



FROM THE BILL "THE HUN" SCHMELING COLLECTION AT THE LEATHER ARCHIVES & MUSEUM

VISUAL ARTS

Drawn together

The Hun's homoerotic art—which inspired generations of gay men with its sex-positive themes—finds a new home at Chicago's Leather Archives & Museum.

By **TONY PEREGRIN**

Long before smartphones provided immediate access to porn and the ubiquitous “dick pic,” gay men were limited to physique magazines, adult bookstores, and covert illustrations produced by Bill Schmeling (also known as “The Hun”) and his more popular contemporary, Tom of Finland, to view hardcore expressions of gay male desire—all of which were taboo 50 years ago, if not against the law.

Today, the work of Schmeling—once obtainable only in discreet, plain-wrapped packaging via mail order—is available for in-person, public viewing at the Leather Archives & Museum (LA&M) in Chicago, which acquired the collection in the summer of 2019.

According to LA&M's executive director Gary Wasdin, Schmeling's work, with its depictions of fearless, sex-positive acts, will educate and titillate viewers as it first did in

the 1960s, perhaps even more so today in an age marked by factory-style porn where live streaming platforms means everyone is his/her/their own adult content studio.

“Intense is probably the word that comes to most peoples' minds when they see Bill's art,” Wasdin says. “People see these images and instantly think of Tom of Finland because his work is so iconic. Bill's work is in that general style of exaggerated hypermasculine art, but it is more raw, aggressive, and much more sexual, with depictions of kink play, BDSM, and lots of bodily fluids.”

Beyond Schmeling's portrayal of “dangerous” fantasies featuring “tormented” men in brutal and often compromising situations—a trademark of the Hun's style—was his penchant for drawing interracial sex scenes, an element that made his work all the more innovative, especially for the time. In fact, Schmeling was white and his husband, Roland, an inspiration for a solid portion of his work, was African American.

“I think it's just amazing to see art like the Hun's and realize that people were pretty fucking creative, and despite the challenges of the time, people were doing some amazing stuff and enjoying life,” Wasdin says. “These artists and photographers are pioneers who put themselves out there to make this material accessible for all of us.”

“The Bill ‘The Hun’ Schmeling Collection” encompasses tens of thousands of items, from personal correspondence to sketches to original artwork. “Archives generally measure collections by feet, not by item,” Wasdin says when pressed for a more specific number to describe the scope of the collection. “The Hun collection is probably 200 linear feet, packed mostly in bankers' boxes, and then of course, the art is stored separately from that.”

In August 2018, Wasdin began the delicate process of discussing the acquisition of the collection from Schmeling, who at the time was storing it rather indiscriminately, from attic to basement, in his two-story house in Portland, Oregon. It took about a year of conversations with the 81-year-old artist before he granted the release of his life's work to the LA&M.

“We came to an agreement to have his full collection come here—meaning Bill didn't want to parcel out pieces here or there—and from a researcher's standpoint that is something we're always anxious to do,” Wasdin

says. Schmeling's donation included not only the entirety of his collection of illustrations and comics, but also the ability to use his images and to sell merchandise. (And, yes, there is a gift shop on-site where attendees may purchase anthologies of his work, comic books, and greeting cards).

In July 2019, Wasdin, his archivist, and a LA&M board member traveled to Schmeling's home to pack up the collection and prepare it for shipping to Chicago. “When Bill first met me he said, ‘You have really small feet!’ As you see in the comics, the Hun had quite a fetish for feet,” explains Wasdin with a good-natured laugh. “The whole experience was phenomenal. He was so warm and friendly.” Schmeling—who suffered from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease—passed away on September 12, 2019.

Visitors to the LA&M, from the casual viewer to the academic researcher, are granted access to the collection as long as prior notice is given to the museum. “This collection is approachable from a lot of different angles,” Wasdin says. “It could be of interest to someone studying the history of gay pornography to someone researching the evolution of BDSM and kink and its growing acceptance in the U.S., to someone writing a novel set in gay New York City 1972—the options are boundless.” Low-resolution photography for not-for-profit purposes is permitted, as is posting on social media, although some of the Hun's imagery may not meet the terms and conditions established by various platforms.

“A lot of people, quite frankly, see some of Hun's artwork and they're like, ‘Nope, that's too extreme,’ Wasdin says. “It's not for everybody, but that's part of the beauty of it—things are not supposed to [appeal] to everyone. I will say that for me, personally, I always liked the Hun because it is more like me: I'm big, I'm hairy, and that's what the Hun was, that's what his characters looked like. It's almost inconceivable to think of a pre-Internet world where it was almost impossible to find people like you, where you couldn't simply Google ‘hairy, naked dad-bods.’”

“It's important to remember that these drawings weren't just Bill's fetish—he was making a living at this, which is a testament to the level of interest that was out there,” Wasdin says. “His work helped us proliferate a connection and a sense of community and revealed a completely different perspective of human sexuality.” **FR**

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