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The Art of Henry Scott Tuke in Late Victorian and Edwardian Britain

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Abstract

This thesis examines the paintings of Henry Scott Tuke (1858-1929) against the backdrop of late Victorian and Edwardian Britain, exploring how his depictions of naked youths at the British seaside navigated and subverted dominant cultural narratives of gender and sexuality. The study employs a multidisciplinary approach, integrating the lens of "the queer gaze," multiple social-historical contexts in relation to the seaside, and critical reception. The first chapter delves into Tuke's portrayal of naked youths, revealing layers of homoerotic desire and voyeurism. Through visual analysis, Tuke's paintings are shown to evoke both childhood innocence and charged intimacy, inviting viewers to question and interpret the subtle sensuality within them. The second chapter examines the significance of the British seaside in Tuke's work, highlighting its idealized portrayal as a utopia of leisure and a masculine homosocial space. The final chapter explores the reception of Tuke's paintings during his lifetime and in current perspectives, revealing a nuanced tension between tradition and innovation in both style and subject. Tuke's depictions of naked youths at the beach occupy a liminal space between convention and novelty, both accepted by the critics of his time as well as the Royal Academy and celebrated by queer fringe groups. Overall, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of Tuke's work while shedding light on broader discussions surrounding the representation of gender and sexuality in art history.

Keywords: homoeroticism, queer gaze, seaside, gender and sexuality, leisure, Victorian era, Edwardian era, critical reception

Table of Contents

Introduction

In 2017, Tate Britain unveiled its groundbreaking exhibition *Queer British Art 1861-1967*, showcasing the diverse artistic expressions of LGBTQ+ identities spanning over a century.[1] Among the featured artists stood Henry Scott Tuke (1858-1929), a British Impressionist painter celebrated for his evocative portrayals of youthful male nudes against the backdrop of the Cornish coast. While Tuke's inclusion in this exhibition may seem straightforward, it prompts a deeper inquiry into the nuances of queerness within his paintings and their reception.

Although historical records lack the substantiation to definitively identify Tuke as homosexual, his lifelong bachelorhood and associations with a circle of homosexual poets and writers suggest a complex engagement with queer themes. Since the 1970s, Tuke's oeuvre has undergone a renaissance within cultural gay circles, characterized by descriptions of his work as homoerotic and emblematic of "the queer gaze."[2]

The inclusion of Tuke's paintings in *Queer British Art 1861-1967* invites speculation on the nature of queerness in art. Questions emerge: Is the artist himself queer? Or is queerness a subjective interpretation imposed by contemporary viewers? Tate Britain's curatorial decision did spark some debate: *The Guardian* criticized the exhibition for its perceived lack of coherence and its attempt to categorize artists solely based on the theme of sexuality.[3] Tuke's paintings, however, illustrate the conflict present within the exhibition perhaps better than any other artwork: they are both traditional and unconventional, both academic and innovative. This thesis intents to examine his paintings in relation to the queer lens his name has become attached to while considering the coastal setting of his paintings and the critical reception to them. It will answer the following overarching research question: How did Henry Scott Tuke's paintings navigate and subvert dominant cultural narratives of gender and sexuality during the late Victorian and Edwardian era, as seen through the intersecting lenses of the queer gaze, the British seaside, and critical reception? This research adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary approach, combining visual analysis, literary research, and an examination of critical reviews. All the paintings used for visual analysis

[1] "Queer British Art 1861-1967," Tate Britain Exhibition, accessed October 1, 2023, https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/queer-british-art-1861-1967.
[2] Catherine Wallace, *Catching the Light: the art and life of Henry Scott Tuke 1858–1929* (Edinburgh: Atelier Books, 2008), 153.
[3] Laura Cumming, "Queer British Art 1861-1967 review: indifferent shades of gay," *The Guardian*, April 9, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/apr/09/queer-art-tate-britain-review-laura-cumming

were accessed digitally and can be found in the appendix.

This thesis is divided into three chapters. Chapter 1 will focus on the concept of the queer gaze and to what extent it presents itself in Tuke's work through an in-depth visual analysis of his paintings featuring nude boys, answering the following sub-research question: How do Henry Scott Tuke's paintings of young, fit men in various states of undress convey homoerotic desire and to what extent can they be contextualized within the framework of the queer gaze?

Chapter 2 will focus on the English coast as the backdrop of Tuke's paintings as seen through four interrelated social-historical contexts, led by the following sub-research question: How did the British seaside, as the setting of Henry Scott Tuke's paintings, reflect the phenomenon of leisure culture in the late Victorian and Edwardian era as well as Tuke's own childhood experiences, and to what extent can it be characterized as both a gendered and a homosocial space?

Lastly, Chapter 3 will look at the reception of Tuke's paintings, both in his lifetime and now. It will explore the paradox between the style and subject of his paintings in relation to reception studies by answering the following sub-question: How were Henry Scott Tuke's paintings of youthful male nudes received during his lifetime, and how have they been reinterpreted and contextualized by subsequent generations of modern critics and queer audiences?

By delving into Tuke's art through these diverse perspectives, this study aims to provide new insights into the homoeroticism supposedly present in his work, the significance of the British seaside as a thematic backdrop, and the varied reception to his paintings over time. Ultimately, this thesis seeks to fill a gap in scholarly discourse by offering a fresh, multifaceted exploration of Henry Scott Tuke's art, contributing to a deeper understanding of the interplay between art, sexuality, and gender in the late Victorian and Edwardian period. Moreover, it underscores the relevance of such inquiries for contemporary discussions surrounding LGBTQ+ representation in historical art.

Chapter 1: Henry Scott Tuke and The Queer Gaze

Chapter 1 will focus on the concept of the "queer gaze" and to what extent it presents itself in Tuke's work through an in-depth visual analysis of *The Critics* (1927), a painting featuring nude boys, answering the following sub-research question: How do Henry Scott Tuke's paintings of young, fit men in various states of undress convey homoerotic desire and to what extent can they be contextualized within the framework of the queer gaze?

The theoretical framework of this chapter will be based on several main concepts: "the gaze," and the queer gaze, voyeurism, and homoeroticism. Literature about the gaze will be based on Michel Foucault, Laura Mulvey, and John Berger. Other literature will be based on gender studies and the male nude in art. The visual characteristics of the queer gaze and homoeroticism will be established to analyze their construction within Tuke's paintings.

1.1 The Queer Gaze in Theory

The concept of the male gaze, initially introduced by art critic John Berger in 1972 in his work *Ways of Seeing*[4] and later expanded upon by feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey in her 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,"[5] examines the objectification of women in visual media, highlighting the contrasting perspectives through which men and women are depicted. The concept of a gaze, both figuratively and philosophically, pertains to an individual's perception and consciousness of others.[6] In 1975, French philosopher Michel Foucault delved into this concept in his work *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, contending that the gaze serves as a tool for exerting domination in a socio-political context. He posited that societal order is established through society's submission to an omnipresent "eye," which surveils everything with its disembodied gaze. This dynamic establishes a form of social power, where we, as subjects, are observed but lack the ability to observe ourselves.[7] Mulvey's theory further intertwines the act of gazing with power dynamics, illustrating the male gaze from the perspective of the viewer, the filmmaker, and the male character embedded within the narrative.[8] In modern interpretations, the male gaze can entail any act of depicting women in visual media and literature from a male, heterosexual perspective, which

[4] John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Classics, 2008), 46-47.
[5] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6–18.
[6] Jennifer Reinhardt, "gaze," *The Chicago School of Media Theory*, accessed January 3, 2023, https://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/mediatheory/keywords/gaze/.
[7] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 205.
[8] Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 14-16.

turns them into sexual objects for the male heterosexual viewer to enjoy.[9] Mulvey's male gaze theory was built on concepts like scopophilia and voyeurism. Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, used the term scopophilia to describe and explore the phenomenon of experiencing pleasure through the act of looking. Similarly, voyeurism describes a sexual interest in watching other people, most often while they are engaged in private and intimate behavior like undressing, bathing, or sexual intercourse.[10] It is often mentioned in the same breath as the male gaze.

In response to the male gaze, feminist theory introduced the female gaze to highlight women as both spectators and subjects with agency.[11] However, this concept faced criticism for neglecting the representation of minorities, like queer people and people of color. The queer gaze arose in response to the binary framework of male and female gazes. It focuses instead on how queer people experience and create art, promoting diversity and inclusivity.[12]

In queer theory, the queer gaze is broadly defined as recognizing how LGBTQ+ individuals perceive the world and each other.[13] It challenges patriarchal and heteronormative norms, placing queerness at its core.[14] While some argue that the authenticity of the queer gaze is enhanced when the creator is queer, others like journalist Amelia Abraham emphasize the importance of the subject in shaping the queer gaze.[15] The concept aims to deconstruct gender-based power dynamics and binary notions of desire, thereby creating a space for all types of identities and narratives, even the ones that are non-conforming and often overlooked in mainstream media.[16]

Despite this intention, the queer gaze is not immune to criticism either. The rapid rise in the popularity of the term "queer gaze" has sparked concerns about its commercialization and commodification. The worry is that corporations may exploit a queer aesthetic and

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[9] Anne W. Eaton, "Feminist Philosophy of Art". *Philosophy Compass* 3, no. 5 (September 2008): 873–76.
[10] Elisabeth Schellekens, "Taking a Moral Perspective: On Voyeurism in Art," *Art and Pornography: Philosophical Essays* 14 (2012): 309–327.
[11] Polina Tatsenko and Nataliia Tatsenko, "A journey through the female gaze: media and art perspective," *British and American Studies. A Journal of Romanian Society of English and American Studies* XXVIII. (2022): 233-34. DOI: 10.35923/BAS.28.24.
[12] Tre'vell Anderson, "What Hollywood can gain by placing the 'queer gaze' in the spotlight," *Los Angeles Times*, March 16, 2018, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-ca-mn-lgbtq-filmmakers-love-simon-20180316-story.html.
[13] Anderson, "Hollywood."
[14] Eliza McDonough, "Radical Queer Gazes: How lesbian and nonbinary contemporary photographers are destabilizing the male gaze," *MA Theses* 72 (2020): 48, https://digitalcommons.sia.edu/stu_theses/72
[15] Amelia Abraham, "Photographers creating work through the queer gaze," *Dazed Digital*, July 3, 2019, https://www.dazeddigital.com/art-photography/article/45069/1/kiss-my-genders-queer-gaze-hayward-catherine-opie-victoria-sin-juliana-huxtable.
[16] Molly Moss, "Thoughts on a Queer Gaze," *3:AM MAGAZINE*, April 3, 2019, https://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/thoughts-on-a-queer-gaze/.

narrative for financial gain, thereby diminishing the radical potential inherent to the queer gaze.[17] This commercialization can contribute to the stereotyping of queer identities, reducing them to simplistic archetypes and overlooking the diverse perspectives that queer art can encompass.[18] Additionally, there is a risk of boxing LGBTQ+ individuals into a singular category defined solely by their queerness, which can be problematic. This narrow focus on queerness within perceived queer art may overshadow other aspects of an artist's identity, life, or work.[19] Advocates for a nuanced approach argue for recognizing the multi-dimensionality of LGBTQ+ individuals to see them beyond their queerness, like heterosexual artists whose work is not automatically assumed to be political either.

