Visualizing Homoeroticism: The Photographs of Robert Gant, 1887–1892

Chris Brickell

QUERY SHEET

This page lists questions we have about your paper. The numbers displayed at left can be found in the text of the paper for reference. In addition, please review your paper as a whole for correctness.


TABLE OF CONTENTS LISTING

The table of contents for the journal will list your paper exactly as it appears below:

Chris Brickell
Visualizing Homoeroticism: The Photographs of Robert Gant, 1887–1892
Visualizing Homoeroticism: The Photographs of Robert Gant, 1887–1892

Chris Brickell

How did 19th-century men conceive of and represent their same-sex desires in a time and place where homosexuality was publicly unnameable? In partial answer to this question, this article focuses on two photograph albums assembled by Robert Gant in New Zealand during the 1880s. It explores the themes implicit in these albums, and suggests that men like Gant could piece together homoerotic subjectivities by creating and collating visual materials. Gant’s pictures, like those of his overseas contemporaries, evoked multiple meanings and encouraged sexually unorthodox readings of masculinity, bodies, clothing and expressions. Early photography, then, provided a complex site within which an unnameable sexuality could take shape.

INTRODUCTION

What did same-sex desire mean in the past? The answers to this question are, of course, located in particular times and places. Of popular knowledge about male homosexuality in 19th-century England, the historian Harry Cocks writes: “Even when it was directly encountered, same-sex desire remained somehow ineffable” [Cocks 2003: 160]. At the same time, Cocks suggests, this ineffability—an “unnameable quality”—had a powerful structuring function. Herein lay a paradox. Not only did homoerotic attachments exist, but they were bestowed with rich meanings, meanings profoundly influenced by the unnameability of same-sex erotic attraction. While their desire “dare not speak its name,” those who pursued an erotic interest in their own sex found ways to render their feelings and actions significant to themselves and those around them.

How, precisely, did this work? Writing in the British context, Cocks explores literary allusion, coded language, and the complexities of policing practice. This article takes Cocks’ argument as its starting point and suggests that, in the absence of a rich language of naming, visual material provides us with some valuable clues to erotic self-understanding during this period. It explores the late 19th-century work of one particular New Zealand photographer—Robert Gant—and scrutinizes how visual symbolism could accompany, and sometimes stand in
for textualized expressions of male sexuality. To read this symbolism is, in turn, to gain valuable insights into the sexual meanings and subjectivities of the time. This article locates its argument within a social constructionist frame of reference, and seeks to avoid assumptions about an ahistorical, transparently knowable “homosexuality” that spreads seamlessly through time and space [Seidman 2003]. We cannot accurately describe Western 19th-century men as “gay,” I argue, for a minoritarian, politicized gay identity is the result of decades of complex social and political shifts involving particular discourses and styles of life [Brickell 2008]. At the same time, though, I am suspicious of the appeal to a historical rupture that characterizes some constructionist arguments. Before the psychiatric moment of the late 19th century, some authors suggest, there were merely sets of sexual acts; after it there was a homosexual identity and a clear binary between homosexuality and heterosexuality; (for a discussion see Brickell [2006]). The story, I will suggest, is much more complex than this. Medicine was by no means the only—if even the primary—force; a much wider variety of social and cultural influences was at work [Chauncey 1985]. Until the 1950s many people believed that same-sex acts were the doings of any disreputable character and yet, a century earlier, some people managed to consolidate subjectivities around their same-sex desires. As Cocks points out, “diverging modernities” were “productive of correspondingly diverse identities and selves” [Cocks 2006: 1213].

What of photographs, then, as a way to explore the influences of the past? There is a rich vein of academic work in visual anthropology, history and sociology [Burke 2001; Goffman 2006; Knowles and Sweetman 2004; Pink 2004]. Scholars in this area suggest that visual material does not merely illustrate the “truths” uncovered in textual sources, as many conventional researchers have previously assumed, but is a unique and valuable source in its own right [Burke 2001: 10; Dalley 2006: 188; Kuhn 1995: 11]. Photographs, paintings and other visual traces tell us of their makers and their audiences, and reveal context-dependent and more generally applicable themes and symbols. They also offer up antecedents, and gesture towards future modes of understanding and social organization. “Private” photographs are also “public” objects, as the worlds of meaning on which they draw are deeply social as well as profoundly personal [Holland 1991: 3]. As a result, visual sources can show us much about the relationships between individual lives and cultural worlds in a range of times and places; they are valuable resources with which to address questions of subjectivity, including sexual self-understanding.

Scholars from several disciplines have examined the social aspects of image-making. Jay Ruby, an anthropologist, explores the role of photographs as “culturally conditioned visual communication systems” and suggests these reveal the structured “symbolic codes” inherent in their culture and history [Ruby 2006: 67]. The sociologist Erving Goffman shows how different kinds of image perform different social functions: “public pictures” target a large number of unconnected individuals, and their creators often seek to persuade or propagandize, inform or instruct, while “private pictures” are intended for display among people involved in their production. These are typically infused with insider knowledge; they portray ritualized, ceremonial moments in which people
act and appear in ways significant to them and members of their circle [Goffman 2006: 31–33]. Private and public images reflect something about their creators and participants, but they also spark new meanings as people look over the images made by themselves, their friends and others [Ibson 2002].

