Recent research and the re-examination of much of the art of Mark Tobey (1890-1976), Morris Graves (1910-    ), Guy Irving Anderson (1906-    ), and Leo Kenney (1925-    ), members of the so-called Northwest School or Ecole du Pacifique,¹ have led me to propose that homosexuality is the hidden key to understanding the art of these four senior American artists. As discussed below, their art became a visual encoding system for a collective sequence of erotic symbols. Homosexuality not only explains Tobey's arrival in Seattle in 1923 in the first place—fleeing a failed marriage in New York—but also may explain his earlier 1918 conversion to the Baha'i World Faith, his subsequent male imagery for the next 30 years, and his eventual decision to go against his own promise to his Seattle patrons, Mr. and Mrs. John Hauberg, to leave his entire estate to the Seattle Art Museum (Hauberg was President) in return for the Haubergs' monthly cheques averaging $1,000 over a period of roughly ten years. Love,
apparently, was a stronger force to the aging expatriate artist (he moved to Basel, Switzerland in 1967) and it was not until the death of his secretary Mark Ritter two years after Tobey's own 1976 death that the matter was resolved between the art museum, Ritter's heirs, and Tobey's sole surviving distant cousins.

The more one examines the art of Tobey, Graves, Anderson, and Kenney, the clearer it becomes that they were (and are) artists who variously expressed, repressed, and transmuted a homosexual sensibility into their paintings. The more one examines the critical literature surrounding these artists, the more it becomes evident that by and large this aspect has been completely ignored or suppressed in commentaries on their work by critics and assiduously concealed by themselves. This essay is an attempt to suggest the background for the hidden development of a gay iconography within Northwest art of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, to provide a hermeneutical template for viewing these works in this vein, and, finally, to determine why such an interpretation could add anything at all to the heritage of exhibitions and commentary about these artists. Since three of the artists are still living (Graves, Anderson, Kenney) and have refused to discuss these issues with the author, information is based on research, speculation, and conversations with other involved parties who agreed to be identified.

My goal here is not so much biographical as critical; nevertheless, there is a large untapped fund of anecdote and lore about these four that is a part of the history of the Northwest School and I have drawn upon parts of this where appropriate. It has been difficult if not impossible to determine what the precise relationships between them were but it is correct to say that Tobey was at least a decade older than the others and that the effects of his life and loves on his art is somewhat more clear-cut than for the others.

A case may be constructed that the presence of symbolic homosexual male figuration informed his art right up to his early acclaim in New York in 1943. As for Graves, Anderson, and Kenney, a comparable, if less precisely conclusive, case can be made by careful examination of iconographies within their oeuvres. What they all share is a submission to varying degrees of modernist abstraction directly in ratio to the rate of commercial success they enjoyed. That is to say, the more they were accepted in the mainstream art world both of New York and Seattle (not to mention San Francisco, Zurich, and Paris for Tobey), the faster their residual male figuration themes disappeared. Only Guy Irving Anderson, the least well-known of all, a recluse who retired to a small fishing village north of Seattle in 1925, has continued and strengthened an art of exclusively male-homoerotic imagery and today, at the age of 81, is the only remaining member of the group who could be said to have averted the pitfalls of success which caused the others to abandon an erotics of painting in favor of a decorative abstraction soundly based in the milieu of mid-century modernism—and postwar hospitality to sexual non-conformity.
It was a 1953 article, “Mystic Painters of the Pacific Northwest,” appearing anonymously in LIFE magazine, that first grouped Tobey with Graves, Anderson, and Kenneth Callahan, the only non-gay member of the group. Leo Kenney was already known to the group by the late 1940s but his long detour to San Francisco (1952-1959) cut him off until his return. By then, he had ceased most male-figurative work and was approaching modest success with gouache paintings of discs or “mandalas,” though he detests the latter term. The LIFE article came over ten years after Graves’ first New York solo show at the Willard Gallery. Tobey had first shown at Knoedler in 1917, and returned to New York with a show at Willard’s in 1944. Much of their greatest work had already been painted by then and the author of the article chose to treat them as eccentrics of the Far West, gentlemen aesthetes immersed in Asian culture who were fusing, contrary to Kipling, the “twain” of East and West.