Lastly, I should mention that the queer gaze and the concept of homoeroticism are often mentioned together and sometimes even used interchangeably. For this thesis, the following distinction will be made: homoeroticism is primarily concerned with same-sex desire, often in a sensual or sexual context. It is more narrowly focused on the erotic and romantic attraction between same-sex people, often prioritizing aesthetics while celebrating the male or female form.[20] The queer gaze, in contrast, extends beyond sensual or sexual desire between same-sex individuals to include a broader perspective, taking into account counter-narratives that subvert heteronormative norms while also authentically portraying LGBTQ+ experiences. The queer gaze can present itself through "coded language," which is sometimes only recognizable to other queer people, who have taught themselves to look at subtext and read between the lines due to a history of censorship towards and violence against explicit homosexual content. The concepts of the queer gaze and homoeroticism will be explored through a visual analysis of Tuke's painting *The Critics.*

1.2 Visual Analysis of *The Critics* (1927)

The Critics (fig. 1), finished by Tuke in 1927, presents the viewer with a literal rendering of the gaze. It was one out of the two paintings by Tuke included in the *Queer British Art 1861-1967* exhibition by Tate Britain. This inclusion already tells us it was considered to have at least an element of queerness to it, though the exhibition had a broad approach to the term

[17] Adharshila Chatterjee, "Fantastic Bodies and Where to Find Them": Representational Politics of Queer Bodies in Popular Media," in *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 8 (2016): 214.
[18] Chatterjee, "Fantastic Bodies," 214.
[19] Caroline Evans and Lorraine Gamman, "The Gaze Revisited, Or Reviewing Queer Viewing," in *A Queer Romance: Lesbians, Gay Men and Popular Culture*, ed. Paul Burston and Colin Richardson (New York: Routledge, 1995), 20.
[20] Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective (*Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998*),* 17.

"queer," which they chose to use because terms such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender were not recognized identities for most of this period, as well as to avoid the imposing of specific identity labels on artists.[21]

In the painting, there are two young men, one partly undressed and one fully undressed, sitting on a beach with their backs to the viewer, watching a third boy bathing in the water between a few coastal rocks. The sun illuminates their white skin and athletic bodies while the blue-green water glistens in the daylight. The work is typical for Tuke, featuring his signature portrayal of young naked men and boys leisurely spending time at the British seaside: swimming, sailing, fishing, or sunbathing at the beach. It is as much a study of light as a study of bodies. His brushstrokes consist of Impressionist-like short strokes and dots, but the depiction of the boys' bodies is soft and natural. He also typically avoids the color black, instead opting for more naturalist colors. What is most interesting about this painting, however, is the inclusion of the act of gazing within the scene itself. Not only is the viewer watching these boys, but they are also watching each other. By portraying the two boys in the front with their backs to us, a slightly voyeuristic feeling is created within the viewer: the boys are not aware they are being watched, as they are caught in the act of looking at the third boy in the water. At the same time, the viewer shares their perspective, as Tuke has placed our point of view from behind the figures. During the Impressionist period, people participating in bathing or other intimate personal rituals became popular, including scenes of all-male recreational and social activities. These everyday scenes often evoked a sense of voyeurism or spectatorship by showing undressed people (often women) in private moments.[22] The scene in *The Critics* also feels like a private moment that the viewer is intruding on. The little view the viewer get of the surroundings through the boxed-in framing of the two young men makes the painting feel intimate.

The atmosphere in *The Critics* seems relaxed but could read as more charged due to a three-way construction of the gaze. In many of Tuke's nude paintings, a circle of looks is established between the figures. According to Mulvey, within the visual and aesthetic language of cinema, the male gaze is established through three distinct perspectives: the male spectator watching the film, the male individual behind the camera and the male character depicted within the film. As a result, the female character becomes objectified by the camera,

[21] Tate Britain, "Queer British Art."
[22] Kathryn Brown, "The Aesthetics of Presence: Looking at Degas's 'Bathers.'" *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 68, no. 4 (2010): 331–33. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40929541.

the audience, and the male character with whom she shares the screen.[23] Following that logic, the queer gaze could be established from three different perspectives: the queer person watching the film (or artwork), the queer person behind the camera (or canvas), and the queer person represented within the film (or artwork).[24] *The Critics* creates a similar intersection: the youths within the painting are gazing at each other, the viewer is gazing at the youths, and the gaze of Tuke himself as creator is present, as he started these paintings while working with male models who posed for him on location. The concept of the queer gaze can become complicated when the queer identity of the spectator, artist, or subject is unknown, a situation frequently encountered with historical artists or models. It can be argued that by presenting the subjects as male, Tuke subverts Berger's observation that in European art, men take on the role of the watcher and women take on the role of the object.[25] However, if the objectification of women by men in art was critiqued, this could raise similar questions about the queer gaze. When feminist scholars suggested reversing the male gaze, this was met with the warning that a role reversal does not solve the problem of gender inequality or fetishization.[26] It makes one wonder: when the depiction of nude men is voyeuristic, and both the subject and spectator are gay men, which could hypothetically be the case for *The Critic*, what is to separate the queer gaze from the male gaze?

The difference lies in perspective and goal: the male gaze is defined as primarily being occupied with the objectification and sexualization of women from a heterosexual male perspective. The queer gaze separates itself from the male gaze through intention, which is to portray LGBTQ+ experiences authentically. It is driven by the motivation to provide alternative narratives and interpretations of a marginalized, under-represented community.[27] For queer viewers, it can be a powerful experience to gaze at images that reflect the inner self.[28] In the *Los Angeles Times*, journalist Tre'vell Anderson contends that the queer gaze offers room for telling alternative narratives by shifting focus towards connection and intimacy rather than adhering to the conventional heterosexual way of choreographing bodies.[29] Some queer people take it even further and argue that the current queer gaze adheres too much to a rigid framework as well, only taking into account the lesbian or gay male gaze,

[23] Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 14-16.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 46-47.
[26] Natalie Perfetti-Oates, "Chick Flicks and the Straight Female Gaze: Sexual Objectification and Sex Negativity in New Moon, Forgetting Sarah Marshall, Magic Mike, and Fool's Gold," *Gender forum* 51, no. 51 (n.d.): 20-21.
[27] Clifton Snider, "Queer Persona and the Gay Gaze in *Brokeback Mountain*: Story and Film," *Psychological Perspectives* 51, no. 1 (2008): 66.
[28] Snider, "Queer Persona," 66.
[29] Anderson, "Hollywood."

while still appealing to an LGBTQ+ audience without unsettling the straight viewers.[30] Ideally, there should be no categorizing at all. Tuke's true intention behind his nudes might remain vague to us due to the homophobia present in the society in which he was living, which might have affected how he expressed himself. The public's reception of Tuke's art will be further explored in Chapter 3.

Though all speculation about Tuke's sexuality remains just that – speculation, the relationship between him and his models seemed to have crossed certain boundaries between artist and model, even if only one-sided. He was close friends with many of his models, who, after a time of bringing professionals down from London, would be local boys when he moved to Falmouth. Edward John Jackett (1878–1935), Charlie Mitchell (1885–1957), who looked after Tuke's boats, and Jack Rolling are a few well-known examples.[31] Many of these boys were acquaintances: sons of his friends, close neighbors, and of his housekeeper, as well as his own nephew and nephews of family friends. In his will, Tuke left generous amounts of money to some of these models, who were all grown men by then but had modeled for him as boys.[32] He was particularly grief-stricken when one of his favorite models, Nicola Lucciani, died during the First World War, as all of Tuke's regular models would eventually be called upon. Some would tragically not return.[33] As mentioned by Abraham, some queer creators do argue that implicitly someone is more likely to achieve a queer gaze when they are themselves queer, though this is not a requirement. Combined with assumptions about Tuke's sexuality, this knowledge and his idealized portrayal of the naked male form could indicate why *The Critics* and many of his other works feel homoerotic to us, even though nothing explicitly sexual is happening. Furthermore, the queer gaze, unlike homoeroticism, is not inherently erotic. *The Critics* can be an expression of the queer experience without having to be sexual. No genitals are visible, and none of the models are touching, which is characteristic of all Tuke's nudes. His work is predominantly about the pleasures of looking rather than touching, which makes it perhaps more fitting to call the atmosphere sensual rather than sexual, more of a suggestion or implication of sense-gratification for the sake of aesthetic pleasure than anything else. As a result, the erotic act takes place in the mind instead of on the canvas. Nothing is happening, but perhaps something could. Perhaps something is on the verge of happening, and the viewer might catch onto that if they are prepared to look for subtext and

[30] Molly Moss, "Thoughts on a Queer Gaze," *3:AM MAGAZINE,* April 3, 2019**,** https://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/thoughts-on-a-queer-gaze/.
[31] Wallace, *Catching the Light*, 69.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid, 70.

read between the lines.

This will-they-won't-they dichotomy adheres particularly to the queer gaze as described by Tim Wray in "The Queer Gaze." According to author Tim Wray, the queer gaze is a questioning one, constantly occupied with the returned look and if this returned look signals mutual interest, disinterest, or sometimes even hostility.[34] It looks to be reflected, to find a mirroring of similar desire, which turns the queer individual in both object and subject. Queerness had to be hidden from the outside world for a long time and therefore conveyed to other queer people through signals that would be undetectable to straight audiences. These signals are also referred to as "coded language," which means the visual signs are not always obvious at first sight. Appearance, dress codes and conduct would not only serve to construct one's own identity but also to identify other queer people through their clothing, grooming and mannerisms.[35]

Quoting D. A. Miller, Joel Sanders, Professor of Architecture, writes that: "'(p)erhaps the most salient index to male homosexuality, socially speaking, consists precisely in how a man looks at other men.' ... [Q]ueers have had to depend not only on legible signs – clothing, grooming, mannerisms – but on the visibility of the look itself to identify other queers."[36]

Tuke's paintings often evoke this wondering, questioning look, as the subjects never explicitly seem to express their desire. Given the general attitude towards homosexuality in the Victorian and Edwardian era Britain, the lack of explicitly expressed queer desire is not very surprising. Queerness has often been invisible in media and art throughout history, but this has not prevented queer people from identifying with it. According to Grace McNealy, the queer gaze offers the viewer an opportunity to find a possibility of queerness in cinema, even when it is not explicitly shown. By implementing this alternative reading practice, queer viewers can find sustainment in their identification and desire.[37] In "The Hetero Media Gaze in Film and Television," Associate Professor in Media and Inclusivity Christopher Pullen writes that "queer audiences to some degree are coerced into the position of the voyeur, as there is an expectation of absence, and yet there is a drive to continuously find representations of the self."[38] Even though representation is increasing, mainstream media has for a long time

[34] Tim Wray, "The Queer Gaze," *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Bauhaus-Universität Weimar* 4 (2003): 70. Wray, "Queer Gaze," 70.
[35] Wray, "The Queer Gaze." 70-71.
[36] Joel Sanders, *Stud, Architectures of Masculinity* (New York, 1996), 23–24.
[37] Grace McNealy, "Queering the Gaze: Visualizing Desire in Lacanian Film Theory," *Whatever* 4, no. 1 (2021): 440.
[38] Christopher Pullen, "The Hetero Media Gaze in Film and Television," *Straight Girls and Queer Guys* (2016): 43, http://www.jstor.com/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1bgzbtn.8.

lacked central openly queer characters, which is why queer audiences have learned that they will not see themselves reflected on screen. As a result, they become voyeurs in their attempts to find fragments of their own experiences in whatever they are watching.[39] This attempt is not always in vain: as not to upset conservative audiences, history has seen many "queer coded" characters on film and in art, which give off some queer signals, but nothing too overt so they could remain unnoticed by straight viewers. Ambiguity, therefore, was common.[40] To a queer viewer, the homoeroticism in Tuke's depiction of the bodies and the shared looks between the characters might read as more obviously queer than to the straight viewer, who did not have to teach themselves to search for some type of affirmation in the ambiguity and can therefore take an artwork at face value.

