anthony Hawtrey. This is a painting of companionship, of shared enterprise more important than any specific attachment. The people are physically separated, more so

than in *A Prelude by Bach*, but unified by Atwood's placing of the figures in the space as it compressed in the perspective, heading back into the house, creating a continuity of the space. Thus, the formal arrangement is about closeness, about a world of love that can contain romantic relationships without requiring one to ask whether or not they engaged in sexual activity, rather than other physical contact or, indeed, only emotional contact.

Of course, the question of lesbian sexuality is evident in the house and its ménage, and the developing discourse about female sexual deviance in the early-twentieth century is certainly a specific context for the ladies and their lives. Indeed, this emerges explicitly, particularly in St John's writing and self-crafting. In 1915, St John published anonymously a novel titled *Hungerheart: The Story of a Soul*.³⁴ It is a roman à clef, based on St John's own life, from her childhood, through the moment of her deciding to live without men, to a life engaging with theatre and with women's suffrage, and a series of partnerships, including one that is clearly her relationship with Edy. The novel ends with John, the central character, converting to Catholicism, as St John herself did, but moving away from the autobiographical parallel, as she establishes a relationship with a nun (a very different world of love and ritual). Given St John's Catholicism, the soul in the subtitle must be taken literally.

St John conceived herself in the book in terms of the congenital lesbian as sexologists had defined that type. She was by no means the only woman to define her sexuality, and indeed her whole self, in this way. Radclyffe Hall similarly relied on Krafft-Ebbing and Havelock Ellis to understand her sexuality.³⁵ However, in the book and in her life, St John rejected the heterosexual model for lesbianism; that is, the idea of one partner as masculine and the other as feminine, thus conforming to heterosexual marriage, as Hall and Una Troubridge did, at least in private or appropriate circumstances. While there is much yearning to be 'the Only One' to 'the Only Other', this is not linked to a gendered model of desire. Indeed, when John is happily living with Sally (Edy), she writes that 'I used to wonder which was the husband and which was the wife in the ménage'.³⁶ For

³⁴ Christopher St John, *Hungerheart: The Story of a Soul* (London: Methuen & Co., 1915).

³⁵ Sally Cline, *Radclyffe Hall: A Woman Called John* (New York: The Overlook Press, 1997), 42–3, 227–8; Diane Souhami, *The Trials of Radclyffe Hall* (New York and London: Doubleday, 1999), 167–72. See also Laura Doan's important and more critical account in: Laura Doan, 'Lesbian Writers and Sexual Science: A Passage to Modernity?' in *Fashioning Sapphism: The Origins of a Modern Lesbian Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 126–63.

³⁶ St John, *Hungerheart*, 219. For brief accounts of the novel, see: George Robb, 'Gutsier, and Ten-Plus Years before the Well', *The Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide*, 28:6 (2021), 46; David Trotter, 'Lesbians Before Lesbianism: Sexual Identity and Early-Twentieth-Century British

all its agonising and melodrama, *Hungerheart* points towards the more mature world of Smallhythe, where same-sex love, a mutual affirmation that ideally has equal weight on both or all sides, is the emotional bedrock. Moreover, this was a network. Love exceeds not only a pair of bodies, those of Edy and Chris, but also a trio, after Tony moved in. It extended further to Ellen Terry, whose gravitational pull had brought the women together and whose celebrity status helped to make this life possible.

Thus, the ménage at Smallhythe, both the three women and the broader female world they crafted, are exemplary of Smith-Rosenberg's thesis. What matters here is not what is homosexual and what heterosexual, what norm and what deviance, what genital and what platonic; instead, what matters is the fact that they built a home together, and a home based in loving same-sex bonds.

And so, to Atwood's painting of the dining room, which I want to discuss as an image of this complex love; not in terms of lesbian sexuality, but in terms of same-sex love; not as sexological type, but as experiential ground. This unassuming painting will be made to bear huge weight interpretatively and conceptually. This is in part because this essay is an experiment in looking for love, but more importantly because the apparent mismatch between the quiet, small and unexceptional painting and the weight of love is the point here; that only in moving away from the transcendental, the myth of the romantic, the epiphanic and the allegorical can love be painted as ontological groundedness.