Pictures can be sites of productive ambiguity. While they transmit and create meaning, these meanings are not always fixed or transparent. The painter or photographer may bestow on an image a different meaning than those engaged by the people depicted in the painting or photograph. Then there is the question of the audience. Different viewers might interpret an image in quite different ways, and these differences may well be intensified as time goes by. One hundred years after an image is made, its viewers—scholarly researchers included—may bring a very new set of interpretations to bear. They will be guided by the frameworks offered in their own time, and will choose between conservative or innovative readings. They may view the past’s pictures in a conventional manner, or against the grain. As Annette Kuhn sums it up, “memories evoked by a photo do not simply spring out of the image itself, but are generated in a network, an intertext, of discourses that shift between past and present, spectator and image, and between all these and cultural contexts, historical moments” [Kuhn 1995: 12].

These observations come to the fore in a visual analysis of homoerotic culture and symbolism, and they generate a new set of questions. When we look at an image of a man alone or men together, are we seeing homoeroticism or comradeship, alternative or dominant masculinities, classicism, heroism or eros? And how may these things combine? How might these meanings reveal themselves, overlap or fade into the background? Will every researcher locate the homosocial and the homoerotic in the same ways? Can we all agree on what same-sex love and desire look(ed) like? How are visual clues layered? What is the role and perception of the viewer? Before I can address these questions in a specific context, though, I must start at the beginning. It is time to introduce my photographer.

AN IMMIGRANT PHOTOGRAPHER

Robert Gant was born in 1854 in the London borough of Woolwich. In 1876, at the age of twenty one, this son of a doctor decided to make his fortune in the Antipodes and set sail for New Zealand on the Lord Warden. Gant secured an apprenticeship with a pharmacist in Wellington, the colony’s capital. When not dispensing drugs he pursued his thespian interests, and in his spare time the young immigrant traveled around the country with at least two troupes of actors and Christy minstrels. He appeared as Frizette, “a lady’s maid,” in The Patchwork Company’s “Patchwork Revels” during 1879, and Ruth, the nurse, in Gilbert and Sullivan’s 1881 performance of Pirates of Penzance. Robert Gant was as keen an actor as he was a druggist.

One day in 1882, a year after his formal registration as a chemist, Gant boarded a train in Wellington. He and the other passengers traveled in a northeasterly direction, inching their way up and down steep mountain slopes and chugging through several tunnels, to emerge in Masterton, a rural service town of just
2,200 folk. In this remote rural world—the region is known as the Wairarapa—the colonial capital would have seemed far away indeed. Gant was quick to make friends there, though, with a group of well-to-do young men. They were clerks and small business owners, sons of bank managers, magistrates and teachers, and the heirs to large farming stations.

Wherever Robert Gant went, so too did his camera and his bag of glass plates. Presumably Gant produced the resulting albumen prints in his own chemist’s shop, and then pasted them into albums. Two volumes of his 19th-century photographs survive, passed down through the descendants of Charles Blackburn, one of the men depicted in them. These were recently acquired by the Alexander Turnbull Library, a section of New Zealand’s National Library. A later set of Gant photographs, from the 1910s, also survives in the Wairarapa Archive in Masterton.

Figure 1  A full-page layout in one of Gant’s albums. (Alexander Turnbull Library PA1-q-963-04).
This article focuses on Robert Gant’s 19th-century albums. Both of them recorded domestic scenes inside rural homesteads, in private gardens, and in the quiet spaces of the countryside. There is none of the formal rigidity of the typical Victorian studio portrait here: almost all of the images portray a casual, intimate attitude between their male sitters. While the photographer arranged some album spreads as themed tableaux, others are a jumble of albumen prints pasted onto pages cheek-by-jowl. Sometimes pieces of one photograph are cut and glued down onto another. The arrangements can be complex, the juxtapositions unexpected [Figure 1]. Some of the images have witty captions handwritten underneath. A handsome, stocky young man—identified as “H Mowat, aged 20”—merits the note “Plenty of Him,” and four men sitting on a fence are captioned “A Row of Sparrows.” Two in American Indian costume, spears poised, are “The Mild Indians.” Some of the photographs were given dates, and inscriptions reveal the albums were compiled over several years, from 1887 until about 1892. Gant appears in quite a number of the photographs, suggesting that he had either an accomplice to squeeze the bulb or a very long release cord.