There seems to be an agreement that some element of queerness can be detected in Tuke's *The Critics.* Artist and curator Marcus Bunyan, for example, notes that despite the lack of substantiated evidence for the speculations about affairs between Tuke and his Cornish models, it is not difficult to spot a homoerotic undercurrent in *The Critics*.[41] In relation to the name, it could seem like the boys are judging the swimming technique of the third youth in the water, but they could just as well be appraising his physique.[42] Journalist Jeroen Struys also detects the presence of the queer gaze, wondering if the two sitting boys are evaluating the third boy and if Tuke himself felt watched like that by his surroundings.[43] He mentions how the painting feels like almost an intimate memory, an imagination of blissful desire to beauty, people, and summer.[44]

Another reason Tuke's paintings are often considered to be examples of queer art, despite the unconfirmed status of his sexuality, is his embracement of the Uranian world. During the 1880s, Tuke developed a friendship with Oscar Wilde and other homosexual writers and poets who called themselves Uranians during the late 19th century and early 20th century and united behind their love for (or between) adolescent boys.[45] Not only did they champion homosexual desire and emancipation, but they also specifically drew on pederasty as originated from ancient Greece. Pederasty specifically entails the homosexual relationship between a man and a boy (as in adolescent male), with the first taking on the active role in the

[39] Pullen, "The Hetero Media," 46.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Marcus Bunyan, "Review: 'Queer British Art 1861-1967' at Tate Britain, London," *Art Blat*, September 24, 2017. https://artblart.com/2017/09/24/review-queer-british-art-1861-1967-at-tate-britain-london/.
[42] Bunyan, "Review."
[43] Jeroen Struys, "'The Critics' (1926)," *De Standaard*, April 11, 2020.
[44] Struys, "The Critics."
[45] Donald H. Mader, "The Greek mirror: the Uranians and their use of Greece," *Journal of Homosexuality* 49, vol 3-4 (2005): 377.

relationship, including intercourse, and the latter taking on the passive role.[46] Though this may seem contradictory when taking the sexual dynamic into account, Uranian eroticism lied within the pureness of the individual. According to the Uranians, there was a wholesomeness to the almost paternal relationship between a male youth and an older, wiser man, as he could help to shape the adolescent's higher mind.[47] In the poem *Youth*, attributed to Tuke, he mourns the loss of the erotic freedom that had been present in ancient Greece.[48] The ancient world was often used to explore and depict same-sex desire, like the Uranians who used it to legitimize homosexual desire without social repercussions.[49] Tuke, too, made use of this by always preserving the innocence within his nude paintings. However, at the same time, the purity of *The Critics* is what makes it erotic in Uranian terms.

Compared to *The Critics,* Tuke's earlier works relied more on classical imagery. *Hermus at The Pool* (c. 1900, fig. 2), for example, shows an adolescent naked boy standing in the water, adorned with a winged helmet and caduceus, attributes of the Greek god Hermes. The classical symbols are very explicit, though Tuke would abandon these mythological themes in his paintings in favor of regular naked boys swimming and sunbathing like in *The Critics.*

However, the classical influence can still be seen in some of his later works in his depiction of the male body. *The Critics* is somewhat subdued in this, as the boys are sitting and shown from the back only. In *A Bathing Group* (1914, fig. 3), however, one of two depicted boys is standing on the rocky shore holding a towel while strongly resembling a classical sculpture with a similar soft but athletic body, as many of Tuke's ephebic models spotted. His pose also mimics a classic contrapposto pose. The full view of his naked physique invites the viewer to take on a voyeuristic role and appreciate his beauty perhaps even more than is the case in *The Critics*. The vivid Mediterranean color palette of blues and gold evokes a dreamlike Arcadian past.

People have celebrated the male nude since Ancient Greece, when the naked male body was seen as heroic and beautiful, representing the superior sex.[50] Therefore, male bodies in art often looked muscular and flawless to show off their strength, power, and vitality. From the Renaissance onwards, nudes started to become valued for their sensual and aesthetic

[46] Mader, "Greek Mirror," 379.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Wallace, *Catching the Light*, 68.
[49] Mader, "Greek Mirror," 340-341.
[50] Jill Burke, *The Italian Renaissance Nude* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 26.

quality instead of their religious iconographic character.[51] The search for the ideal male form as the height of beauty was a strive shared by many Renaissance artists, the most well-known example being Michelangelo with his statue of *David* (1501-1504).[52] Tuke, similarly, was known to swap the heads and bodies of models to achieve the most perfect form in his paintings.[53] All the paintings of young naked men seem to indicate at least some fascination with the male form on Tuke's part. The subtle classical imagery, as present in *The Bathing Group,* also enhances the sense of homoeroticism. *The Critics*, in comparison, has lost almost all connection with antiquity and classical themes. The scene feels perhaps even relatable to us, despite the idealized depiction of the toned bodies, because the boys sitting in the sand do not appear to be posing in the same way that the boy in *The Bathing Group* is, which almost seems to be for the viewer's pleasure. The atmosphere in *The Critics* reads as more laid-back, though this is further enhanced by the fact that the scene involves three boys. In *The Bathing Group*, only two boys spend time together and share glances, which creates more tension.

In contrast to *The Critics*, earlier works by Tuke often featured larger groups of boys, like in *August Blue* (1893-1894, fig. 4) or *Ruby, Gold and Malachite* (1902, fig. 5). Though it is possible to detect a homoerotic charge due to the all-male ensemble and the nudity, the paintings just as well read as a celebration of boyish youth, freedom, and friendship. In this reading, the boy's disregard for each other's nudity conveys not only their lack of care but also their innocence and purity. As homosexuality was criminalized during Tuke's lifetime, it is not hard to imagine the seemingly innocent interpretation of naked male youths to be the only way in which an artist could openly express same-sex desire. At the same time, modern speculations about Tuke's presumed homosexuality may lead to assumptions about the content of his work as well. When people assume Tuke's art is queer because Tuke himself is speculated to be queer, they risk jumping to conclusions when looking at paintings like *The Critics.* If Tuke did have sexual relations with his models, this aspect of his life should not exclusively be what defines his art. *The Critics* being included in the *Queer British Art* exhibition by Tate Britain risks what the queer gaze was criticized for as well: the artist's sexuality overshadowing their art and institutions, grouping them with other artists due to their presumed queerness. Doing this can reduce the nuance and multi-dimensionality present within Tuke's art. It is more useful to look at the eroticism within his paintings than to

[51] Burke, *Renaissance Nude*, 28.
[52] John T. Paoletti, "Introduction," in *Michelangelo's David: Florentine History and Civic Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 6.
[53] Wallace, *Catching the Light*, 69.

speculate about his sexuality, as it is rare to find old documents explicitly stating same-sex relations. Even for heterosexual relationships, this type of evidence is hard to find. Furthermore, by wanting to reach a definitive conclusion by separating the pure from the erotic, people might be led to make over-simplifying either-or statements: either Tuke's nude paintings are fully innocent portrayals of youth, or the perceived homoeroticism within them is a product of deeply imbalanced homosexual power relationship within his personal life. Instead, the balance between these two elements should be recognized and the subjectivity that is at the heart of the queer gaze should be acknowledged.

Space for definable visual elements becomes complicated when the concept of the queer gaze itself is defined by diversity and the abolishment of categorization. The three-way establishment of the gaze as developed by Mulvey in combination with the nudity, private setting and the beauty of boy's bodies can evoke a sense of blossoming queer desire, but there is always a lack of certainty present at the same time. From a queer perspective, the literal inclusion of gazing between same-sex subjects can easily be read as an example of the queer gaze if defined by Wray's searching for reciprocation in one's desire through intersecting looks and coded language. However, if *The Critics* is truly defined by anything, it is its ambiguity. By remaining implicit instead of explicit and sensual rather than sexual, the painting leaves it up to the viewer to decide what is happening between the male youths. It invites them to question, wonder, and fill in the blanks in our heads as they become voyeurs to intimate moments. The tension within Tuke's paintings is created by what remains hidden and what is revealed. It is all about the *what-if*: the mere possibility of what *could* happen between these youthful boys, frolicking around all by themselves on the seashore, but ultimately the tension remains unresolved. Because of this, Tuke's nude paintings retain their sense of innocence, which leaves the viewer to reconcile the purity with the homoerotic. This interplay of intimacy and ambiguity, combined with the act of gazing and Tuke's own possible queerness, contribute to a complex visual narrative. In conclusion, the presence of the queer gaze in *The Critics* remains, as is the case for so many of Tuke's paintings, suggestive rather than definitive, but perhaps it simply had to be this elusive to be allowed to exist at all.

Chapter 2: The British Seaside in Social Historical Contexts

This chapter shifts to what surrounds the naked youths in Henry Scott Tuke's paintings: the British seaside. Tuke had a particular fondness for the seaside, which developed early on in his childhood when he spent much time at the beaches of Falmouth.[54] Impressionist painters were often inspired by the sea and the way in which light reflected on water, which was no different for Tuke.[55] The following sub-question will lead Chapter 2: How did the British seaside, as the setting of Henry Scott Tuke's paintings, reflect the phenomenon of leisure culture in the late Victorian and Edwardian era as well as Tuke's own childhood experiences, and to what extent can it be characterized as both a gendered and a homosocial space? This question will be explored by considering the backdrop of Tuke's paintings through four different but interrelated socio-historical contexts: the development of leisure culture during the late Victorian and Edwardian era, Tuke's childhood and life in Falmouth, the phenomenon of nude bathing and public nudity in relation to gender, and the beach as a homosocial space. The British seaside, as depicted in Tuke's paintings, will be considered a space suited for masculinity and homosexual interactions. The depiction of the British seaside in Impressionism will serve as a basis for comparing Tuke's paintings, as several of his works will undergo visual analysis, focusing on the natural environment in his male nudes rather than the figures.

2.1 Leisure Culture in the late Victorian and Edwardian era

In Tuke's *August Blue* (1893, fig. 4), a familiar scene can be seen: a group of undressed adolescent boys spending time together at the seaside. One boy hangs on to the side of a rowing boat with his back to us; another boy is standing in the boat while holding a towel, and the other two are sitting in the boat, one of them sunbathing and the other holding the oars. The horizon is visible, but apart from that, there is little to indicate a precise location. Considering the date, the painting was likely created in the harbor of Falmouth, where Tuke lived at the time.[56] This painting characteristically depicts the British seaside as an idyllic location: a place of sunlight, peace and leisure. The calm aquamarine sea exists of loose brushstrokes, speckled with sunlight. Not all Tuke's paintings feature a visible sky, but in this painting, a bright, half-cloudy sky can be seen in the background, adorned by tall sailing

[54] Wallace, *Catching the Light*, 37-40.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid, 53.

ships. Tuke turns the British seaside into a utopian paradise, partly through his natural depiction of light and color, but the activities of the figures scattered on these British beaches play an important role, too. The adolescent boys featured in his paintings are involved in leisurely activities: sunbathing, bathing in the sea, and sailing in a small boat. They are recreationally enjoying the natural environment surrounding them.