What Atwood presents here is the world they share; indeed, the ground of that world. Every part of the image signals this. First, the very mise-en-scène: it is, of course, domestic and personal, waiting to be populated and used, with the settle by the fire, the table at the far left ready for a meal, and the door open at the far right, giving on to the stairs, suggesting movement through the house. While this is a far from unusual image of a domestic interior, it is one that asserts the sense of a life lived here, the life shared by the women.

Second, the objects and, most telling, the familiarity of objects: the flowers on the sideboard, the ceramics on the dresser, the plates lined up above the fire-place, and the hat, cape and walking stick on the stool. These last items are very different from the discarded symbolic objects in the Solomon painting. Rather than representing absence, these things connote someone's presence in the house; here is what has been taken off upon entering and occupying the space. (The hat, cape, and walking stick might belong to Ellen Terry, mother, matriarch, and centre of the Smallhythe community.)

Fiction', in Billie Melman, ed., *Borderlines: Genders and Identities in War and Peace 1870–1930* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 1998), 206–8; Joy Melville, *Ellen and Edy*, 176–91.

Third, and perhaps most striking of all, is the use of viewpoint and perspective. Visually, we are invited to enter the space, an invitation enhanced by the discarded cape and by the open door giving onto the stairs, effectively allowing us access through the house. Atwood's paintings often deal with the geometry of architectural spaces, from theatres and stations to Billingsgate and Olympia, and in all cases the architectural structure not only gives form to the painting's composition, but also plays a role in dramatising the *mise-en-scène*. The same is true of the Smallhythe dining room. Here, Atwood identifies a pseudo-Cartesian grid in the pillars, the shadow of the pillars, the beams in the roof, and the pattern of the floor tiles. I say pseudo-Cartesian, since this is not about the objective measuring of space, but rather the subjective inhabitation; it does not provide a neat mapping of the space, but draws our attention to the materials, the wood and clay, the historical and material fabric of the house, and this contributes to the sense of our being at home here. Of course, I am not suggesting that Atwood sat down with her brushes and planned to do this; but the transfiguration of the literal home into a conceptual home is implicit in or a consequence of how she looks and how she represents the space. The texture of the space stands for the texture of their life.

This is not just a setting for a narrative of love, a space waiting to be filled with the experience of love; it signals love itself. Here, the commonplace and the extraordinary, the real and the imagined cohere. Unlike the distinct if supervenient spaces of Solomon's world, the tension between the space of absent love and the space of dangerous desire, here the spatial becomes a visual correlative for rootedness, physically and by extension emotionally. Same-sex love is at home.

As an aside, we should note that the painting also encompasses the absent servants. The highly polished surfaces, the swept floor and the laid table all indicate that invisible domestic labour is supporting this world of love and ritual. In later years, Mrs Seal, known as Bruce, lived rent-free in the Toll Cottage in exchange for household duties.³⁷ Bruce had not only been given a male monicker, but she also wore men's clothes. As such, she appears to conform to the Smallhythe ethos, but we must be wary of including her in this history in an uncritical manner. Her presence and the evident domestic labour in the painting are reminders that the

³⁷ Holroyd, *Strange Eventful History*, 535. James Lee-Milne also mentioned Bruce in his brief account of visits to Smallhythe in the 1940s. His account is rather unkind, and he concentrates on the appearance of the two old ladies, Chris and Tony, noting their corduroy trousers and men's jackets, rather overstating the masculinity of their dress; most photographs of the women show them in smocks rather than trousers. Lee-Milne describes Mrs Seal as a 'terrifying woman in the ferry cottage who helps with housework': James Lee-Milne, *Some Country Houses and their Owner* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975), 61.

women's world of love and ritual was not only enabled by their theatrical and Bohemian milieu, but also by their social class and status. Just as George Roberts, the man with whom Solomon was arrested in the gents' lavatory at Marylebone, received a much harsher penalty than the painter when sentenced, and just as, say, the experiments in living amongst the Bloomsbury Group relied on servants, so Smallhythe was both pioneeringly radical and, from the perspective of class, wearily orthodox.³⁸

Home is a familiar, even clichéd metaphor for love, but historians of the domestic interior have tended to focus more on décor, home life, family, and so on, rather than to insist on the word love as a defining characteristic. One might ask, though, what evidence there might be to support the claim that this is an image of love, a representation not simply of the particular home described but of the ontological groundedness it afforded its inhabitants? Is this taking May's notion of 'at-homeness' too literally? In a sense, the move from home to love is the result of a particular hermeneutic, but there are visual, painterly strategies underpinned by Atwood's understanding of domestic space that might support such an interpretative move.