REPRESENTATIONS

This rural Wairarapa district, its countryside, villages and homesteads, offered idyllic settings for friendship and photography. Inside bedrooms, parlors and kitchens men sleep, rise, dress and sit down to breakfast, and they loll over one another on armchairs and sofas. In groups they lean out of windows, arms around waists and heads on shoulders. In what appears to be a local playhouse, they pose in front of stage sets and don a wide range of costumes. Some are pirates and sailors, others wear women’s clothing. Out of doors, all-male groups lie together on logs, sit atop fences, and mill about in backyards and forest clearings. Most of the settings are domestic, private. Others are relatively secluded spots—forest glades and swimming holes—in the public domains of a sparsely settled district with a marked gender imbalance in its population. In the Wairarapa’s country districts, males comprised between 55% and 70% of the inhabitants.1 This was the space of the idyllic rural male comradeship so warmly supported by the English writer John Addington Symonds, the American poet Walt Whitman, and others in those days who left the cities in search of “the homoerotic freedom and possibilities of an idealized “elsewhere,” as the historian Matt Cook puts it [Cook 2003: 128–131].

The North American artist Thomas Eakins offered this idea in visual form when, in 1885, he completed his well known painting, “The Swimming Hole.” A number of naked young men clamber over a weir and dive into the water while Eakins swims nearby, accompanied by his dog Henry. This was, in the words of the art historian James Saslow, the imagery of “a distinctively American male arcadia” [Saslow 1999: 198]. Robert Gant, though, went on to give Eakins’ arcadia an Antipodean form [Figure 2]. Many of the same elements are here in his own “Summer Morning” from 1889: the weir, the river, the bathers, the young man with his back to the camera, and the older bearded fellow swimming apart from the main group. Gant’s photograph has faded over time, but we can still make out the softly bucolic background of trees and meadows. This clear,
Figure 2  Gant’s “Summer Morning,” from about 1889, inspired by Eakins’ ‘Swimming Hole,’ painted in 1885. (Alexander Turnbull Library PAI-q-962-38-1; Amon Carter Museum, Texas, ACM 1990.9.1).
cool Wairarapa river is thus a New Zealand translation of Eakins’ rural idyll, and Whitman and Symonds’ retreats from city life. It shows that the homosocial themes of England and North America made their way across the world, into other English-speaking settlements.

Robert Gant drew from the Northern Hemisphere in other respects too, notably with the concept of romantic friendship. This intense emotional connection between members of the same sex had its basis in sex-segregated societies, and the assumption that carnal desire could be distinguished from “pure” and “spiritual” love [Katz 2001: 36–39; Reade 1970: ch. 1]. Passionate relationships between two or more men (or women) could legitimately incite sentiment and devotion as long as they were assumed to be asexual in their character. Romantic friendship, scholars suggest, afforded emotional intimacy in a sex-segregated age. Anthony Rotundo has famously argued [1989: 1] that many 19th-century men “paired off” with a special friend, “a partner in sentiment as well as action,” until marriage heralded a loosening of their intimate ties.

Walt Whitman was perhaps the high priest of male romantic friendship, and by the 1880s some New Zealand libraries had copies of Whitman’s book of poems, Leaves of Grass, first published in America in 1855 and greatly expanded thereafter. Walter Scott’s 1887 edition included numerous references to “manly love” and the “attachment of comrades” which Whitman presumed “latent in all men” [Whitman 1887: 27, 28, 31]. In the verse “When I Heard at the Close of Day,” a Whitman celebrated “my dear friend my lover.” He continued:

For the one I love most lay sleeping by me under the same cover in the cool night In the stillness of the autumn moonbeams his face was inclined toward me And his arm lay lightly around my breast—and that night I was happy. [Whitman 1887: 33]

Romantic friendship is evident in Gant’s images of men embracing, arms around shoulders and hands on knees, heads abutting. Sometimes two men touch and others look on or look away; occasionally three men share an intimate arrangement. One photograph, captioned “Makora Bush, last Sunday in 1888,” depicts a forest clearing where three men sit on a bench. One smiles beatifically and hooks his arm around that of the fellow next to him who in turn drapes his arm over the shoulders of the third man and gazes at him fondly. In Figure 3, three men sit in a parlor in an even more intense arrangement. The man in the middle, Gant himself, rests his chin on his young companion’s head, closes his eyes dreamily, and wraps his arms around the youth’s torso. Gant’s head is obscured by the protective hand of the third sitter, who stares down at the photographer.

Figure 3 is a variation on North American photographs from the period. Both David Deitcher [2001] and John Ibson [2002] discuss such examples, many of which are side-by-side portraits with one man’s hand on his friend’s shoulder or knee. Some of Gant’s friends hold hands, while a few hug or even touch heads: one couple embraces with temples touching and three men sit closely, heads together, and grin at the camera. Gant’s devoted self-drapery is a particularly intense evocation of this romantic friendship. Yet the presence of a third party indicates that this romantic portrait, and others like it, do not necessarily imply the exclusive one-to-one attachments we celebrate in photography today. The
The seated fellow in Figure 3 is no gooseberry, but aligns himself with—and even enhances—the close bonds between the other two men.

The romantic friendship ideal lived on in New Zealand until the early decades of the 20th century. By then psychiatrists had expanded their influence over matters of sexuality, and they increasingly suspected romantic friends of unorthodox sexual interests [Brickell 2008: 69–70; D’Emilio and Freedman 1998: 130]. It had long been the case, however, that the ambiguities of male romance opened up useful spaces for those whose passion was erotic as well as emotional. Comradeship could shade into intimate behavior of a more erotic sort. Perhaps this is the space enjoyed in Figure 4, where Robert Gant and his taller companion kiss on a doorstep. This is the very last image in one of the albums. It occupies a page all to itself—hinting, perhaps, at its relative symbolic importance—and has a one-word caption: “Goodbye!” This may have been a liminal instant, a moment suspended halfway between romance and eros, but it has the last word.