During the mid-18th century, it first became fashionable in Britain to spend the holiday by the sea.[57] Historically, people have experienced the sea in different, contradictory ways: serene but powerful, beautiful but dangerous. Up to the 18th century, the sea was often a fearful place, one of mythological beasts and monsters, pirates and biblical tempests. During the Romanticism movement, which reached its height right before Tuke was born, people became obsessed with the natural world: the sea turned into something wild and inspirational of both great beauty and great terror.[58] After this, the seaside started to become associated with health and became a privilege of the upper-class. It was only during the Victorian era that a visit to the seaside became affordable to more classes than just the wealthy.[59] According to art historian Christiana Payne, this was mostly the result of engineering advancements during the Industrial Revolution: roads, railways and bridges increased accessibility to places, including the coast, for those who did not live near the sea. The train was an essential form of transportation. The railway arrived in the 1830s and developed further during the 1840s, which made traveling easier.[60] Historian John Walton describes how quiet coastal villages, previously only occupied with fishing, turned into tourist attractions.[61] Seaside resorts popped up and were visited by Victorian tradesmen and white-collar workers in search of a relaxing holiday with more money to spend.[62] However, as the 19th century progressed, the price of rail travel dropped, and seaside holidays became available to the masses.[63] In 1871, the Bank Holidays Act turned some days of the year into official holidays, when banks and offices would close.[64] This meant that people could spend multiple days at the seaside if they could afford overnight stays. By the end of the 19th century, it was even possible for ordinary manual workers to afford a day trip to the seaside: this was especially popular among the working class because the seaside was a public space, free for everyone to visit if one was not

[57] Alain Corbin, *The Lure of the Sea: The Discovery of the Seaside in the Western World, 1750-1840* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 57.
[58] Corbin, *The Lure*, 57.
[59] Christiana Payne, "Modernity at the Seaside," *Oxford Art Journal* 33, no. 2 (2010): 240.
[60] Payne, "Modernity," 239-240.
[61] John K. Walton, *The English Seaside Resort* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), 45.
[62] Walton, *The English Seaside Resort*, 45.
[63] Corbin, *The Lure*, 86.
[64] Ibid.

looking to spend the night.[65] This turned the British seaside into a social space, where people from different backgrounds would come together seeking amusement.[66] People from all levels of Victorian society would bathe, take walks along the promenade, let their children play in the sand, ride donkeys, watch a Punch and Judy show, sail, and enjoy seafood like fish and chips.[67] Pleasure piers would also become a common phenomenon, offering seaside attractions and other forms of entertainment.[68]

The increase in visits to the seaside was part of the "Leisure Revolution" that developed during the 19th century.[69] According to historian Hugh Cunningham: "There is nothing in the leisure of today which was not visible in 1880."[70] Though it may seem obvious to us now, leisure was historically a privilege of the upper class, only available to those with money and time to spare. This started to change from the mid-19th century onward: wages began to grow, which meant the working class could afford more things, and the hours of work started to decline, which meant people had more time for leisure activities. The 1874 Factory Act limited the hours of the workweek to a maximum of 56.5 hours and eventually moved toward an eight-hour workday. Annual vacations also became more normalized, spreading from white-collar workers to the working class.[71] When combined with increasing literacy, ease of travel, inexpensive railway fares, widespread banking holidays, the fading of opposition against secular activities on Sundays, and a broadened sense of community which had grown in Britain, leisure culture suddenly boomed among all classes during the late Victorian era.[72] This shift from a work-oriented lifestyle to leisure and recreation would continue into the Edwardian era.

Still, leisure culture did not look the same for all classes. The Victorian middle class increasingly shaped the idea of leisure culture after 1850 in reaction to the appalling conditions of the urban poor.[73] Working-class leisure activities were often associated with drunkenness and public rowdiness. The middle class sought to reform both the lower and upper classes by formulating leisure activities based on productivity, respectability, and self-justification. Leisure had to be moral and productive to the country and, above all, rational.

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[65] Payne, "Modernity," 240.
[66] John Hannavy, *The English Seaside in Victorian and Edwardian Times* (Miami: Parkwest Publications, 2003), 16.
[67] Hannavy, *The English Seaside*, 19.
[68] Walton, *The English Seaside Resort*, 156.
[69] Hugh Cunningham, *Leisure in the Industrial Revolution c. 1780-c1880* (London: Croom Helm, 1980), 20-21.
[70] Cunningham, *Leisure c. 1780-c1880*, 142.
[71] Ibid, 21-22.
[72] Hugh Cunningham, *Leisure in The Working Class England, 1875-1914*. (London: Croom Helm, 1985), 8-20.
[73] Peter Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England: Rational Recreation and the Contest for Control, 1830-1885* (London: Routledge, 1978), 8.

This manifested itself in athleticism and town parks at first, but the increasing respectability of the seaside would make it a similar target for the projection of social idealism.[74] The wholesome ambiance created within Tuke's paintings reflects the Victorian attitude by portraying the British seaside as a place of health, recreation, and sociability. The youths in his paintings are based on working-class models, but they are depicted as golden, healthy, and carefree, not as the grimy and worn-out figures associated with urban factory work.[75] With this, Tuke presents a counter-narrative to the reformist approach of the middle class, portraying working-class youths as happy, unburdened, and untouched by the grim realities of rough labor, while at the same proving right the theory that the seaside would be healing to the lower classes. The class dynamic in Tuke's paintings, in relation to leisure and the natural environment, is therefore always tied up with the idea of pure masculinity and the rural allure of the British seaside. It is now known that many of the strapping young models of Tuke's paintings would meet an untimely death during the First World War, yet even in his later works, Tuke would retain his idyllic depiction. The color usage in *August Blue* can be considered both vibrant and serene. Even though the environment depicted is natural, it feels somewhat romanticized, both in the beauty of the boys and the beauty of the landscape surrounding them. *August Blue* reflects the general romanticization of leisure time at the British seaside during the late Victorian and early Edwardian era.

2.2 Henry Scott Tuke's Childhood

Tuke's utopic depictions of the British seaside were more than just reflections of the time: they also seem to reflect his love for the environment. As a young boy, he grew up in Falmouth after moving there with his family in 1859.[76] Art historian Catharine Wallace mentions in her biography of Tuke how the long summer days spent swimming in the sea and playing on the beach left a lasting impression on Tuke, who formed many firm friendships at this young age. She also mentions that, around this time, he discovered his love for nude sea bathing in Falmouth, a recreational activity he would continue engaging in with age. It is not hard to imagine paintings like *August Blue* to be inspired by Tuke's own experiences as an adolescent, as he had a happy, peaceful childhood.[77]

Before Tuke moved to Falmouth, he was part of the Newlyn School of Painters in

[74] Bailey, *Leisure and Class*, 9-13.
[75] Law, "Erotics of Display."
[76] Wallace, *Catching the Light*, 13.
[77] Ibid, 13-17.

1883, a movement defined by an art colony of artists situated in or near the fishing village Newlyn, on the English coast, from the late 19th century to the early 20th century. They were inspired by the environment: natural lighting, for the study of light and painting *en plein air*, cheap living, and a fascination for the working life at sea and everyday life around the harbor.[78] As Tuke's style was more Impressionist than the other Newlyn painters, he only stayed a short time. After this, he would develop his signature paintings of naked male youths frolicking about in the British seaside as presented in *August Blue*, departing from the everyday life harbor scenes that characterized the Newlyn School.[79]

After Tuke moved to Falmouth in 1885, he used the beaches of Falmouth as the setting for his paintings (fig. 6, fig. 7). His focus was more often on quiet villages and secluded coves rather than the busy seaside resorts. His later paintings, like *The Critics*, would focus more on the figures within the landscape, framing them closely so that much of the environment has become obscured. In *August Blue*, some sailing ships are portrayed in the background, hinting at Tuke's background as a maritime painter. Though he was most well-known for his figurative artworks, he was also an established maritime painter, and he produced many paintings of majestic sailing ships, mainly in watercolor.[80] Tuke's enduring fascination with the exquisite craftsmanship of fully rigged ships was a notable aspect of his artistic inspiration. According to Emmanuel Cooper, he demonstrated the ability to draw these vessels from memory from an early age.[81] In *A French Barque in Falmouth Bay* (1902, fig. 8), he still focused on portraits of sailing ships without the presence of adolescent boys like in *August Blue*. His choice to relocate to Falmouth in 1885 was, in part, shaped by the continual allure of the ships that graced the local surroundings.[82] The other reason, according to Wallace, was that the mild climate of Falmouth, with warmer temperatures and more sunny days, was more fit for nude bathing.[83] This was attractive to Tuke not only because he was fond of nude bathing but also because it would make it easier for him to position his models outside in the nude, which would be harder to do if it was too cold or rainy. He started many of his paintings on location, working *en plein air* to accurately capture the natural lighting, and would finish them in his studio.[84] To accurately capture the reflection of sunlight on water

[78] Betsy Cogger Rezelman, "THE NEWLYN ARTISTS AND THEIR PLACE IN LATE VICTORIAN ART" (PhD diss., Bloomington: Indiana University, 1984): 87.
[79] Wallace, *Catching the Light*, 128.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Emmanuel Cooper, *The Life and Work of Henry Scott Tuke: A Monograph* (London: Éditions Aubrey Walter, 1997), 35.
[82] Cooper, *Life and Work*, 35.
[83] Wallace, *Catching the Light*, 53.
[84] Ibid, 68.

and flesh, like in *August Blue*, the climate of Falmouth needed to be relatively sunny. According to his own words, Tuke considered the outdoors his studio, which is why the reflection of sunlight on the sea looks so fresh and realistic.[85] He established his residence at Swanpool and acquired a fishing boat named "Julie of Nantes" for £40, which he transformed into a floating studio and living space. Additionally, he rented two rooms in Pennance Cottage, strategically located between Pennance Point and Swanpool Beach. While the cottage served as his primary base until his passing, he frequently lived aboard boats for a nice view of the harbor.[86] He regularly traveled between Falmouth and London for his work. However, his love for the seaside would always prevail over city life, which is visible in the idyllic way he depicts the landscape in his paintings.

2.3 Nudity, Bathing, and Gender

Tuke was not alone in his enjoyment of nude sea bathing. Bathing was the most popular activity while visiting the British seaside. In the 18th century, the idea was raised that seawater had healing abilities and could be considered a cure for illnesses ranging from general malaise to broken bones.[87] The act of sea bathing, therefore, was supposed to have general health benefits and a visit to the seaside was even prescribed by doctors.[88] The association between bathing and health goes back to the ancient Greeks, who were the first to suggest that bathing in water could be used not only for hygiene and cleanliness but also for therapeutic purposes. Spas spread throughout Europe and beyond during the expansion of the Roman Empire, becoming a place where people came to relax, socialize, and get medical treatment for all types of ailments.[89] But while spring water was considered to have medicinal purposes for decades, the idea that the seaside as a place could be purifying and healing was relatively new. The health benefits soon bled into recreational pleasure, and Victorians quickly became fond of swimming for more than just health reasons.[90]

Sea bathing is a central act in Tuke's paintings, including *August Blue*. One of the boys is enjoying the water while hanging onto the boat. Sea bathing and swimming were some of the most popular leisure activities at the seaside during the late Victorian and

[85] Catherine Wallace, *Henry Scott Tuke: paintings from Cornwall* (The Royal Cornwall Polytechnic Society, 2008), 165.
[86] Wallace, *Paintings from Cornwall*, 165.
[87] John Hassan, *The Seaside, Health and the Environment in England and Wales since 1800* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 9.
[88] Hassan, *The Seaside*, 9.
[89] Walton, *The English Seaside Resort*, 205.
[90] Corbin, *The Lure*, 59.