First, Atwood's paintings of interiors, whether they are concerned with love or not, illustrate how emotional lives, our subjective and bodily experience, work in tandem with the world we inhabit; this is, perhaps, a symptom of our feeling love as a kind of 'at-homeness'. Unlike the model of romantic love as something that transcends the world, apparently removing us from our physical and social surroundings, Atwood depicts spaces as agents in human interactions. This is evident in a range of spaces, from the YCMA Canteen at a London railway station (probably Victoria), where Canadian soldiers wait to leave for their camp in Folkstone or the front in *On Leave*, the painting she made for the Canadian War Memorial Fund in 1917, to the unidentified Catholic charitable institution in *Finis* (1928) or the interior of the Barn Theatre in Smallhythe in 1939. Each work pays acute attention to architecture, but also to the architecture of human relationships as played out by the figures within those spaces.

Second, and more striking, is Atwood's representation of uninhabited spaces. As with the painting of the dining room at Smallhythe, she presents spaces as bearing the marks of lives and loves and personalities. Take her picture of John Gielgud's dining room from 1933 (see Figure 2.7).³⁹ The possessions, the distinctive

³⁸ On the Bloomsbury Group and domestic staff, see: Alison Light, *Mrs Woolf and the Servants: An Intimate History of Domestic Life* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2008). The women at Smallhythe similarly relied on their chauffeur and gardener: Melville, *Ellen and Edy*, 230.

³⁹ *The Exhibition of the Royal Academy of Arts MCMXXXIII* (London: William Clowes and Sons Ltd., 1933), 13. Clare Barlow included this in her pioneering exhibition *Queer British Art*



Figure 2.7. Clare Atwood, *John Gielgud's Room*, 1933. Oil on canvas, 635 x 764 mm. Tate Britain. © Estate of Clare Atwood.

taste of furniture with the green marble-topped table and Louis XIV chairs, and nineteenth-century boudoir screen, the drinks tray and cat curled up on a chair: all these remind us that a portrait of a room is the portrait of its inhabitant, and represents daily life, the use and care of possessions, the possibilities of social and emotional encounters, and so on. The painting also hints at the nexus of homosexuality, theatre and the decorative, a stereotypical set of connections, but connections that have been used positively and fruitfully by homosexual men to craft personal and professional lives, as was the case for Gielgud. In this painting, Atwood captures the porousness of home and inhabitant, of home and at-homeness. This is not a fantasy space promising an elsewhere, as in Solomon's vision and Aestheticist music room, but this is a space in which selfhood is firmly embedded.

1867–1967 (London: Tate Publishing, 2017). Gielgud was Ellen Terry's great-nephew and so part of the broader network in theatrical, sexual and familial terms.

There is another difference that makes love present in Atwood's domestic world rather than absent as in Solomon's and synthesises the metaphorical at-homeness of love with the literal home: age. The Smallhythe women could certainly exhibit behaviours associated with self-dramatising romantic love. This was particularly true of St John, whose narcissism was pointed out in a review of *Hungerheart* in *The Spectator*; the critic remarked that 'she is only able to consider the world in its relation to her own personality'.⁴⁰ However, when Tony joined the household at Smallhythe at the age of fifty, love had come to mean something different; it was, as her painting suggests, about stability rather than unpredictability, about the groundedness of a shared life rather than the flightiness of romance.