I would like to propose they were doing even more. They were using Asian art traditions and techniques as a palimpsest for building a gay erotics of painting. Asian art or the “look” of Asian art was the veil to pull over the pain of being homosexual in an alien unsympathetic culture. Their extensive travels as merchant seamen throughout the 1930s offered them more than exposure to art masterpieces and antiquities; it offered them more cosmopolitan and anonymous settings to express their sexuality. It is possible that Tobey had an affair in Seattle with the Chinese exchange student Teng Kuei in 1923 and that this friendship was largely responsible for his introduction to calligraphy (which he studied with Teng) and his subsequent stay in China with Teng’s family in 1934.

Graves was a flamboyantly eccentric youth according to high school classmate and sculptor George Tsutakawa though Graves attended but never graduated from Broadway High.4 He later shared a cabin at Deception Pass north of Seattle with a Japanese lover. Both created a Zen garden, spending weeks hauling huge boulders back and forth across the land until they had achieved the appropriate configuration. Tobey’s and Graves’ relationships with Asian-Americans or Asian visitors reinforced a muted, subtle eroticism in their work before 1941.

Whether Tobey’s myriad sketches of truckfarmers and fishmongers in Seattle’s Pike Place Market or Graves’ self-portraits and first vulnerable animal pictures, both attained a delicate male figuration which disappeared almost entirely, shortly after their earliest New York acclaim. For Tobey, the crowded scenes of his New York paintings commented upon by historian Frederick Hoffman,5 and the vast series of Pike Place Market sketches, gradually disappeared into masses of white tempera “calligraphy,” the outlines of the bodies becoming the quick gestural strokes of the all-over fields so admired by critic Clement Greenberg at the time. For Graves, who freely adapted Tobey’s tempera calligraphy as rock-covering in his early Blind Bird (1940), his gay sensibility made itself felt in the animal portraits which I choose to read as symbolic self-portraits of the “wounded,” sensitive gay artist Graves.

The enthusiasm these artists felt for Asian art was not only fueled by their
travels and liaisons. Richard E. Fuller (1897-1976) was the owner, founder, and life-long director of the Seattle Art Museum. A descendant of Margaret Fuller and distant cousin of R. Buckminster Fuller, Dr. Fuller (as he was referred to since he had a Ph.D. in Geology) was also one of the top five Asian art collectors in the U.S. His annual trips to China, Korea, and Japan with his mother, the redoubtable Margaret M. Fuller (1860-1953), went on for many years, and continued after her death. Their generous offer of a $2 million building housing their collection to the City of Seattle in 1932 set in motion the city's visual arts culture direction for many years to come—and also offered considerable employment to Callahan and Graves as curators, as well as an open-door policy to the Museum's collections for those artists whose work interested Dr. Fuller.

Richard Fuller did not marry until the age of 54 and though it would be heresy in Seattle to suggest he was homosexual, it is undeniable that he enjoyed or preferred male company, especially that of Tobey and Graves, and later Kenney. They were given carte blanche, had their work collected by him and his friends (Seattle's wealthiest families), entertained lavishly by their first and earliest patron, and given frequent exposure to the many masterpieces of erotic Hindu sculpture in Dr. Fuller's collection.

Fuller's sympathetic patronage antedated any New York acclaim and it seems clear he was completely at home with the male-figurative, pre-New York success work of Tobey though to be fair he remained a great supporter of the artist's later masterpieces as well. One cannot overestimate the effect his support had on his proteges either creatively or economically. The cohesive strong leadership with which he ran the Seattle Art Museum has yet to be equalled, as well as the copious concern and programming support he showed for local artists.