Edwardian eras. Both swimsuits and bathing machines, which were cart-like devices that allowed people to privately change into swimwear at the beach, developed in this period (fig. 9).[91] Though there was no official law against nude swimming in the United Kingdom, towns were free to make their own laws. In natural waters like the sea, men and boys often swam naked while women used bathing machines and were generally expected to wear bathing costumes that modestly covered most of the body.[92] The Victorian era, along with the Edwardian era, had quite stringent social rules, with a clear difference in the code for public display and the one for private life. Victorian morality was often characterized by puritanical etiquette, which led to the use of the bathing machine for example, but this should not be confused with lack of knowledge: it was still possible to see people bathing in the nude.[93] For most of the 19th century, swimming and sea bathing was typically segregated by gender.[94] According to John Travis, however, bathing areas designated to men or women were not often policed, which is why mixed bathing still occurred.[95] At the turn of the century, commercial pressure to reintroduce mixed bathing so families could spend their holiday together started to outweigh the moral pressures: sea bathing was overwhelmingly done for pleasure by now and the segregated beaches disappeared, which introduced bathing costumes for men.[96] Nude bathing mostly ceased but boys up to the age of fifteen would often still swim and play naked at the beach, which was criticized by some but seen as harmless by others, because the boys were still young enough to be considered innocent (fig. 10).[97]

The act of sea bathing was above all a gendered one because leisure in general was a primarily male activity, with the exception of a few middle-class women.[98] Despite the increase of free time to spend, working-class women were often occupied with housekeeping and in the upper-class society, gender roles prevented women from participating in some of the leisure activities that men participated in.[99] In the particular case of visiting the seaside, it was not as common for women to bathe as it was for men, and if they did, they had to be properly covered up (if they did participate in nude bathing, they did so in secret).[100] Apart

[91] Hannavy, *The English Seaside*, 23.
[92] Walton, *The English Seaside Resort*, 193.
[93] Ibid.
[94] John Travis, "Sea-bathing from 1730 to 1900," in Stephen Fisher (ed) *Recreation and the Sea* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997), 15.
[95] Travis, "Sea-bathing," 15.
[96] Walton, *The English Seaside Resort*, 193-194.
[97] Travis, "Sea-bathing," 23.
[98] Leonore Davidoff, "Class and Gender in Victorian England: The Diaries of Arthur J. Munby and Hannah Cullwick," *Feminist Studies* 5, no. 1 (1979): 88.
[99] Davidoff, "Class and Gender," 89.
[100] Travis, "Sea-bathing," 23.

from female nudity being considered inappropriate, the beauty ideals for women during the late 19th and early 20th century involved the desire for white skin, preferably as pale as possible. Researcher Veronica Giannotta mentions how the act of sunbathing was therefore not popular among middle to upper-class women, both because of the racial superiority of whiteness but also the association of tan skin with the lower classes, who more often had to work outside.[101] As beauty standards were more prevalent for women, men did not have to adhere to these standards as strictly and went outside more often into direct sunlight. Especially for working-class men, sunbathing and tanning would be more common.[102]

In *August Blue*, the subjects are pale-skinned, but they are openly sunbathing without any attempt to shield their skin from the sun by wearing clothes or using parasols. There are no swimsuits or bathing machines present; the subjects are either naked or in various stages of undress. Since the subjects are both male and adolescent, this act of nude bathing can be considered common for the time and mostly innocent. Because of societal rules on propriety, nude bathing was a predominantly male leisure activity.[103] This made the British seaside a predominantly masculine space. Both in leisure and labor, the seaside was occupied by men rather than women. The maritime industry was a male-dominated one, up to the point that women were forbidden from sailing on merchant ships or military vessels.[104] In terms of spending time near the sea for pleasure, it was a place fit for male camaraderie, where young boys could play around freely in a natural environment.[105] While some seascape artists of the time would portray the seaside featuring a diverse range of people, from men and women to children, as they were taking part in dressed activities, like taking a stroll on the beach, Tuke's paintings exclusively feature these male adolescents. He was not fully alone in his depiction of this topic, though he was unique in having his oeuvre exist almost entirely out of these male nudes.

2.4 The Beach as a Homosocial Space

The phenomenon of gendered spaces leads directly to the following concept and last social-historical context: the homosocial space. According to English Professor Lavaughn Towell,

[101] Veronica Giannotta, "Drop Dead Gorgeous: Beauty and Whiteness in Victorian England," *The General* 8 (2023): 73.
[102] Gionnotta, "Drop Dead Gorgeous," 83.
[103] Travis, "Sea-bathing," 16.
[104] Jesse Ransley, "Boats Are for Boys: Queering Maritime Archaeology," *World Archaeology* 37, no. 4 (2005): 621–623.
[105] Ransley, "Boats Are for Boys," 622.

social environments where members of the same sex, most often men, could interact and socialize with one another, often in a context where these same-sex interactions were encouraged or even forced, qualify as homosocial spaces.[106] These homosocial spaces are characterized by an absence of women or, in the case of all-female spaces, an absence of men. The term "homosocial" should not be confused with "homosexual", however. While both terms involve same-sex interactions, "homosocial" refers to social interactions between people of the same gender, whereas "homosexual" pertains to romantic or sexual attraction between people of the same sex.[107] Homosocial spaces primarily involve social interactions, while homosexual spaces are associated with romantic or sexual contexts.

By occupying the British seaside with boys only, Tuke frames it as a predominantly masculine space while simultaneously presenting it as a place of socialization. Tuke's subjects almost always interact in some way, whether engaging in conversation, sharing looks, or participating in group leisure activities. In *August Blue,* there is an interaction between interlocking gazes between the boys and the shared activity of sailing and bathing in which they are engaging. Even when Tuke focuses on solitary figures, like in *Boy on a Beach* (1901, fig. 11), there is still a hint of sociability. This depiction reflects the idea of the Victorian and Edwardian seaside as a communal space that invites social interaction. Though the beach is a public space, Tuke's scenes often feel private, as the boys are always in small groups without other people around. No other seaside visitors are shown, and there are no signs of habitation in the background. This creates a sense of social freedom. All the interactions are between boys, and though none of them are explicitly sexual, they can read as homoerotically charged, as discussed in Chapter 1. By focusing on male subjects in a setting that women would have trouble entering due to social boundaries around gender and nudity, the British seaside becomes a place fit for same-sex interaction. The setting is both public and private, meaning the boys in the painting can interact at liberty, without social restrictions or surveillance.

All-male environments like this had the potential to become fertile ground for homosocial interaction, resulting in homosocial spaces. In a homosocial space, men or women are free to socialize without social or political restraints, which were often placed upon them by the restrictiveness of Victorian and Edwardian society.[108] These same-sex interaction-based locations could be focused on queer men or queer women. For men, places included

[106] Lavaughn Towell, "Homosocial Spaces and Canonicity in the Victorian and Edwardian Eras," *Journal of Literature, Language and Linguistics* 1, no. 1 (2007): 2.
[107] Towell, "Homosocial Spaces," 2.
[108] Ibid.

men's clubs, university fraternities, sports teams, racetracks, or other social venues where they could interact freely and separate from women.[109] In the Victorian era, The Labouchere Amendment to the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885 made all homosexual acts, specifically between men as lesbian acts were not recognized, illegal in Britain.[110] Those convicted of sodomy could face years of imprisonment, which often included hard labor and abuse.[111] A homosexual sub-culture was yet very much present in Victorian and Edwardian Britain.[112] In the 19th century, the approach most often taken to homosexuality was to cover it up. The prosecution of Oscar Wilde, a friend of Tuke, brought the subject to the public eye and the press for the first time.[113] Homosexual writers, poets, and artists like Oscar Wilde had been coming together in homosocial groups for social bonding, like the Uranians, for years.[114] Tuke must have therefore been familiar with homosocial spaces, further motivated by his love for the seaside and the leisure act of nude bathing. By characterizing the British seaside, and the beaches of Falmouth in particular, as a sociable all-male environment in his paintings, Tuke turns this environment into a homosocial space suited for homosocial interaction while overt sexuality remains avoided.

The sense of pure masculinity is further motivated by the ruralness of Tuke's depiction of the seaside. In discussing his artistic approach, Tuke is well-known for preferring local working-class boys from Falmouth as his models over professional ones from London.[115] This choice highlights a contrast between the pure masculinity he captures in the rural utopia of Falmouth and the corrupting masculinity associated with urban life, which was exemplified by scandals like the Cleveland Street scandal in London.[116] This scandal involved the police's discovery of a homosexual male brothel in 1889.[117] The male prostitutes also worked as telegraph messenger boys and many clients were said to have been upper-class figures, which fueled the attitude of the time that homosexuality was a vice of the aristocratic, corrupting lower-class male youths.[118] Tuke's paintings, in stark contrast, present scenes far removed

[109] Ibid.
[110] Ari Adut, "A Theory of Scandal: Victorians, Homosexuality, and the Fall of Oscar Wilde," *American Journal of Sociology* 111, no. 1 (2005): 215-216.
[111] Adut, "Theory of Scandal," 216.
[112] Towell, "Homosocial Spaces," 3.
[113] Adut, "Theory of Scandal," 215-217.
[114] Towell, "Homosocial Spaces," 3.
[115] Jonathan Law, "1912: Henry Scott Tuke and the Erotics of Display," in *The Royal Academy of Arts Summer Exhibition: A Chronicle, 1769–2018*, ed. Mark Hallett, Sarah Victoria Turner and Jessica Feather (London: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2018).
[116] Law, "Erotics of Display."
[117] Montgomery Hyde, *The Cleveland Street Scandal* (London: W. H. Allen, 1976), 45.
[118] Hyde, *The Cleveland Street*, 45.

from this urban seedy underbelly. Instead, they depict a utopian neverland, where viewers can envision themselves swimming with the boys in an idyllic environment. When considering this idea of the corrupt masculinity of the town, it is important to note that the youths in Tuke's paintings like *August Blue* are rustic and working-class yet removed from labor.

In conclusion, during the late Victorian and Edwardian era in which Tuke was active, the British seaside became a symbol of relaxation, health, and communal enjoyment as the "Leisure Revolution" and other societal shifts allowed different classes, including the working class, to partake in seaside activities like sea bathing and sunbathing, which is reflected extensively in Tuke's paintings of male youths in the seaside. Tuke's idyllic depiction of this environment, like in *August Blue,* is characterized by natural light, vibrant colors, and leisurely activities and projects a utopian vision of the British seaside, albeit a gendered one. Tuke's connection to Falmouth, his choice of local male models, and his background as a maritime painter further shape the rural and idealized nature of his paintings. His work presents the British seaside as a predominantly masculine place, reflecting the reality of women not having access to the same public locations and leisure activities as men during the Victorian and Edwardian eras due to social restrictions. The same-sex interactions present in his paintings, free from societal restraints, create a sense of social freedom and turn the seaside into a masculine homosocial space. In the transition to Chapter 3, the environmental elements surrounding the figures in Tuke's paintings will help provide additional insight into the reception to Tuke's art.

Chapter 3: Henry Scott Tuke and the Reception of his Paintings

In the final chapter of this thesis, the reception to Henry Scott Tuke's paintings of naked youths at the British seaside will be explored, both back in his lifetime and now. Nowadays, his art has seen a resurgence in popularity for the perceived homoerotic undertones present within his work but during the late Victorian and early Edwardian era, the style of his paintings was hardly groundbreaking: his brushstrokes and technique were almost traditional during the later years of the Impressionist movement. Therefore, the way in which Tuke's art diverged from the norm perhaps lies more in what is being depicted in his paintings. This chapter will explore the paradox between the style and subject of his male nudes in relation to public and critical reception by answering the following research question*:* How were Henry Scott Tuke's paintings of youthful male nudes received in their original historical context, and how have they been reinterpreted and contextualized by subsequent generations of modern critics and queer audiences? Utilizing reception studies as a basis for theory, the question will be answered through the analysis of a select few critical reviews on exhibitions of Tuke's art and literature on public reactions while considering the changing interpretations.