The task of the least: Love and the history of art

Thus, for Atwood, home is a means of representing love indirectly but fully. For Solomon, it is more a case of nostalgia, in its etymological sense, the pain of not being at or not having a home. This difference is a consequence of the individual circumstances of the two artists; a homosexual man in the 1860s to whom love was denied and whose life was ruined by this and a lesbian woman in the 1910s and after, for whom the female world of love and ritual accommodated desire and, as I have argued, made it less important than love. As such, the comparison is asymmetrical, although one must acknowledge that men could create loving homes, such as Ricketts and Shannon or Edward Carpenter and George Merrill, and women were also persecuted and denied love by the structures of compulsory heterosexuality. Nevertheless, what the comparison does reveal is the ways in which home can be deployed to literalise the conceptual space of groundedness, whether finding or not finding a place in the world anchored by a person or persons who might affirm one's being. Making space a symbol in this way bypasses the need for illustration or allegory, avoids the problem of desire or sex, and attends to the feeling of love rather than its behaviour. It finds a solution to the indirectness of visual representation. But while Solomon's symbolism is designed to represent a love that cannot speak its name or paint its image, Atwood requires no such strategy, for she has found a way of painting love. Hers is no vision of love revealed in sleep, in a fictional space, but a vision of love revealed in the real world, a real space transfigured by love and ritual. The dining room

⁴⁰ *The Spectator* (17 April 1915), 549. A very sympathetic review in *The Asiatic Review* also comments in passing that 'The writer [...] attributes too much singularity to herself' in respect to her desire to be loved: L. C. W. 'Reviews and Notices', *The Asiatic Review*, 6 (April 1915), 342.

at Smallhythe is not where falling in love happens, but it is where love persists. While both paintings show domestic spaces, there is a marked difference between the Aestheticist fantasy of Solomon's space and the quotidian nature of Atwood's, where instead of the discarded sash and crystal globe are the cape and walking stick laid down, instead of the mystical myrtle are flowers arranged on a side table, instead of absence and silence, love is present.

In essence, this is about what John Armstrong calls 'the task of the least'. This he defines as seeing 'the significance of a detail which a hasty eye would easily pass over', understanding how that detail is part of another person's world and life; apprehending not the cataclysm of falling in love but the small intimacies of a love that persists.⁴¹ For Armstrong this 'task of the least' is an act of the imagination, but it is an imaginative act that does not change or distort the world. Rather, it imagines the world more acutely as it is: 'imagination can be allied to acuteness of perception, rather than distortion. And this function of the imagination has its natural application with respect to the quieter, less obvious features of a person or a work of art'.⁴²

This is Atwood's world. She sees the quieter, the unobtrusive, the less obvious, representing this world in a way that both minimises its drama and yet magnifies its emotional and amatory force. The actors are, in her theatrical mode, waiting in the wings, but not to enter and perform high-flown, high-strung drama; rather, to sit, to eat, to share a life. The dining room does not bear the spiritual and personal struggles of *Hungerheart*, but it is here that the heart is fed. And this is where we witness the ontological groundedness that love ideally provides. The task of the least serves as the corrective May demands; he points out that in conceptions of love as unconditional, eternal and selfless, 'love is being overloaded'.⁴³

Perhaps this imaginative task of the least is how art can best represent love. Perhaps it is in this 'task of the least' that the world of love and ritual is most visible, that the hysterical desire of falling in love and its vicissitudes is displaced by a better understanding of love. And I wonder if the history of art is particularly well suited to attend to this task of the least. After all, the seeking of details and relating them to broader contexts of life, discourse, or society is what many art historians do; they find the visual symptom that reveals the structure or fundamental concern. The art historian is well positioned to see the texture of love, its quiet traces in the image. This is a fundamentally tendentious process, but as

⁴¹ Armstrong, *Conditions of Love*, 95.

⁴² Armstrong, *Conditions of Love*, 96.

⁴³ May, *Love: A History*, 239.

no less a figure than Heinrich Wölfflin pointed out, 'It is true, we only see what we look for, but we only look for what we can see'.⁴⁴

There are, inevitably, objections to be raised to all of this. Not least of these, it may be that my reading of these paintings is too much for them to bear; that the paintings are being overloaded and this is more about my intention to find love in these works, than about history. But even if that is the case, I hope that this essay has opened up questions about how we might think of love and intimacy rather than sexual desire and identity as a framework for art historical investigation; not, I hasten to add, to displace desire, but rather to broaden our endeavours, and to make the task of the least for the painter the task of the least for the art historian.

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⁴⁴ Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*, trans. M. D. Hottinger, sixth edition (New York: Dover Publications, 1950), 247.

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