While some of Gant’s photographs focused their viewers’ attention on the emotional aspects of the homosocial past, others made a priority of the body. Gant’s albums offer us a glimpse into emotional worlds, but they also invite us to consider the appearance of the male body and its incorporation into a homoerotic context.

This was partly a matter of the gaze, be it exercised, reflected or deflected. Susan Bordo has recently explored the ways male bodies appeared in late 20th-century
culture. She analyzes the effect of consumer culture on male embodiment and display, and notes that men in advertisements often adopt one of two ideal-typical poses: the “face-off,” where the staunchly posed subject stares down his viewers and fends off their gaze, and the “leaner,” reclines or inclines, “engrossed in reverie and sensation” [Bordo 1999: 190]. There is a distinctly erotic dimension to all of this. While the face-off asserts his sexual prerogative and dominance, the leaner invites his viewer’s gaze—and his or her sexual attention. These types of distinction have a long history. The statues of sleeping fauns, Bordo observes, with their languorously draped bodies, take their place in classical art alongside “more heroic models of male beauty” [Bordo 1999: 188–90].

These distinctions can be seen quite clearly in 19th-century New Zealand photography. In family, work or leisure settings, many men adopted Bordo’s “face-off.” They folded their arms and stared, unsmiling, into the camera’s lens. Robert Gant’s albums though are full of “leaners.” The young man in Figure 5 leans against a doorway, his pose and attitude not unlike Cipriani’s statue of the dancing faun or Donatello’s “David.” He looks down, disengaging from his viewers and leaving them free to admire his well dressed torso, stockinged calves and the bulge to the right of his trouser fly. This is not the only bulge among the pages of Gant’s albums: in another image a man stands, hands behind his head and
pelvis pushed forward, revealing what appears to be a sock stuffed down the front of his trousers. Quite unselfconsciously, the caption reads “Look at Me!” In both examples a passive pose accompanies an active exhortation to look. The incipient eroticism was perhaps strengthened by the inclusion of other, similarly erotic images in the albums: the two men kissing on the doorstep, for instance.

We see this interplay between subject and viewer—and its homoerotic undertones—in another of Gant’s key themes: cross-dressing. As a cultural form, men’s cross-dressing occupied a highly ambiguous space in 19th-century society. It found its instantiation in two spheres, the theatrical and the homoerotic. The theatrical aspects were long established: men played both female and male roles on stage before the Restoration of 1660, and they have continued to do so since [Baker 1994; Senelick 2000]. This was highly accepted, even applauded, as Robert Gant’s own experience demonstrates. Under the alias Cecil Riverton, Gant played Nancy, Betsy and Nellie in three different Wairarapa variety shows, as well as Frizette and Ruth during his earlier years in Wellington. Gant’s performances were feted everywhere. Critics judged his costumes “‘oriental in their magnificence,” his make-up “‘flawless,”’ Land he always sang “‘with great taste and expression.”’ On almost every such occasion the local newspapers declared him “‘a pronounced success”’ [Wairarapa Weekly 1888: 4; 1889a: 13; Evening Post 1881: 2].
As these reviews suggest, Robert Gant’s photography reflected his real-life fascination with dressing-up. Sometimes he featured in his own stage roles. In one photograph he was Clarissa Champneys, the elderly spinster in Henry Byron’s three-act comedy *Our Boys*, posed in a frilly hat and an elaborate dress with a long train. On another page he was Mrs Sadripp from *Milky White*, coyly deferring to his male co-performer. Throughout Gant’s albums, his friends don dresses, skirts, kimonos, ornate hats and flowery headbands, and the photographer’s eye combines the theatrical with the erotic: stage sets are the backdrops for arch looks, sly smiles or, as Figure 6 reveals, the wistful gaze. This latter man, another “leaner,” relaxes into a casual, welcoming pose. He is an androgynous figure: his blouse and skirt give way to a pair of tights stretched over toned muscles. The clothed body and contented far-off stare combine to invite the viewer’s intimate attention.

Once again, Robert Gant tapped into a rich tradition: 18th-century English molly cultures, for instance, combined homoerotic expression with a highly theatrical and ritualized cross-gender dressing [Norton 2006: 156]. These connections became public in London in 1870, when Frederick Park and Ernest Boulton, two

![Figure 6 Looking wistful. (Alexander Turnbull Library PA1-q-963-20-4).](image)
young men about town, were tried on a sodomy charge. In letters read out in court, the pair wrote about their “campish” ways and “living in drag” [Kaplan 2005: ch. 1; Upchurch 2000]. In 1870 Robert Gant was a sixteen-year-old lad living in the London borough of Woolwich, and would have been aware of a scandal that quickly filled the English newspapers. New Zealand’s media also drew the links between cross-dressing and same-sex desire. Under the headline “Petticoated Men,” the *West Coast Times* reported that Boulton and Park were first thought to have “been guilty only of a piece of impersonating folly,” but, it turned out, “there are facts which point to the commission of abominable crimes” [*West Coast Times* 1870a, 1870b].