Before diving into the analysis, some theoretical terms on reception need to be cleared up. According to university professor Robert C. Holub, critical reception refers to the assessment, evaluation, and response that a creative work receives from critics, scholars, and the public. Reception theory, in short, focuses on the way in which audiences interpret media messages and make meaning out of them. This suggests that, according to reception theory, media messages are not fixed but open to interpretation. The audience's interpretation, in return, is influenced by their personal, cultural, and social experiences.[119]

Reception theory first emerged in the late 1960s in the field of literary studies.[120] German academic Hans Robert Jauss first introduced the idea of a reader's prior knowledge and expectations affecting their interpretation of a text. He called this concept the "horizon of expectations."[121] Later, cultural theorist Stuart Hall developed the encoding/decoding model of communication in his 1973 essay "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse." In this essay, he argued that producers of media encode their "texts" (literature, film, or other creative work) with specific meanings, but audiences might decode these texts differently because of their cultural background, values, experiences, and the expectations that come with

[119] Robert C. Holub, *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1984), 21-22.
[120] Holub, *Reception Theory*, 116.
[121] Hans Robert Jauss, "Toward an Aesthetic of Reception," *Theory of Literary Production* (1982): 193-240, 19.

this. Meaning, therefore, is not inherent to a text but is created in the space where text and reader intersect.[122] According to Hall, there are three stages the audience goes through when interpreting text: dominant, negotiated, and oppositional. Dominant reading means an audience agrees with the intended meaning of a text; their interpretation aligns with that of the creator.[123] In this case, they often share the same cultural or social background as the creator. A negotiated reading occurs when the intended meaning of a text is partly accepted by an audience, but they might have some different interpretations because of a different background, for example. Lastly, oppositional reading means an audience rejects the intended meaning of the text entirely.[124]

Holub describes some criticism directed at reception theory, for one that it treats the audiences as homogenous groups instead of considering the diversity of individual interpretations.[125] Others criticize the emphasis that is put on the audience, which neglects the role of the creator. Furthermore, the impact of larger social and political structures on audiences might be overlooked.[126]

When discussing art, interpretation entails explaining an artwork's meaning. When looking at art from a reception perspective, the Impressionist movement is especially interesting when considering that the name came from a critic ridiculing Claude Monet's painting *Impression, soleil levant* (1872).[127] Reception to art evolved more quickly than ever before following the emergence of Impressionism. This was not only the result of a rise in innovative and experimental art but also due to great advancements in the printing press.

In 1814, *The Times* adopted a printing press with the capacity to produce 1,100 impressions per hour, a technological advancement that allowed for dual-sided printing.[128] This breakthrough made newspapers more affordable and expanded their accessibility to a broader segment of the population. The introduction of wood pulp papermaking in the 1840s significantly decreased the cost of newsprint as well.[129] As literacy rates climbed during the 19th century, the demand for newspapers escalated, transforming news as people knew it. In the 1880s, London newspapers adopted a new journalistic writing style that had become

[122] Stuart Hall, "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse," in *CCCS Selected Working Papers* 2, ed. Ann Gray (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 1973), 386.
[123] Hall, "Encoding and Decoding," 387-390.
[124] Ibid.
[125] Holub, *Reception Theory*, 154.
[126] Ibid.
[127] Gary Tinterow and Henri Loyrette, *Origins of Impressionism* (New York: Harry N Abrams Inc., 1994), 114.
[128] James Moran, *Printing Presses: History and Development from the 15th Century to Modern Times* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 192.
[129] Moran, *Printing Presses*, 193.

popular in New York. *The Times* would stand out as one of the world's first newspapers to achieve mass circulation, providing critics with a bigger audience.[130] Exhibition reviews and art criticism would become more widespread and carried increasing weight in how art was perceived.[131] Tuke found himself at an interesting intersection between rapidly developing abstractionism and conservative academicism in an art world where critical reception became more important than ever.

3.1 Critical Reviews in the late Victorian and Edwardian era

Tuke's popularity in modern queer art circles has given Tuke somewhat of a modern-day cult status. However, it seems that Tuke received his less popularity from alternative fringe groups and more from traditional institutions like the Royal Academy during his lifetime. Wallace mentions how Tuke was academically trained at the Slade School of Art by artist Alphonse Legros and the President of the Royal Academy of Arts, Sir Edward Poynter. He received a scholarship in his early twenties, which allowed him to travel to Italy in 1880, where he would first start doing oil studies of nude male youths. He lived in Paris from 1881 to 1883, studying under French history painter Jean-Paul Laurens.[132] After briefly joining the Newlyn School, Tuke would create his full first painting of naked youths at the seaside in 1884, called *Summertime*, depicting two local boys.[133] Up to the 1890s, Tuke would attempt to incorporate mythological contexts into his male nudes. The critics, however, did not favor these works, which they dubbed too formal, flaccid, and lifeless.[134] After abandoning these classical themes that left the public unconvinced, he would truly find his footing in his paintings of nude local boys bathing and sailing, incorporating a freer painting style and using fresher, brighter colors. This would prove to be his most successful formula; Tuke created a few female nudes during this period, but they were never as popular as his male nudes.[135] Despite also being a well-regarded maritime artist and portraitist, which generated some of his income by means of commissions, the male nudes seemed to be what truly set him apart from his peers and provided him his considerable reputation. At the turn of the century, in 1900, he was selected as an Associate of the Royal Academy of Arts, and the Royal Cornwall

[130] Aled Jones, *Powers of the Press: Newspapers, Power and the Public in Nineteenth-Century England* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1996), 74.
[131] Jones, *Powers of the Press*, 77.
[132] Wallace, *Catching the Light*, 19-29.
[133] Wallace, *Paintings from Cornwall*, 31.
[134] Wallace, *Catching the Light*, 53-54.
[135] Ibid.

Polytechnic Society held a banquet in his name as a result. He would also be rewarded by the Royal Watercolour Society. Fourteen years later, he would be upgraded to Royal Academician to the Royal Academy, becoming a Full Member. Several of his most popular male nudes would be purchased by major art galleries, such as Leeds Art Gallery and Tate, London.[136] He also established his own art gallery in Falmouth for commercial outlet.[137] Tuke would mostly retain his success throughout his lifetime, though in the wake of the First World War, his idealized depictions of adolescent boys would become to be considered somewhat outdated.[138] By the year of 1928, his work was no longer in fashion, even becoming the subject of mild ridicule in cartoons by the press as a result of his repetitive subject matter.[139] Eventually Tuke would pass away in 1929, in Falmouth, after which his reputation rapidly faded, leading him further into obscurity.[140]

Tuke's established reputation, acceptance by the Royal Academy and successful career were no small achievements considering the subject matter of his paintings, which is nowadays often assumed to be queer art. It seems unlikely, however, that his painting *The Critics* would have been displayed in the Leamington Spa art gallery if there was the slightest inclination that the painting's contents were, in some way, queer.

Clare Barlow, the curator of *Queer British Art*, has discussed the reception of two of Tuke's paintings of naked youths which were displayed at the Summer Exhibition in 1912, considering them in the context of the Uranians.[141] As Tuke exhibited at the Royal Academy from 1889 onwards, he was encouraged by supporters, like the editor of the queer monthly journal *The Artist and Journal of Home Culture* (1888–1894): Charles Kains-Jackson. It seems that the subject of these paintings would not be entirely new to an audience from the early 20th century, but Barlow does mention a shift in the cultural context that occurred between 1889 and 1912.[142] As discussed in Chapter 2, the Cleveland Street scandal occurred in 1889, which fueled perceptions of corrupting male homosexuality among the aristocratic. This attitude was still around when Oscar Wilde was accused of sodomy in 1895, leading to a widespread media coverage of his trial for "indecency". The act of looking and the representation of nude male bodies became a matter of public debate as a result of this shift in the moral climate. During this period, paintings of naked youths, when removed from a

[136] Ibid, 11.
[137] Wallace, *Paintings from Cornwall*, 165.
[138] Cicely Robertson, *Henry Scott Tuke* (London: Yale University Press, 2021), 160.
[139] Robertson, *Henry Scott Tuke*, 160.
[140] Wallace, *Catching the Light*, 148.
[141] Law, "Erotics of Display."
[142] Ibid.

classical context, were not generally accepted, with the notable exception of bathing scenes.[143] Artistic nudity, in general, was a complicated topic during the Victorian era. Author Alison Smith mentions how the nude, to the Victorian, was alternatively disturbing and fascinating because so little of the body was seen in public.[144] When concerns about mixed bathing between men and women also resulted in nude bathing becoming improper during the late 19th century, and the northern climate necessitated plentiful clothing anyway, the naked body had become an unnatural sight in public for many Victorians.[145] Apart from culture and climate, a large opposition against the nude was also motivated by the personal and public morality as dictated by Protestant tradition and evangelicalism, with had a general negative view of the natural body. Nudity in art therefore had to be justified in some legitimate way to avoid public scrutiny and disapproval from critics.[146] Even at the turn of the 19th century, when public appreciation for nude boys did become more legitimized, this was only the case if the nudity fell under the guise of the innocence of youth, coming back to the need for justification.[147]

When Tuke's *The Bathers* (fig. 12) made its debut at the New English Art Club exhibition in 1889 held at the Marlborough Gallery in Pall Mall, it attracted attention for its impressive "flesh-painting," as praised by *The Magazine of Art*.[148] Meanwhile, *The Artist* noted:

> The "Bathers," by H.S. Tuke, is wonderfully full of light and air, and is excellent in tone. Three boys on the deck of an old barge form the subject; one is preparing to plunge. It is doubtful if barge decks are often painted this beautiful celadon colour which forms such a perfect contrast with the flesh tones and so perfect a harmony with the colour of the sea. It is also, perhaps, to be wished that that artist had found a plunger of [a] somewhat less Boeotian face. However, the whole tableau is one which Pindar might have celebrated and which Pericles would probably have bought.[149]

[143] Ibid.
[144] Alison Smith, *The Victorian Nude: Sexuality, Morality & Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 15.
[145] Smith, *The Victorian Nude,* 15.
[146] Ibid.
[147] Ibid, 194.
[148] "Art in May," *The Magazine of Art* 12 (1889): 38, Internet Archive.
[149] "The Position and Prospects of the New English Art Club," *The Artist and Journal of Home Culture* 10 (1889): 128, Internet Archive.

This comprehensive review, spanning about twenty pages, marked the reviewer's most extensive commentary on any painting in that particular exhibition.[150] Charles Kains-Jackson promptly followed with an erotic poetic response called: "Sonnet on a Picture by H.S. Tuke in the Present Exhibition of the New English Art Club."[151]

While Tuke's artistic credentials were still considered somewhat avant-garde in 1889, the modern nude would truly enter the British exhibition scene due to the New English Art Club. From the 1890s onward, Tuke was a regular presence at exhibitions from the Royal Academy, garnering frequent notice and praise from leading London art journals.[152] *The Times* praised *August Blue* as "one of the most powerful studies of the undraped figure" in the 1894 exhibition.[153] Tuke would continue to draw enthusiasm from art journals, with *The Magazine of Art* writing about *The Diver* (1899):

> "The Diver," by Mr. Tuke—representing boys bathing from a boat in the sunshine—is about as good as such a thing can be; it is very realistic, without much poetic glamour, and is, taken all in all, the best downright rendering of the male nude in the Academy.[154]

When discussing the same painting, *The Athenaeum* was more critical:

> His group of naked youths and boys about to bathe in a misty sunlit sea shows that Mr. H. S. Tuke is disposed to ride a rather good idea to death, while he takes less pains than he used to do and does not make such careful studies. Accordingly, *The Diver* (385) is by no means so finished as its forerunners, develops no new knowledge, and has much less freshness and energy than the 'Idyl of the Sea' (621 last year). It is, apart from this, a capital piece.[155]

Regardless, despite mild critique on topic repetition and technique, nothing is directed at the appropriateness of the nude boys within the work. In a society known for its aversion to nudity on display, Tuke somehow managed to thrive. According to historian Nicholas Edsall, his paintings of naked youths were popular among art critics but also eagerly acquired by

[150] Ve-Yin Tee, "Liberating Boyhood," *Romantic Echoes in the Victorian Era* 1 (2008): 191.
[151] Charles Kains-Jackson, "Sonnet on a Picture by H.S. Tuke in the Present Exhibition of the New English Art Club" *The Artist and Journal of Home Culture* 10 (1889): 191.
[152] Tee, "Liberating Boyhood," 192.
[153] Ibid, 193.
[154] "Current Art," *The Magazine of Art* 23 (1899): 478, Internet Archive.
[155] "The Royal Academy," *The Athenaeum* (January to June 1899): 662, Internet Archive.

public institutions and "snapped up" for private collections.[156]

3.2 Paradox of Style and Subject

Despite the general acceptance of nudity presented in Tuke's paintings, it seems hard to imagine now that the public was completely oblivious to the possible presence of homosexual desire within Tuke's artworks, especially in the wake of the Labouchère Amendment of 1885 and the trials of Oscar Wilde ten years later. It can now be established that, during the earlier years of his career, Tuke adopted a style characterized by rough, visible brush strokes that were at first unfavored by other fashionable painters and critics, who preferred the smooth, polished finish that was taught by the Royal Academy.[157] Tuke's art would come to be defined by his progressive plein airisme, vivid colors, and loose impressionistic brush strokes, but at the turn of the century, these elements were not considered innovative anymore. He was first and foremost an academic painter of nudes by then rather than an artistic radical. The Impressionist style would have certainly been groundbreaking in Britain when Tuke was studying in school as a young adolescent. However, by the time he adopted this style himself, great advancements in abstraction had already been made. Post-Impressionism had already begun to introduce itself with new techniques and an overall rejection of Impressionist limitations.[158] Tuke would never really let go of his soft Impressionist style, which is why by the time he became a member of the Royal Academy during the Edwardian era, the realistic values that Impressionism had maintained, had long been left behind by other artists. As Tuke reached the end of his life, modern art evolved so far from a natural representational presentation of people that his art style would have been considered almost traditional.