What constituted Tobey's erotic works and why might they be seen today as a suppressed or transferred stream of male or homoerotic images? First, Tobey's conversion to the Baha'i World Faith in 1918 set him on a track of universal spirituality, brotherhood of man, and utopian ideals perfectly suited to the ambience of international modernism being practiced and articulated elsewhere in the world at that time. The Baha'is, founded in Haifa, Israel by the prophet Baha'u'llah in 1863 have no priesthood, or rather they believe, to the recent consternation of Ayatollah Khomeini, in a universal priesthood holding that the divine resides within each individual. It may have been that the young Tobey was seeking a religion that could encompass his shifting sexual preference (within four years of his conversion his New York marriage began and ended in disaster).

Second, Tobey's so-called "priesthood" series of paintings of the late 1930s (Rising Orb), might be read as manifestations of an idealized world of male camaraderie and divine guidance. The flowing robes, the sump- tuous use of gold paint, the crowds of muscled worshippers, and the purples and greens, combine with an intimate, Persian-miniature size to reveal a world of tense expectation, enigmatic rituals, and perhaps an idealized world of shared male leadership.

Other American artists of the period dealt less obliquely with homosex-
ual figuration, or male and female figuration, as seen by homosexual artists. Historian and curator Elizabeth Armstrong has pointed out how Paul Cadmus' work, for example, satirized U.S. army and navy recruits home on leave. Their rippling biceps and bulging crotches represent the extreme opposite of the gay erotics of the Northwest School where everything was hushed, blurred, and colored with dour grays and browns. Similarly, as critic John Perreet has demonstrated, Marsden Hartley's late-period portraits of Prince Edward Island fishermen constitute an Expressionist handling of male desire and longing for the male. And we know from his posthumously published novel Cleophas that several of the paintings were based on men Hartley had formed attachments to within the members of the family with whom he lodged. Some were lost at sea and Hartley created memorial portraits.

More to the point perhaps are the Neo-Romantic works of Pavel Tchelitchev (1898-1957), and Eugene Berman (1899-1972). Tobey's pastel self-portraits show his hair streaming in green and purple, his face fully made-up with pink and blue eyeshadow, and his eyes large and provocative. Evoking the Neo-Romantic dream world even more acutely, however, Leo Kenney has spoken of his admiration for Tchelitchev and Berman. In his own work he captured their qualities of quasi-Surrealist settings, raked stages, formal gardens, and dark nighttime grottoes (Kenney, The Priestess, 1942). Ambiguity of gender is a strain that runs throughout Kenney's and Graves' work and acts as another code or sign that the non-macho and perhaps male or female figure is actually a male homosexual, or analogue for the artist himself.

Guy Irving Anderson treats this differently in that his figures are not of uncertain gender at all—genitalia are always evident though flaccid, passive, and meant to be observed. Rather than walking through Kenney's dream world of surrealistic theatre, his nighttime stage for the actor in women's clothing, Anderson's figures are asleep, dreaming a Jungian world of circular shapes, meditation signs, and cosmological origins. As such they constitute one of the more remarkable but little remarked-upon bodies of 20th-century American art. For forty years, Anderson's sleeping male figures have accumulated into one of the most sustained exercises in voyeurism in American art. Resting, sleeping, dreaming, or stretching, his models—mostly friends from his fishing village of La Conner, Washington—are the vehicles for the artist's purported search for universal mythic symbols of origins, evolution, and tragedy. On another level, though, they are focuses of admiration, reverence, desire, and control. As with the other artists under discussion, Anderson's sexual orientation made itself felt in ways that are not readily or immediately apparent. Once one examines their art along these interpretive lines, however, chains of imagery are revealed which reinforce a view of homosexual culture as a forum for the exotic, the divine, and the occult. By quirk of historical circumstance, geographical isolation, and enlightened institutional patronage, what would have been shunted to the side as off-beat or bizarre in more highly developed visual arts population centers became mainstream in Seattle. Indeed, the qualities of Anderson...
son's art—pancultural, exotic, divine, occult, and erotic—as well as that of Tobey's, Graves', and Kenney's, became the chief elements of the Northwest School style. Yet it has never been commented upon or noticed that Northwest School painters evolved their "mystic" sensibilities in tandem with their evolution as gay artists. Put another way, it has never been recognized that the mainstream style of one branch of regional American art was essentially a gay style, created by gays, and operating on a symbolic level of meaning in addition to the more open and popular interpretations of mock-Asian stylistics and cozy ecological awareness.