Drag took on a slightly different form in the case of the sailor. As we have seen, the blouse on the young man in Figure 6 makes loose reference to the seafarer, but there are other examples. In Figure 7, a youth poses in a sailor costume and holds out two men’s shoes. The young man’s hat appears in a number of

![Figure 7 Looking nautical. (Alexander Turnbull Library PAI-q-963-16-5).](image-url)
Gant’s photographs; its band, which reads “H.M.S. Pinafore,” betrays its theatrical origin. This youth had his Gilbert and Sullivan counterparts, too: other Pinafore sailors dallied in front of a ship-like set, complete with portholes, built onstage in a Masterton playhouse.

The sailor, of course, held an enduring homoerotic appeal. His uniformed body echoed those of the guardsmen and soldiers that so excited homoerotically inclined men in London, New York and countless other cities and towns around the globe [Chauncey 1995: 76–86; Cook 2003: 25–26]. Like the cross-dressed thespian, the sailor could be an ambiguous figure. He was enjoyed for his combination of roughness and muscle, and a body sensually wrapped in a “close-fitting costume of ribbons, bows and silks” [Gardiner 1992: 60]. We know Robert Gant had an eye for “real” seafarers: in 1892 he journeyed through the Suez Canal to Britain, and caught the likenesses of several of the sailors and deckhands. In one photograph, a grimy shipboard tar has his hands on his hips, the profile view accentuating his buttocks, chest and arms.

Gant’s photographs abstracted the seafarer’s homoerotic appeal and folded it back into the theatrical realm of fantasy and make-believe. In Gant’s visual world, the ship’s sailor informed the stage equivalent, while the clean, stage-dressed young man evoked his shipboard counterparts. There is a noticeable difference, though, between Gant’s wistful dressed-up sailors and the more muscled, assertive seamen who populated the 20th-century paintings of the homosexual U.S. artists Charles Demuth, Joseph Leyendecker and Paul Cadmus [Weinberg 2004: ch. 2]. Gant’s sailors had an almost innocent fairytale quality, a reflection of the comradely gentleness that pervades his albums, while the 20th-century North American artists appealed to a more assertive “face-off” masculinity.

What of the shoes held by the young sailor in Figure 7? These reflect another recurring theme: an intrigue for male footwear that pervades both of Gant’s albums. As Figure 1 shows, Gant pasted his impressions of men’s lower legs and feet among his other images. These appear as a fetish, a variation on the mania for women’s ankles that we assume—rightly or wrongly—to symbolize Victorian sexuality. Gant’s shoes are a distinctly masculine fetish, juxtaposed with handsome faces and lithe bodies. These shoes, all Oxfords, are possibly the same pair. It is not possible to say though whether they indicate Gant’s interest in a particular wearer or an attraction to clad male feet in general.

Robert Gant’s shoes, along with other preoccupations—executions and spiritualism—appear in text as well as photography. In 1894 the chemist won a one-guinea prize for a short story he submitted to Sharland’s Trade Journal, the periodical of New Zealand’s Pharmacy Board. “At the End of a Holiday,” Gant’s only known piece of writing, told of a séance in a rural homestead. The protagonist Edwin Claridge had set out for China, and a pair of his Oxfords lay, wrapped in brown paper, in the middle of the living-room. The young clairvoyant Albert Digby enters into a trance, is helped into Edwin’s shoes, and discovers the traveler’s fate: beheaded in a Chinese prison at the hands of the Black Flag Army. There is a vivid description of the execution, played out by the entranced Digby. His ankles, “displayed in smart salmon-coloured socks, were crossed and pressed together as if bound by cords” and he “writhed and struggled...the teeth chattering and the eyes rolling in their sockets” [Gant
1894: 58–61]. The execution theme, like the shoes and socks, found its way into Sharland’s from the pages of the photograph albums, where men dressed up as pirates and soldiers and even enacted the decapitation of their countrymen. Hands bound, a victim is led to the chopping block where a masked executioner, his shirt emblazoned with a skull and crossbones, wields the axe. In text and image, shoe fetishism mingled with a ritualized bondage. At the same time, a campish theatricality shines through this gleeful ghoulishness.

“At the End of a Holiday” pays close attention to male attractiveness. Gant described Edwin Claridge as follows: “He has a handsome gentle face. It is browned by the sun, but his neck, which is bare and long, is white. His eyes are deep set and close together; the lashes are long and curling. His nose is short and slightly turned up at the tip. He has a very light moustache, and his mouth is beautifully shaped. His chin is rounded and full” [Gant 1894: 60]. Albert Digby was also the object of Gant’s—and his readers—gaze. An “intensely clairvoyant” youth of eighteen with “his father’s form and his mother’s face,” he radiated a “solemn ineffable beauty.” Digby exemplified a broader fantasy as well: the beautiful, perceptive and malleable youth, amenable to the will of an older man. Llewelyn Davis, Digby’s mentor, said of the young clairvoyant: “He is wonderful. His mind is sensitive to the least impulse of my will. I could do anything with him” [Gant 1894: 59].