The tension between Tuke's traditional style and unconventional subject is central to the discussion about the reception of his paintings of naked male youths during his lifetime. In terms of subject, he successfully worked outside of the mainstream of his peers.[159] Though everyday life scenes were common topics amongst other British Impressionists during the late 19th century, his specific rendering of nude bathing youths was not a typical subject for this movement, neither was it a typical subject in academic art. During the late Victorian and

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[156] Nicholas C. Edsall, *Toward Stonewall: Homosexuality and Society in the Modern Western World* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), 159.
[157] Wallace, *Catching the Light,* 153.
[158] Ibid.
[159] Julia Saville, "The Romance of Boys Bathing: Poetic Precedents and Respondents to the Paintings of Henry Scott Tuke," in *Victorian Sexual Dissidence*, ed. Richard Dellamora (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 254.

Edwardian era, the Royal Academy was familiar with nudes if they were female or classical but less so with male nudes in a realistic setting.[160] Tuke was not the first artist to place naked men in a bathing setting, but he was, remarkably, one of the few who was accepted for it. That he did not ruffle any feathers at the Academy could be a result of what has been discussed in Chapters 1 and 2: by keeping the nature of his paintings non-sexual and non-explicit they could be read as celebrations of youth. According to author and professor Julia Saville, Tuke's capacity to attain widespread public approval relies on this suppression of youthful sexuality, presenting instead an idealized portrayal of enduring youthful well-being and vigor.[161] This portrayal successfully captivated his middle-class patrons without violating their standards of propriety.[162] In the previous chapter, I touched upon the "pure masculinity" present in Tuke's nudes as a result of the utopian depiction of the rural environment around these working-class figures. This further allowed his paintings to be read as pure and wholesome while allowing Uranians to see underlying implications due to their classical erotization of adolescent boys. The average viewing outsider who did not share these insights or the attraction to adolescent boys could more easily miss these signs. This means some part of the public was not entirely oblivious to these undertones. According to Professor of British Literature Ve-Yin Tee, there was, without a doubt, a segment of the public with a specific interest in adolescent boys to which Tuke catered for an audience.[163] Notably, one of Tuke's patrons, Leonard Duke, explicitly asked for a version of *Noonday Heat* (fig. 13) without trousers, and Tuke fulfilled this request by providing a watercolor rendition.[164] Tuke cultivated a devoted following among these specific individuals.[165] Reactions from his contemporaries, therefore, seemed to be spread out across a sub-section of admirers with Uranian interests and the rest of the public who did not share these sentiments but admired his artistic skill. While certain images created by Tuke prompted passionate and erotic expressions from poets aligned with the Uranian school (like Alan Stanley), works like *August Blue* were deemed respectable enough to be acquired through the Chantrey Fund, which reputedly dedicated to supporting the finest art originating from Britain.[166] This only exemplifies the multifaceted reception to Tuke's work.

The acceptance of his male nudes by the Academy was perhaps further boldened by a lack of evidence against Tuke having relationships with his models. This was unlike some of

[160] Saville, "Romance of Boys," 254.
[161] Ibid, 253.
[162] Ibid.
[163] Tee, "Liberating Boyhood," 206.
[164] Cooper, *Life and Work*, 35.
[165] Ibid.
[166] Law, "Erotics of Display."

his contemporaries, such as author Frederick Rolfe or photographer Wilhelm van Gloeden, to whom Tuke's paintings of naked youths are often likened and who had confirmed sexual relations with male models.[167] The privacy of Tuke's personal life may have raised less suspicion and by de-emphasizing sexuality within his work, Tuke close friendships with some of his models could have avoided scandal. In contrast, painter Simeon Solomon was arrested for attempted sodomy twice, which would eventually affect and subsequently end his career.[168] However, even he exhibited at the Royal Academy during his lifetime. It is, therefore, not as if queer artists were fully unable to enter these spaces.

The line seems to have been blurry: while Tuke would become a member of the Royal Academy in 1914, even presenting a nude bather for his diploma work, the painting *Bathing* (1911, fig. 14) by Duncan Grant was seen as controversial by the press due to its homoerotic implications.[169] Though they are different in style, the subject of Grant's painting is very similar to the subject of Tuke's paintings. Grant's all-male bathing scene, created for the dining room of the Borough Polytechnic, was criticized by the *National Review* for being a "nightmare"' and having a "degenerative" influence on the students of the Borough Polytechnic.[170] A possible reason for these different receptions to a similar subject, could be that the style of Grant's *Bathing* was a lot more stylized than Tuke's painting style, which seems very true to nature in comparison. Furthermore, the swimmers in Grant's painting were supposedly at the Serpentine, which was a location associated with the gay culture of London.[171] Tuke's naked youths, in contrast, are presented in some unknown utopic beach, lacking the social context which would condemn Grant's work.

Another less easy-to-explain example evolves artist Edward Burne-Jones, who submitted a male nude painting, *Demophoön and Phyllis* (1870, fig. 15), to the Royal Watercolor Society, of which Tuke would also become a member, in the 1870s.[172] Even though the context of the painting was both mythological and heterosexual, it was considered indecent and immoral by critics, resulting in his resignation from the Royal Watercolor Society. Even by then, Burne-Jones' contemporaries had been creating works that were far less tame in comparison, so the harsh criticism of what would now be considered a pretty

[167] Ibid.
[168] Ibid.
[169] "Duncan Grant," Tate Britain, accessed November 29, 2023, https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/grant-bathing-n04567.
[170] Matthew Kerr, "The Tate was right to look again at queer British art," *Apollo Magazine*, April 14, 2017, https://www.apollo-magazine.com/tate-was-right-to-look-again-at-queer-british-art/.
[171] Tate Britain, "Duncan Grant."
[172] Smith, *The Victorian Nude*, 140.

traditional painting seems somewhat surprising.[173] It goes to show that what was considered appropriate or inappropriate by late Victorians in terms of artistic male nudity, varied greatly, lacking consistent values.

3.3 Current Perspectives

In the 1970s, Tuke's paintings of adolescent boys were rediscovered by a new generation of gay art enthusiasts and collectors.[174] Particularly keen admirers include Elton John, who has collected many of Tuke's works, and Freddy Mercury.[175] Twenty-first-century perspectives on Henry Scott Tuke's paintings of naked youths present an interesting comparison to the reception he experienced during his lifetime. In the present day, Tuke's depictions of youthful male nudes have found resonance and appreciation within various circles, but notably among queer audiences. Unlike the late Victorian and Edwardian era, where Tuke had to cleverly navigate societal expectations and artistic norms to achieve acceptance from traditional institutions like the Royal Academy, today his work is celebrated mostly for its perceived homoerotic undertones.[176] The modern lens allows for a reinterpretation of Tuke's art, emphasizing the homoerotic elements that may have been downplayed or overlooked in earlier times. The acceptance of diverse sexual identities in the modern art world, as opposed to the societal constraints of the late Victorian era, have contributed to a more nuanced view of Tuke's portrayal of naked youths.[177] Present-day perspectives also consider the cultural context in which he created his works and from which the interpretation of his art can never be fully separated. However, the openness to diverse interpretations, a key aspect of reception theory, is evident in the present-day reception to Tuke's art. Modern queer audiences bring their personal, cultural, and social experiences to the interpretation of his paintings, as did Tuke's contemporaries back in his lifetime. While there exists a contextual difference in the societal acceptance of public homosexuality, it is noteworthy that Tuke garnered popularity not solely among queer fringe groups from the 1970s onward but also enjoyed a similar niche following during his own lifetime, particularly within the Uranian community. With queerness more out in the open, because of the decriminalization of homosexuality and the

[173] Ibid.
[174] Wallace, *Catching the Light,* 153.
[175] Kimberly Thrower, "Elton John to lend his own paintings to exhibition," *The Daily Telegraph,* May 1, 2008, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturenews/3673021/Elton-John-to-lend-his-own-paintings-to-exhibition.html.
[176] David L. Philips, "Tuke, Henry Scott," in *Who's Who in Gay and Lesbian History from Antiquity to World War II,* ed. Robert Aldrich and Garry Wotherspoon (London: Routledge, 2001), 448.
[177] Ibid.

rise of queer activism, public figures like Elton John could openly express their interest in Tuke's, increasing his popularity in this specific community. The attention Tuke suddenly received from notable homosexual figures might have also affected the current reception of Tuke's paintings.

This thesis started with a mention of the 2017 Tate exhibition *Queer British Art 1861-1967*, in which a select few paintings by Tuke were featured under the guise of being "queer art." Curator Clare Barlow explicitly mentioned how the exhibition was about queer artworks, not queer artists, and that this distinction is important.[178] Furthermore, she mentions how an artist's identity is not the only element that can qualify a painting as queer, as queerness can also be in the eye of the beholder.[179] Still, as briefly discussed in Chapter 1, the exhibition received criticism for putting together a wide range of artists and perceiving their art through a prism of sexuality, rather than the quality of these works as standing on their own. I doubt this was the intention of the curator, hence the explanation of the exhibition being about queer artworks rather than queer artists. It would be difficult to execute the latter without basing one's exhibition on speculation about the sexualities of artists who lived during a time when sexual identities as they exist now did not yet exist. However, does focusing the exhibition on queer artworks instead make any difference, especially when artists like Tuke are included? Tuke, as has now been established, seemingly lived his life away from scrutiny about his sexuality and enjoyed a successful career in traditional art circles that complimented the same paintings that were now included in the *Queer British Art* exhibition. His art is, therefore, perhaps best defined by its reserve, ambiguity, and contradiction. While accepted by art critics and the Royal Academy during his career, Tuke is now included in exhibitions based solely on the topic of queerness. Whether the exhibition of minorities in art museums is a trend under the guise of inclusivity and political correctness can be subjective and context-dependent. It may reflect a genuine effort by museums to address historical underrepresentation and promote inclusivity. Nevertheless, there could also be instances of tokenism, performative gestures, or just accidental superficiality by reducing artists to a mere part of their identity, like sexuality. It seems at least that the modern perception of Tuke and the reception to his paintings has shifted for a large part to the homoeroticism perceived within his work.

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[178] Charles McCuaid, "Inside the first ever exhibition dedicated to queer British art," *HERO Magazine*, April 12, 2017, https://hero-magazine.com/article/94126/inside-the-first-ever-exhibition-dedicated-to-queer-british-art.
[179] Naomi Rea, "'Museums Belong to Everyone': Curator Clare Barlow on the Tate's Groundbreaking Queer Art Show, and the Work Institutions Still Need to Do," *artnet*, June 30, 2021, https://news.artnet.com/art-world/museums-belong-to-everyone-curator-clare-barlow-interview-1984438.