Tobey's English hiatus (1930-38) at Dartington School, a progressive arts institution in Devonshire, England with long-standing ties to Seattle's Cornish Institute where Tobey occasionally taught, produced hundreds of male figure drawings, lithographs and paintings. He was a frequent observer of dance and life-drawings classes. The anatomy of these exclusively male figures is often exaggerated: massive thighs, huge biceps, Greek-like curly hair. Tobey's homoerotic idealization of the male figure is confirmed by an examination of the artist's library, part of the posthumous estate settlement left to the Seattle Art Museum and disposed of by Donnally Hayes Books of Seattle. There were several volumes of elaborately illustrated Swiss, Italian, and German-published books such as Ernst Buschor's Plastik der Griechen (Piper, 1958), Nevio Degrassi's La Scultura Greca (Novara: Athenaeum) and Wegner's 1955 Meisterwerke der Griechen (Basel: Holbein).

Examining the contents of Tobey's library also reveals publications associated, sometimes amusingly, with gay sub-culture reading. For instance one finds Benjamin Morris' The Sexually Promiscuous Male (Monarch, 1963), Marcel Proust's Sodome et Gomorrhe (inscribed to Tobey by his lover Pehr Hallsten, 1897-1965), and a pulp paperback cookbook published in 1937 by G.P. Putnam's Sons, For Men Only by Achmed Abdullah and John Kenny. As the dustjacket states, "For Men Only will appeal to all men who cruise and camp or who simply feel an urge to express themselves in this most ancient of arts."

Tobey's sustained series on the male figures fall into two or three rough categories: his commissioned portraits of Seattle scions of the 1930s and 1940s like Paul McCool and David Stimson; his drawings from Dartington; his "priesthood" series; and his drawings of denizens of Seattle's Pike Place Market which number in the hundreds, mostly clothed figures of the working class. To this one may add his several self-portraits done over 60 years. As suggested above, several of these are very unusual and suggest Tobey tried on different identities (and genders) through the self-portraits recalling his own self-description as a "reformed fashion illustrator."

While it may be that, seen as a modernist continuum, all Tobey's figurative and representational work was preparatory to his abstract or tempera calligraphy period, it is crucial to remember that, as William C. Seitz? among others pointed out, residual representational elements remained a constant in Tobey's art throughout his life. Gradually, though the bodies and faces may have disappeared, the white lines remained and
eventually predominate the images themselves. It is as if Tobey, the devout Baha'i, spent his early years (1920-1940) depicting various aspects of male figuration—nudes, portraits, self-portraits, figure groups—in a way that emulated or paralleled the Baha'i teachings about the interconnectedness of humanity regardless of beliefs, race, religion—and sexual preference. By 1940, this achievement gave way to a more purely spiritual quest using abstract linear elements to imply rather than literally embody this unity of mankind. The success of Tobey’s white tempera calligraphy was superseded by Graves’ New York success using it representationally in such well-known works as Blind Bird (1940) where the tangled calligraphic lines are used as a lichen or moss-covering for the rock under the animal.

Graves’ blind birds—images of extreme vulnerability—carried forth the shift among the loose-knit group away from human figuration toward a sublimated or symbolic figuration. Tobey’s “priesthood” paintings had presented a paradigm of spiritual camaraderie among men—robes, rites, and rippling muscles. Graves turned inward toward the alienated individual (himself?) and the natural world as a metaphor for humanity. He used hedgehogs, birds, fish, and pine trees as analogues for the non-rational instinctive self expressing both his sincere interest in ecology and as a vehicle for his view of a world at war which was inherently hostile to innocent beings. His own internment as a conscientious objector at Camp Roberts, California reinforced these views made clear in the paintings shortly to follow. One may posit at the same time his sense of vulnerability as a gay male given his awareness of the general social and cultural disapprobation of homosexuality in most American cities.

Nevertheless, some evidence of more explicit homoerotic overtones exist, as with Tobey, in Graves’ self-portraits. Self-Portrait (1933) (Seattle Art Museum, gift of Mrs. Max Weinstein) is a particularly revealing work. With arrogant chin uplifted and hooded eyes, young Graves stares at the viewer in front of a sumptuous pink background spread onto a rough burlap ground. There is a mixture of strength and delicacy, of provocateur and tastemaker, that perfectly captures an enigmatic artist so frequently described later in his career as “reclusive” or “lone.” Graves, like Kenney, has been associated by critics (including Greenberg) with Neo-Romantic artists of the period and both he and Tobey were classed as “surrealists” in one of the earliest books to comment on their work, Fernando Puma’s Modern Art Looks Ahead (New York: Beechhurst Press, 1947). Using this matrix, coupled with Leo Kenney’s admission of his affinity to Tchelitchev and Berman, one can argue that Graves, too, subordinated an explicit male figuration to a dream-like nocturnal imagery of wounded birds, pine trees in storms, and seemingly animate rocks. Though recent efforts by critics Theodore Wolff and Ray Kass praising Graves as an artist in tune with the natural world to an extraordinary degree, I still care to argue that an entirely additional level of meaning exists in Graves’ iconography, that of the symbolically veiled or transmuted “innocent” male being, either as an analogue to the artist’s self, or as a symbolic code for the “wounded” ego of the male homosexual lover.
As early as 1933 Graves' commitment to male figuration was apparent. *Morning* (ca. 1933) could be a nude self-portrait, more likely a portrait of a male companion the "morning after." The figure is stretched out, deeply asleep (foretelling Kenney's and Anderson's sleeping figures 20 years later) with a muscled arm thrust between the sleeper's legs. It is even possible the figure is Guy Anderson himself for, as Graves told Frederick S. Wight in 1956:

I threw in my lot with the painter Guy Anderson and we improvised on life... In the spring (of 1934) Guy Anderson and I got a twenty-five dollar truck which served as a camp and a studio—and a life of drift and adventure began. We took six months going to L.A. in the truck... We lived by occasional hay harvesting or berry-picking. At that time we were deep in the Depression—many buildings were abandoned, with much or little of their furnishings left behind, and we collected antiques.

Within five years, though, Graves was painting animals almost exclusively. The shift away from the painful personal realities use of the human figure implied toward the suppressive symbolic use of vulnerable flora and fauna had begun. As Graves told Wight, "the bird is a symbol of solitude, the shore, of the environment of childhood." Nevertheless, an examination of Graves' oeuvre suggests that pairs and multiple animal groups or vegetal images continued to offer examples of possible homoerotic subject matter. For example, *Each Time You Carry Me This Way* (1953) is an especially tender image of cross-species companionship with a walking bird carrying a minnow in its beak. The implications are not only of the natural world but of a world where the strong assist the weak or vulnerable and the title has an amusingly romantic tang. Other pictures of "young" forests, "young" pine trees (e.g., *Joyous Young Pine*, 1943) have unmistakable similarities to clusters of erect phalluses and the pinecones themselves are literal repositories of seeds to be scattered to the wind for regeneration and reforestation. The pictures' exuberant colors, by comparison, and their many bulging vertical forms suggest that Graves was still pursuing a private subject matter even more than was commented upon at the time. *Young Forest in Bloom* (ca. 1950) is another example of this transmuted sexual symbolism. For Graves, who, as a Zen Buddhist, saw little separation between the animal and plant world, such a transference would have come easily, perhaps unconsciously but apparent all the same.

Though it may very well be that the initial impetus for the "wounded" series was the conflict of World War II, it is also likely that the works symbolize the artist's own "wounded" psychological state. *Wounded Gull* (1943), *Wounded Scoter, Wounded Ibis,* and *Bird Maddened By The Long Winter* may all be seen as alternative manifestations of the artist's mental state. Though Graves was never literally wounded in World War II, he was forcibly inducted into the U.S. Army at his parents' Richmond Highlands, Washington home and detained at Camp Roberts, California until honorably discharged for mental reasons (he verbally rejected the "honorable discharge" at the time). His letters of the period to dealer Marion Willard are extremely pessimistic and are clear indications of the artist's disillu-

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sionment with the world, threats to stop painting altogether, etc.\textsuperscript{11}

The death of Sherrill Van Cott in 1943 must also have been a blow since he and Graves may have been lovers. As he told Wight, “He (Van Cott) saw my paintings in Seattle and sent me a note. We took to each other. He saw things the way I saw things.” Though a “heart condition” is given by Wight as the cause of Van Cott’s death, other sources who would not agree to be identified have suggested a suicide. His art, which deserves a full study of its own, either owes much to Graves or was a little-known influence upon the slightly older artist.

Graves’ work of the past 10 years has been mostly floral in subject matter and though Ray Kass has compared the still lifes to Zurbaran, there is little of the muted psychological despair or urgency that characterizes the best of Graves’ earlier period. The only residual sexuality or figuration may reside in the so-called \textit{Tantra Yantra} paintings (1982) in which a single vertical row of white and faintly colored discs parallels the anatomy of the human body. It is as if the artist has attained a purity of purpose in old age even with regard to a subject he has always tended to treat obliquely, the male figure.

Another artist’s work—two or three paintings in particular—provides an illuminating footnote or addendum to any analysis of Morris Graves. Leo Kenney is the third artist under examination here who began using the male figure early in his career and who, as modest success arrived, completely subverted or supplanted it with modernist abstraction. Utterly self-taught and shy of a high school diploma, Leo Kenney is barely known outside the Pacific Northwest. His life had close parallels to Surrealism and the gay Neo-Romantics of the late 1930s, Berman and Tchelichev. In one of his first interviews, he sidestepped a question about influences with “I hardly know. A painting may start out with a very simple idea then grow before it is finished.” Nevertheless, both Graves’ early impastoed oil male portraits and his later circular-disc tempera abstractions seem two paradigms for much of Kenney’s own style. Besides his widely popular disc paintings which began after 1962, Kenney’s work tended toward a figurative, nocturnal Surrealism or, as he told critic Tom Robbins, “I am compelled to restate and celebrate the mysteries.”

Writing in the 1968 catalog for Kenney’s only New York exhibition\textsuperscript{12} (at Graves’ dealer, Marion Willard), Robbins (who also wrote a definitive monograph on Anderson) pointed out that the “nature (of Kenney’s) drama cannot be specifically identified.” I wish to propose here that a more specific meaning to Kenney’s “dramas” may indeed be identified. \textit{Seeker: To David Stacton} (1968) is a highly abstracted frontal view of a male figure. Two approximate rectangles enclose disc-shapes where heart, navel, and phallic could be schematically located and a vertical form at the base anchors the composition. According to Robbins again, the picture is “the human figure—the solar plexus, that hungry ghost that feeds the heart—allowing consciousness.” This is in keeping with Kenney’s and Robbins’ preference for a Jungian or archetypal analysis of Kenney’s art and yet upon further examination several of the artist’s tempera paintings evince a more direct
representation of male sexuality and form.

_Sleeping Seed_ (1966) is an evocation of human sperm, for example. It is delicately and decoratively painted in order to conform with the artist's statement that in his art "the message is about beauty and harmony." And, as mentioned above, the nocturnal tableaux of the late 1930s and 1940s depict ambiguously gendered individuals, either sibylline women or possibly, as with Tobey's priesthood series, men in women's clothing.

Another painting, _Voyage For Two_ (1953), makes more explicit Kenney's erotics of ambiguous gender. Two heads are seen in profile touching lips. The overlay of white tempera traces an intricate nerve pattern and around their skulls suggesting mental and spiritual "activity." When questioned about the specific sex of the figures in 1985, Kenney's response was that "I used to think they were male but now I think it's a male and female." Regardless of such divagation, the work has an etiolated eroticism that borders on the morbid.

Finally, moving backward from the suppressive modernism of his late years to the most forthright figurative statement of his young manhood, _Dreamer Reclining_ (1949) links Kenney to his colleagues Graves and Anderson and makes explicit once again how a gay erotics of painting was sacrificed to the external pressures for the growing prestige of the Northwest School. Reproduced with the 1949 Seattle newspaper interview, _Dreamer Reclining_ is neither reclining nor necessarily a "dreamer." A tall male nude is lying prone with well-formed buttocks raised, almost in presentation to the viewer. Manet's _Olympia_ (1863) seems a more apt analogy, a distant antecedent though, because one cannot see the nude's entire face, the provocative stare of Olympia is replaced by the unembarrassed position of the posterior. In one painting, Kenney has captured the mid-point in the history of the Northwest School. Coming respectively twenty and thirty years after Graves' and Tobey's male-figurative periods and roughly 10 years before Anderson's own long sleeper series, Kenney's painting represents the final phase of his own male-figurative period. The erotic charge of the sleeping figure has much of the voyeuristic quality inherent in the other artists' work but one must especially recall Graves' sleeping figure in _Morning_ (ca. 1933) as a specific forerunner. Both artists' paintings surely became inspirations for the only member of the Northwest School who did not forsake male figuration in favor of modernist abstraction and ensuing success, Guy Irving Anderson.

Anderson's art deserves a full study of its own. For our purposes it may be seen as a long succession of "reclining dreamers" positioned above, on, or around large white discs, or floating in a womb-like heaven. The artist's determined pan-cultural statements alluding to the Chinese, Mayan, and Northwest Native Art sources for formal elements belie the continuously erotic nature of his treatment of the male figure. In addition, many of Anderson's vaunted pan-cultural formal devices may be seen as fragments of erect or rising phalluses. Together, the lambent male figure surrounded by rising phallic forms comprise a series of oil-on-tarpaper paintings remarkable in their muted but unmistakable eroticism. He, alone, of the
artists under discussion here has maintained, developed, and constructed a gay erotics of painting over a lifetime. That there are spiritual or ecological references in Anderson’s work, too, is true. And an examination of Anderson criticism reveals only a few writers sensitive to the additional levels of meaning underlying his art. David Berger, for example, writing about three gay artists exhibiting in Seattle, Galen Garwood, Wayne Douglas Quinn, and Guy Irving Anderson, commented that the latter’s “male nudes express a kind of mythic oneness with nature, but also, in a much quieter way, they evoke the human intellect. For example, Reading in the Rocks shows a male nude with a book, an entity of thought surrounded by the swirling abstract forces of impersonal nature.”

Regina Hackett, reviewing a 1984 exhibition, observed how “in these (magnetic, tactile fields) generative humanoid figures freed from the laws of gravity, pivot and turn, attracting or repelling each other according to the vitality of their bodies.” She also commented on how unconvincing Anderson’s female forms are, rather “like Michelangelo, they often look like men with breasts.”

Whither Now, Angel? (1944) is the consummate early Anderson. Locked in a foreshortened Cubist space, the writhing muscled figure occupies the upper third of the oil-on-canvas. There is a sense of sexual anxiety present with the figure covering his eyes with his forearm and a large “diaper” partially covering what seems to be a huge phallus roughly dead-center on the canvas. It could be that Anderson over the ensuing forty years answered the question the title asks. His “angels” ascended toward states of transcendent ecstasy, caught floating in a circumscribed universe of darkness and intermittent light.

A double-museum retrospective in 1977 at Seattle Art Museum and the University of Washington’s Henry Art Gallery assembled over fifty of the artist’s works and three themes clearly emerged: the presence of the male figure as an erotic symbol, a participant in some mythic-generative scene, or a focus for voyeuristic activity; the gradual transformation of the male body into an abstracted curving phallus which often surrounds other full figures in a kind of erotic wrap (Escaping the Pendulum, 1969-70); and the development of the white disc as a multi-purposes symbol above which the reclining figures stretch or sleep (Floating Figure with Mask, 1975). This could be a moon or sun, a womb or underground tomb, or in keeping with an erotic analysis of Anderson, a monumental anal orifice. It becomes the area of some of Anderson’s most loving paint application and has freed him, in old age, to subordinate the figure to a more cosmic aim, the indeterminacy of the circle, the transfixing of the viewer’s gaze onto a hole of nothingness, the perpetuation of a shape that harks back to the search for the sublime Tobey instigated as early as 1920 and which he passed on to Graves, Kenney, and Anderson. Just as Tobey, Graves, and Kenney all seem to ultimately revert or arrive at the circular shape, so Anderson developed his own roseate orifice. Though some may see this as the triumph of formalism over figuration—and I have held here that for the most part, this was true—Anderson’s use of the circle seems to forestall
such a charge. It emerges gradually out of his geological landscapes of the 1950s and 1960s and it operates always in tandem with the single or multiple male figure residing above it. Indeed, it may be the subject of the figure's dream: white, rosy, spiral, centered, and large enough to contain many interpretations.

For the Northwest School, sex was an integrated part of life, one of its insensate mysteries, because of their immersion in Buddhist and Tantric lore. As with the Hindu and Tibetan painters, sex was expressed through an elaborate system of geometric symbols, chiefly the circle placed over the outline of the human body. As Western artists, they also had at their disposal the entire tradition of European figure painting. It is at the concurrence of these traditions that their art occurs.

One painting, Prometheus (1982), sums up the tradition of gay erotics within the Northwest School and suggests what a close synthesis of the others Anderson's art has been, all the while evolving into his own individual style. The dreamer figure—by now a code for the voyeuristic male model dating back to Tobey—rests atop the “world,” or the disc, the other element shared by all four. Covered with white paint, it harks back to Tobey's white tempera calligraphy, and the covering of the rock under Graves' blind bird. Here, for Prometheus, according to the Greek myth, it is a rock, too, a plinth for the act of suffering he must endure over and over. It comprises three-quarters of the tall, nine-foot oil-on-tarpaper. The curves surrounding the head create reverberation patterns similar to Whither Now, Angel? The body is abbreviated into head, limbs, and genitalia. The animated brushwork, however, ignites the picture as a whole and gives the figure almost a sense of weightlessness or motion. It is Prometheus at his moment of deliverance, about to ascend to the gods. Painted when Anderson was 76, it is indicative of a state of exultation and release that one rarely finds in the art of the others.

Guy Irving Anderson, the sole survivor of the gay “mystics” to retain the figure, has painted works which will unravel their meanings more clearly when seen in the context of the preceding discussion. To root his art in a heretofore unrecognized tradition of homosexual imagery within a branch of American regional art is to connect it at the same time, however, to not only the art of his colleagues but to a rarely commented upon strain of gay European art—Michelangelo, Caravaggio, Beardsley, Salome, Lucian Freud, and Francis Bacon. It is also a way of suggesting how oblivious mainstream modernist criticism of their work has been to this issue. The fact that they all—except Anderson—dropped the male figure in favor of formalism or animal imagery has not made the task of resurrectionist criticism any easier. And there remain the other, more minor figures of homosexual imagery within Northwest art whose achievements also deserve consideration and re-examination: Sherrill Van Cott, Malcolm Roberts, and Howard Kottler, for example.

For the time being, I have tried to begin such a project with what may seem to some a radical re-reading of the Northwest School but one which I am convinced is firmly based upon historical background, the works
themselves, and the hermeneutical imperative from which all interpretive criticism must proceed.

Footnotes

1 The first recorded use of this term is in Harris K. Prior, Ten Painters of the Pacific Northwest. (Utica, NY, Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, 1947). The most recent use is in William Cumming's Sketchbook: A Memoir of the 30s & The Northwest School (Seattle, WA., University of Washington Press, 1984).

2 "L'école du Pacifique," Cimaise, no. 7 (June, 1954).


4 Graves later finished high school in 1932 in Beaumont, Texas.


10 Frederick S. Wight, Morris Graves (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1956).

11 Kass and Wolff, p. 36-37.


17 Conversation with author, February 21, 1986.