Youthfulness is a repeating theme in Gant’s work. The vast majority of the photographer’s friends were under thirty years of age, with a fair proportion under twenty. The stage sailor in Figure 7 falls into the second category, his innocent expression emphasizing his young age. The same can be said of the fairytale allusions in Figure 1, including the frilled outfit of one lad and the pixie pasted on the left-hand edge of another image. These young men vacillate between the playful and the intensely contemplative.

The youthfulness of the men in the albums reflects in part the age and gender structure of rural New Zealand society during the 19th century. In an overwhelmingly male society, many men married in their late twenties, and a significant proportion did not marry at all [Olssen and Levesque 1978: 2; Thomson 2006: 122]. The result was a “bachelor subculture,” commemorated in Gant’s photograph “A Bachelors’ Dinner Party” in which eleven men of various ages gather on a veranda dressed in their best clothes [Wright 2004: 147]. At the same time, the youthfulness of the albums reflects the age-structured homosexuality still common during the 19th century. The anthropologist Stephen O. Murray demonstrates the long and widespread history of this pattern, where adult men eroticize adolescents and take an active sexual role with them [Murray 2000: chs. 1–2]. Some European men translated this pattern into their poetry and art. For instance, members of the “Uranian circle” of 1880s London, who included the painter Henry Tuke and the authors Laurence Housman and George Ives, openly discussed and portrayed “the beauty of male youth” [Cooper 1988: 25]. One can only guess at the sexual roles Gant imagined as he photographed his Wairarapa friends, although we do clearly see the older man’s active gaze upon his younger companions.

Age structured homosexualities featured in Asian, South American, European and Islamic cultures, but two particular examples influenced Gant and his contemporaries: ancient Greece and Rome. In Greece older males taught and
mentored youths in a relationship that incorporated a sexual element, and readers of Plato’s *Republic* and *Symposium* learned that an older man’s love for a beautiful and virtuous youth instilled wisdom and good citizenship in the younger partner [Aldrich 1993: ch. 3]. As Matt Cook explains, many homoerotically inclined 19th-century men saw in ancient Greece a “logic for dissident desires as well as a wider model for legitimacy” [Cook 2003: 126]. This principle in turn found its expression in Greek and Roman statuary and its “image of the perfect male body”; many male Victorians described the pleasures of the antiquarian exhibits in the British Museum [Cook 2003: 125].

In the absence of a local museum collection, Robert Gant made his own artifacts by taking his friends and fashioning them in Greek and Roman terms. Once again, the Antipodean photographer visually rendered the ancient ideal

Figure 8  Looking classical. (Alexander Turnbull Library PAI-q-962-43-1).
his British contemporaries had begun to articulate in words, among them John Addington Symonds, who wrote the 1883 pamphlet *A Problem in Greek Ethics* [Symonds 1901]. In Figure 8, Gant’s friend Charles Blackburn appears as a Roman bust made of marble. Blackburn’s wrapping mimics a toga, the cropping and whited-out hair creates the statuary effect, and his far-off upward gaze hints at an aspiration to higher ideals.

Greek and Roman themes offer a photographic space in which men like Gant could draw upon ancient traditions and rework them for their own purposes. It is widely acknowledged that appeals to ancient societies offered legitimacy to same-sex desire, but they did more than that: the use of classical imagery also smoothed over public anxieties about adults’ gaze upon the young. As late as the 1920s, *The Mirror*, a New Zealand lifestyle magazine aimed at middle-class female readers, unselfconsciously reproduced nude adolescents in classical poses for a general audience. Gant’s classical statuary, however, was not solely the preserve of the youthful. Blackburn would have been in his twenties when Gant fashioned his likeness, but older men also pose, similarly whited out, in a classical fashion.

Sometimes age cut across another vector of social difference: ethnicity. Figure 9 shows one of several Gant images that feature Maori youths. Here three boys

![Figure 9](image-url)  
**Figure 9**  
Gant’s Maori youths from the late 1880s and, for comparison, van Gloeden’s ‘Three Boys on Bench,’ 1895. (Alexander Turnbull Library PAI-q-963-33-2; Courtesy Jack Woody, Twelvetrees Press, Santa Fe).
lean out from behind a fence, and stare directly at the viewer. In other images Maori boys pose in front of ivy-covered buildings—echoing the classical theme once again—or peer over walls. While all are fully clothed, their shy and curious expressions, and their semi-formal arrangement in groups, foreshadow Wilhelm von Gloeden’s turn-of-the-century images of Sicilian youths [Figure 9; Borhan 2007; Weiermair 1994]. Here are Maori adolescents made objects on account of their age and their ethnicity, arrayed for the white viewers who would interpret them through their colonial lens.

David Eggleton notes that 19th-century New Zealand photographers often portrayed Maori as “exotic curiosities” who typically fell into one of three stereotypes: “the noble savage, the alluring maiden [and] the idyllic village dweller living a life of peasant simplicity” [Eggleton 2006: 28]. In some ways the shy young men reflect these types, and inspire their viewers on such terms. Like von Gloeden’s Mediterranean youths, the Maori boys appear as “others” within the radicalized context of their recording. If there is a sexual aspect to this, they are not positioned dissimilarly to the young Pakeha men (that is, those of European extraction) who appear elsewhere in the albums. Unlike many of their Pakeha counterparts, however, not one of the Maori subjects is named in the captions and, as is typical in photographs of Maori in the period, their specificity is erased [Wanhalla 2008: 47]. These youths, like von Gloeden’s peasant boys, instantiated whatever appeals viewers wished to read into their expressions.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION: VISUAL SUBJECTIVITIES

Robert Gant’s photographs are very particular kinds of representation. They tell us something about masculinity, desire and longing in the past; of intimacy, romance and eros. They do not talk to us directly, at least not in the same way as Walt Whitman’s poetry or John Addington Symonds’ prose. Yet they are valuable traces of past conceptions and modes of life. Their captions provide context and guidance for the viewer, while their symbolism, arrangement and expressions offer us valuable clues about our erotic history. In the absence of a rich vocabulary, visual representations allowed Robert Gant—and perhaps some of his friends—to codify and express their same-sex desires. Gant’s photography drew upon widely-available tropes, and twisted them into “visual communication systems” that became emotionally meaningful in complex—and sometimes transgressive—ways [Ruby 2006: 67]. A homoerotic sensibility emerged through the manipulation of ideas about male comradeship, embodiment and eroticism, and their subjection to a homosexually inclined gaze.

This was no random adaptation of analogies and allegories on Robert Gant’s part. Instead he picked up and reproduced internationally-known reference points. The romantic friend was one, the cross-dresser another, the antiquarian a third, and the sailor a fourth. Laurel Brake identifies such references—“boys, the nautical, swimming, flesh, and classical Greece”—as the markers of coded homoeroticism in such magazines as The Artist and Journal of Home Culture and The Studio during the late 1880s [Brake 2000: 282]. Gant may well have had access to such periodicals; he sold books in his chemist’s shop. The use of such markers
hints at an awareness of a wider imagined community. The admired and eroticized sailor, for instance, signifies a world of objects liked not only by Robert Gant but also by men like him.

These photographic experiments profoundly reflected the interplay of local and global. Not only did Robert Gant draw upon Mediterranean tropes, but he also took inspiration from the frontier culture of North America. Walt Whitman’s views on adhesive comradeship filtered through into the realm of the visual in rural New Zealand, as they did in Whitman’s homeland. It is tantalizing to reflect too on the possibility that Gant may have evoked the British subcultures that hosted Boulton, Park and their contemporaries. Was Gant’s drag, perhaps, an Antipodean approximation of the British, a metaphorical space accessed in its absence through both memory and globally transmitted representations?

New Zealand had not the population mass to replicate the homoerotic cultures of London or New York. With a small, spread out and globally isolated population, the south Pacific nation only slowly gained a subculture that claimed its basis in same-sex sexuality. During the 19th century and the early 20th, men typically inhabited mixed networks in which those of all sexual persuasions mingled. Only in the 1930s would these mixed networks be supplemented by groups in which men’s sexuality began to operate as a primary axis of social similarity [Brickell 2008: ch. 3]. While a sense of groupness is not readily apparent during the 19th century, a subjective awareness of the erotic similarities between oneself and others may well have been possible in the earlier period. After all, Antipodeans could—and did—draw quite heavily on cultural influences from elsewhere.

Robert Gant’s albums hint at such a possibility in several ways. First, the photographer demonstrates visually his attraction to men, sustains it across both albums, and extends it into subsequent decades. Gant’s later images in the Wairarapa Archive, from the 1910s, also weave together a range of homoerotic themes [Brickell 2008: 102–105]. Secondly, Gant projected his desires outwards, to a private audience of friends and acquaintances, establishing the possibility that other men might recognize their desires in these images and use them as resources for their own self-making. Groups of men may even have looked at the albums together, sharing a sense of sexual and intimate connection in the process. Thirdly, Gant’s albums commemorated homoerotic desire and preserved it for posterity. They told stories of individual and group life that might easily be read with a homoerotic inclination if their viewers/readers so wished. In this way, the photographer challenged dominant meanings about sexual attraction between men: either silences and unnameability or the public denunciations of “unnatural crime” that accompanied newspapers’ coverage of court proceedings. In his own social circle, Gant replaced such negative interpretations with a positive evaluation of male intimacy, eros and relationality anchored in other times and places. Appeals to a metaphorical Mediterranean, for instance, along with the fairytale quality in many of Gant’s images, suggest an embrace of fantasy and escape, a looking to an imaginary world less constrained by the norms of 19th century society.

At the same time, this was not a smooth, undifferentiated phenomenon. Instead, it was a multilayered process in which men applied different meanings to Gant’s “pageants of masculinity” [Ibson 2002: 75]. Gant’s pictures of men in
lacy dresses, diaphanous blouses and clingy tights would have meant one thing to some of his participants and viewers, and quite something else to others. Dressing up evoked theatricality, an accepted departure from everyday ideas about gendered comportment. As “drag,” however, it refracted these meanings by hinting at subcultures of men—the mollies included—who linked cross-dressing to their secret desires. For some it probably had an erotic charge, a parallel drawn with Boulton and Park’s widely-publicized escapades.

Much the same can be said of Gant’s intimately posed images of male comradeship. In those photos, men’s physical closeness occupied varying points on a sliding scale from chaste physicality to emotional commitment and erotic bonding. Through these visual traces, we see something of the mutability of the lines between intimacy, friendship and sexual desire. For some of these men romantic friendship was a glue that stuck together the homoerotic and the homosocial, and Gant reinforced the connection by sometimes adopting the symbolism of ancient Greece and Rome. Others in this world of men, though, probably understood their friendships in different ways.

I have tried to show that it was possible for men like Robert Gant to organize and communicate their desires through a visual medium. This could happen even in an era when, as Harry Cocks points out, an erotic attachment for one’s fellows went unnamed.

These images show how men could give expression to homoerotic attachments, and possibly even develop homoerotic subjectivities, by creating and collating visual materials. Gant’s pictures, like those of his overseas contemporaries, encouraged sexually unorthodox readings of masculinity, bodies, clothing and expressions, and these collations had sexually-charged meanings for the photographer—and at least a few of his companions. Through these kinds of image we see how the individual’s sexual, emotional and companionable world emerges at the intersection of meaning, representation, subjective interpretation and social interaction. The surviving traces of Robert Gant’s photography offer us some valuable clues about the ways an unnamable sexuality took shape at one particular time, and in one particular place.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the helpful comments of Annabel Cooper, Chris Hill and Paul Hockings on an earlier version of this article.

NOTES

1. While the Masterton township had similar numbers of males and females in its population, the surrounding rural area was heavily weighted in males’ favor: Wairarapa West County was home to 5725 people, 3172 of whom were male, and Wairarapa East County had 1470, 1050 of whom were male [Census of New Zealand 1881: 2].

2. This pose—in its slouch against the doorway, in particular—also prefigures 20th-century representations of the “cruiser,” the man seeking sex with other men in the spaces of the city. See Turner [2003: 63–66].
3. The *Evening Post*, a Wellington newspaper, also drew this connection [Evening Post 1870].

4. On the complex relationships between homoeroticism, spiritualism and a “cosmic consciousness” in late 19th-century Britain, see Cocks [2003: ch. 5].

5. For a thoughtful discussion on the extent to which New Zealanders drew on cultural influences from Great Britain, Australia and North America, see Fairburn [2006].

6. During the 1880s, some homosexual activity was illegal in New Zealand: sodomy, defined in terms of penetrative anal sex, and sexual assault. It is worth noting that consenting sex that did not involve anal penetration was not illegal until a legal change in 1893; same-sex intimacy, *per se*, was never legally proscribed. As a result, there was nothing illegal about any of Gant’s photographs. On the laws applicable at the time, see Brickell [2008: ch. 1].

7. Robb offers a fascinating discussion of the connections between fairytales and homoeroticism in the work of Hans Christian Andersen. The fairytale, Robb suggests, was a “magic cloak” that permitted unspeakable sexual differences to be masked and then reconfigured into a culturally acceptable form [Robb 2003: 220–24].

8. Ibson suggests that in America there was little anxiety about “effeminacy” among men before the turn of the 20th century. This seems to have been much the same for New Zealand as well, provided cross-gender appearances were considered “playacting” [Ibson 2002: 75; Brickell 2008: chs. 1–2].

REFERENCES

Aldrich, Robert

Baker, Roger

Borhan, Pierre

Bordo, Susan

Brake, Laurel

Brickell, Chris


Burke, Peter

Census of New Zealand.

Chauncey, George


Cocks, H. G.

Cook, Matt

Cooper, Emmanuel

Dalley, Bronwyn

D’Emilio, John, and Estelle, Freedman

Deitcher, David

Eggleton, David

Evening Post


Fairburn, Miles

Gant, Robert

Gardiner, James

Goffman, Erving

Holland, Patricia

Ilbourn, John

Kaplan, Morris

Katz, Jonathan

Knowles, Caroline, and Paul, Sweetman, eds.

Kuhn, Annette

Murray, Stephen O.

Norton, Rick

Olssen, Erik, and Andréé, Levesque

Pink, Sarah
Reade, Brian

Robb, Graham

Rotundo, E. Anthony

Ruby, Jay

Saslow, James

Seidman, Steven

Senelick, Laurence

Symonds, John Addington

Thomson, David

Turner, Mark

Upchurch, Charles

Wairarapa Weekly

Wanhalla, Angela

Weiermair, Peter

Weinberg, Jonathan

West Coast Times
1870b [No title.] *West Coast Times*, 30 Aug.: 2.

Whitman, Walt

Wright, Matthew
2004 *Reed Illustrated History of New Zealand*. Auckland: Reed.