The acknowledgment and celebration of the homoerotic elements in Tuke's work showcase the fluidity and plurality of meaning that reception theory emphasizes. Furthermore, the new reinterpretations of Tuke's paintings within a queer framework align with reception theory's assertion that meaning is not fixed but rather created in the interaction between the text and the audience. As Tuke's art becomes embraced within queer visual culture, reception to his work helps us understand the ongoing process of meaning-making and the continuous evolution of interpretations over time. If the reception to Tuke’s art can be defined by anything, it is the paradoxical and conflicting nature of his work. Paintings, particularly those of a representational nature such as Tuke's, possess the capacity to imply the existence of homosexuality without explicitly depicting it. His naked boys engaged in bathing present a seemingly neutral world where everything remains open to individual interpretation.

Conclusion

Beyond the surface of Henry Scott Tuke's tranquil seascapes lies a profound exploration of identity and desire, subtly challenging the norms of his era. I started this thesis with the overarching research question: How did Henry Scott Tuke's paintings navigate and subvert dominant cultural narratives of gender and sexuality during the late Victorian and Edwardian era, as seen through the intersecting lenses of the queer gaze, the British seaside, and critical reception? In Chapter 1, I examined Tuke's paintings through the lens of the queer gaze, investigating how his portrayal of beautiful naked male adolescents conveyed homoerotic desire, a sense of voyeurism, and queer perspective. A visual analysis of Tuke's painting *The Critics* highlighted the dynamic interplay of gaze and spectatorship between the figures in a private setting, emphasizing themes of both childhood innocence and charged intimacy. However, his paintings remain suggestive rather than definitive in their portrayal of queer desire, emphasizing true ambiguity.

The significance of the British seaside as depicted in Tuke's paintings like *August Blue* was highlighted, as I explored its portrayal through four social historical contexts. Through vibrant colors and leisurely activities, Tuke presents an idealized version of the seaside as a utopia of communal enjoyment. However, his focus on male subjects and their interactions underscores the gendered nature of seaside leisure, with women often excluded from activities like nude bathing due to social norms. Moreover, his paintings transform the seaside into a homosocial space where same-sex interactions can flourish. His choice of rustic, working-class models further enhances the rural nature and pure masculinity of his paintings.

In Chapter 3, I explored the reception of Tuke's paintings during his career and in modern perspectives. Tuke's popularity during his lifetime stemmed from traditional institutions like the Royal Academy, where he gained acceptance despite the unconventional subject matter of his paintings. Critical reviews from this period praised his skill while avoiding the discussion of possible homoerotic undertones. Tuke achieved success by sticking to less stylized artistic norms while presenting his paintings as celebrations of youth rather than expressions of queer desire. Nowadays, however, Tuke's art has been rediscovered and celebrated within queer circles, to the point of becoming fully associated with queerness.

My research delves into the interplay between tradition and innovation in the portrayal of gender and sexuality within Tuke's oeuvre. Through a nuanced examination of his artistic choices, a complex narrative has been revealed which challenged prevailing social norms of his time. Thus, this thesis illuminates Tuke's paintings as sites of contradiction and paradox,

occupying a liminal space that pushes the boundaries of accepted subject matter. Despite traditional underpinnings, this research has shown that Tuke's paintings exhibit an off-beat spirit of modernity that set him apart from his contemporaries. His depiction of these boys in the natural surroundings turns the beaches of Falmouth into a social space fit for same-sex interaction. As a result, the constructed queer gaze can be spotted by the viewer. It apparently remained unnoticed by critics of his time, but it was certainly noticed by queer fringe groups: both his peers, the Uranians, and modern queer audiences.

By taking an interdisciplinary approach and combining varying theoretical frameworks throughout three chapters, a well-rounded understanding of Tuke's art has been provided. By engaging with queer theory and the concept of the gaze, the naked youths in his paintings were allowed to be considered from a purely visual perspective, which has effectively highlighted how the queer gaze can be constructed in his work through intersecting glances and how voyeurism plays a part in the creation of a homoerotic scene. Furthermore, by not only analyzing the figures but also the scenery of Tuke's paintings, a better light is shed on the importance of the seaside in relation to the figures. Themes of queer desire and masculinity come up in the analysis of both the boys and the landscape, showing how these two visual elements are in constant conversation with each other. The British seaside can be qualified as a homosocial space in Tuke's work, but this will always be a result of the boys within the paintings interacting with each other. Their interaction with each other and the homoerotic tension that arises as a result is always linked to their nudity. Meanwhile, their nudity is what creates a sense of voyeurism within the viewer but also what turns the seaside into a gendered masculine space, as the gender dynamics of the seaside and nude bathing have been explored. The interplay between purity and homoeroticism have proven to be present in both the depiction of the subjects and the environment. Providing different social-historical contexts on the British seaside has created a layered explanation for why it was such a central subject in Tuke's art while emphasizing why there is no one true reason, as leisure at the beach, nostalgia for childhood experiences, and gender norms of the Victorian and Edwardian era on nudity and homosexuality are all interrelated contexts. Meanwhile, by engaging with reception theory on top of these analyses, this research has shown how the reception to Tuke's paintings relates to the ambiguity of the content within them. By never assuming Tuke's work to be inherently queer and instead wonder why it could be perceived this way, a more nuanced portrait has been painted of an artist who has perhaps become too easily defined by the topic of sexual identity.

While this study provides valuable insights into Tuke's paintings and their reception, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. Firstly, I only looked at a select few paintings and critical reviews, limiting the scope of this research. Additionally, the exclusion of Tuke's non-painting works, such as his photography or writings, may limit the depth of understanding of his life and art. To further enrich our understanding of Tuke and the reception to his work, future research could adopt a more comprehensive approach that incorporates more archival research. Exploring Tuke's correspondence, diaries, and other personal documents could provide valuable insights into his artistic intentions, while the inclusion of more exhibition reviews could provide more valuable insights into the reception of his work among his contemporaries. Additionally, comparative studies could examine Tuke's paintings alongside those of his peers, like other British Impressionists.

Despite these limitations, this research contributes to the field by shedding light on the nuanced ways Henry Scott Tuke's paintings of naked youths navigated and subverted dominant cultural narratives of gender and sexuality in late Victorian and Edwardian Britain. By examining Tuke's art through the intersecting lenses of the queer gaze, the British seaside, and critical reception, this research offers a multifaceted understanding of his work. Moreover, by highlighting the tension between tradition and innovation in his paintings, this study underscores the fluidity of artistic expression and the evolving nature of cultural interpretations over time.

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Appendix

Figure 1. Henry Scott Tuke, *The Critics*, 1927, oil on board, 41.2 x 51.4 cm, Leamington Spa Art Gallery & Museum, https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/the-critics-54260.

Figure 2. Henry Scott Tuke, *Sketch for 'Hermes at The Pool'*, c. 1900, oil on canvas, 48 x 36.5 cm, Royal Cornwall Polytechnic Society, https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/sketch-for-hermes-at-the-pool-13812

Figure 3. Henry Scott Tuke, *A Bathing Group*, 1914, oil on canvas, 90.2 x 59.7 cm, Royal Academy of Arts UK, https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/a-bathing-group-149277

Figure 2. Henry Scott Tuke, *August Blue*, 1893-94, oil on canvas, 121.9 x 182.9 cm, Tate Britain, https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/august-blue-202253

Figure 3. Henry Scott Tuke, *Ruby, Gold and Malachite*, 1902, oil on canvas, 117 x 159 cm, Guildhall Art Gallery, https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/ruby-gold-and-malachite-51046

Figure 6. *Photograph of Henry Scott Tuke painting on Newport beach (model: Tom White),* c. 1917, 89 × 80 mm, Tate Archive, https://www.tate.org.uk/art/archive/items/tga-9019-1-4-1-12/photographer-unknown-photograph-of-henry-scott-tuke-painting-on-newport-beach

Figure 7. *Colour glass transparency photograph of Henry Scott Tuke on the beach painting 'The Embarcation' 1914,* c. 1911-1914, believed to have been photographed by George W. Beldam, 107 × 87 mm, Tate Archive, https://www.tate.org.uk/art/archive/items/tga-9019-1-4-1-10/photographer-unknown-colour-glass-transparency-photograph-of-henry-scott-tuke-on-the-beach

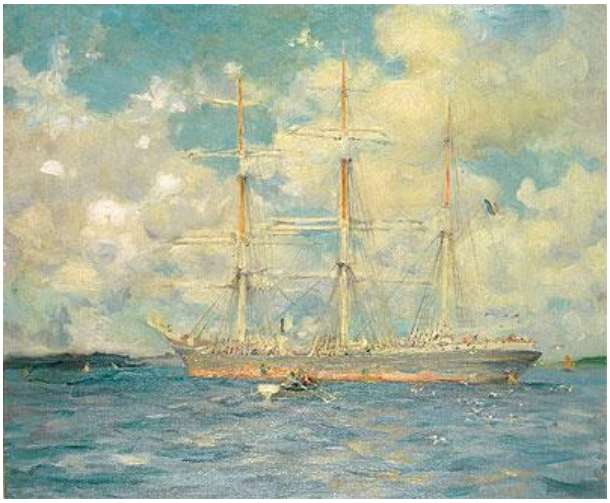

Figure 8. Henry Scott Tuke, *A French Barque in Falmouth Bay*, 1902, oil on canvas, 50 x 60 cm, Falmouth Art Gallery https://www.wikiart.org/en/henry-scott-tuke/french-barque-in-falmouth-bay-1902

Figure 9. *"Don't Be Afraid" Postcard of man and woman in bathing suits with bathing machine*, c. 1910, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sea_bathing#/media/File:BathingMachineDontBeAfraid.jpg

Figure 10. Francis Meadow Sutcliffe, *Water Rats*, England 1889-1891, 12.38 × 17.5 cm, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, https://collections.lacma.org/node/217418

Figure 11. Henry Scott Tuke, *Boy on a beach*, 1901, oil on canvas, 53.3 x 35.5 https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Henry_Scott_Tuke_-_Boy_on_a_beach,_1901.jpg

Figure 12. Henry Scott Tuke, *The Bathers*, 1889, oil on canvas, 116.8 x 86.3 cm, Leeds Art Gallery, Leeds Museums and Galleries, https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/the-bathers-38475

Figure 13. Henry Scott Tuke, *Noonday Heat*, 1903, oil on canvas, 82 x 134 cm, Royal Cornwall Polytechnic Society, https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/noonday-heat-13792

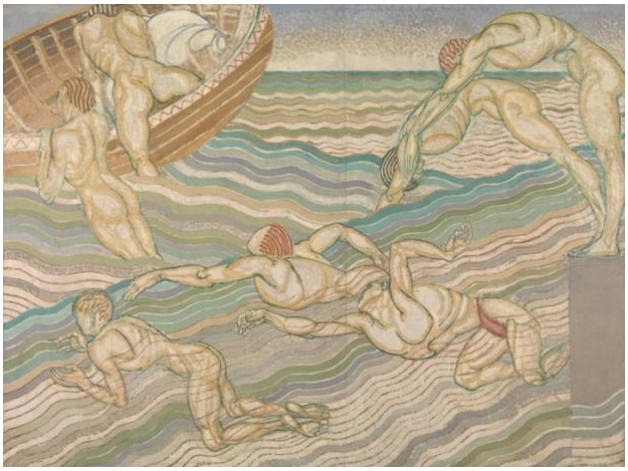

Figure 14. Duncan Grant, *Bathing,* 1911, oil on canvas, 22,9 x 30,6 cm, Tate Britain, https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/grant-bathing-n04567

Figure 15. Edward Burne-Jones, *Phylis and Demophoön,* 1870,
watercolor, gouache and gum on paper, 47,5 cm x 93,8 cm, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery,
https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Edward_Burne-Jones_-_Phyllis_and_Demophoon_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg