This thesis examines the representations of sexuality and gender identity in Gerda Wegener’s erotic illustrations in Les Délassements D’Eros: Douze Sonnets Lascifs (“The Amusements of Eros: Twelve Lustful Sonnets”). In 1925, Gerda Wegener, a Danish artist, collaborated with Louis Perceau, a French poet and connoisseur of erotica, to illustrate a book of erotic poetry known as Les Délassements D’Eros. Her illustrations consist of twelve watercolors, called aquarelles, with female-female sex as well as other sexual mythological and carnival imagery. For many years, both the author and the artist were unknown because the book was published anonymously due to its erotic content. The popular female model in her artworks was her husband, Einar, who in 1930 underwent the first successful sex reassignment surgery to identify as a woman. Through the inclusion of Einar as her female model in her illustrations as well as female-female sex, Gerda pushes and blurs the boundaries of gender and sexuality during the early twentieth century in Paris. Her works explore the fashioning of identity and the collapse of cultural barriers, and express a passion for women and beauty, all of which are still relevant today.
LES DÉLASSEMENTS D’EROS: SEXUALITY AND GENDER IDENTITY
IN GERDA WEGENER’S EROTIC AQUARELLES

BY

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
MASTER OF ARTS

SCHOOL OF ART AND DESIGN

Thesis Director:
Sarah Evans
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my appreciation and gratitude for my graduate advisory committee at Northern Illinois University for giving me the opportunity to research Gerda Wegener and her erotic illustrations in *Les Délassements D’Eros* which contributes to art historical scholarship. Their assistance throughout the development and execution of my master’s thesis has been invaluable. Special thanks to Dr. Sarah Evans, my advisor and committee chair, for her constant support and guidance, helping me shape and focus every aspect of this project. Thank you to Dr. Barbara Jaffee for her great insight and creative assistance. I am indebted to Dr. Diana Swanson for her constant encouragement from the developing stages of this project along with her extensive knowledge regarding queer studies. I would also like to express my thanks to Indiana State University for allowing me to access and photograph Gerda Wegener’s illustrations in their Special Collections. Many thanks to the museum professionals at the ARKEN Museum in Denmark for sending me their exhibition catalogue on Wegener with valuable research and information. I am thoroughly grateful to my amazing friend, Elizabeth Rachel Gauthier, who translated the poetry, enabling a richer analysis for my research.

I am grateful for the love and support from my friends and family throughout this lengthy process – their time and patience with this project will always be valued and appreciated.
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INTRODUCTION

In 1925, Gerda Wegener, a Danish artist, collaborated with Louis Perceau, a French poet and connoisseur of erotica, to illustrate a book of erotic poetry known as Les Délassements D’Eros: Douze Sonnets Lascifs (“The Amusements of Eros: Twelve Lustful Sonnets”), published in Paris. Her illustrations consist of twelve watercolors, called aquarelles, with female-female sex as well as other sexual mythological and carnival imagery. For many years, both the author and the artist were unknown because the book was published anonymously due to its erotic content. The popular female model in her artworks was her husband, Einar Wegener, who in 1930 underwent the first successful sex reassignment surgery to identify as a woman. This artwork has not been analyzed within the discourse of art history, in addition to the greater inclusion of Gerda Wegener in the field. In this thesis, I situate Les Délassements D’Eros historically during the 1920s in Paris to contextualize the perception of erotica and its perennial themes. This with the goal of fostering discussion about Gerda Wegener and her significant contributions to the history of art: Wegener was a successful female artist who challenged gender roles and the conventional concepts of sexuality and gender identity through her art.

Very little is published on Gerda Wegener’s life and successful career, especially in light of her husband’s profession and his later transition. Only recently has their story become well-known through David Ebershoff’s novel The Danish Girl. Published in 2000, The Danish Girl is based on the true story and memoir of Einar Wegener who transitioned into Lili Elbe in 1930.¹

The memoir, comprised of letters, diaries, and other accounts, was published in 1931 entitled *Man Into Woman*. Unfortunately, as noted by several researchers, the primary author is unknown, leaving the memoir open to interpretation. The news of Einar surgically and hormonally transforming himself into a woman (Lili Elbe) was a great sensation in 1931, when it was covered in the Danish and German press, as was the dissolution of his marriage to Gerda by the King of Denmark. Yet his and Gerda’s story was lost for decades. In 2015, Ebershoff’s novel was transformed into the movie *The Danish Girl*, gaining greater visibility of their lives and story, albeit again from Einar’s perspective and his sex transition. Although Einar’s life and gender identity dominate the dialogue of their story, Gerda and Einar’s partnership is crucial in understanding her art and the unconventional life both lead.

Some Danish women artists working from 1900-1930 achieved official recognition, but “as with women artists everywhere, the documents of their lives have been deeply buried,” as evident with Wegener. Although we have limited information about Wegener (1884-1940), we know that she accomplished a successful career in the male-dominated art world. With schooling at the Art School for Women of the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts from 1902-1905 in Copenhagen, Wegener gained artistic training unlike most Dutch women. Inga Christensen relates that before its opening in 1888, “young girls interested in art had available to them only sporadic training in the studios of local artists and study tours abroad.” A new category of women emerged without the rigid organization of gender within masculine and feminine spheres. “As women entered art schools and sought professional training in growing

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3 Christensen, “Early 20th-Century Danish Women,” 10.
numbers, a second generation of ‘modern women’ emerged to demand greater professional and social freedom, and with it greater public visibility.”\textsuperscript{4} As Chadwick and Latimer characterize, “the notion of the modern is a product of social forces identified with modernity, such as industrialization, urbanization, technological and scientific innovation and rapid social change.”\textsuperscript{5} The changes in social forces between the First and Second World Wars gave the modern woman independence to travel and explore careers beyond domestic duties. New modes of fashion, such as cropped hair, pants, and smoking in public signaled her new freedoms.

Gerda and Einar (a landscape painter) met at the Academy, married in 1904, and then later moved to Paris in 1912 to gain more social and artistic freedom, primarily for Gerda. As phrased in \textit{Man Into Woman} from Einar’s “perspective”, “Copenhagen and Denmark did not seem to him to be the right soil for his wife’s art. In Copenhagen he had frequently been obliged to hear how much his pictures were preferred to those of his wife. In Paris, where the contrary was generally the case, he felt at home for this very reason.”\textsuperscript{6} Both partners greatly supported one another in their careers, especially moving to Paris to advance Gerda’s career in a less repressive environment, both socially and culturally, through its artistic fervor and comparatively more lenient European sexual laws. As early as 1904, Einar Wegener modeled as a female for Gerda’s artworks, resulting in her widespread artistic success, especially in Paris. In addition to the unconventional content and themes represented in \textit{Les Délassements D’Eros}, their marriage


\textsuperscript{5} Chadwick and Latimer, \textit{The Modern Woman Revisited}, xiv.

embodied a non-heteronormative relationship, cultivating diverse gender roles. As Tobias Raun writes, “The concept of heteronormativity refers to the notion that men and women are two given, distinct and essentially different categories that are naturally attracted to each other like positive and negative poles,” and this division of the sexes is reproduced in social structures and roles. Gerda was not constrained or confined within their marriage, but supported to pursue her career and venture independently without the social expectation of procreating children. When Einar consistently modeled and made public appearances as Lili, his painting and other interests ceased, leaving Gerda as the primary provider and highlighting their gendered role reversals. In many paintings by Gerda, she and Lili are portrayed as intimate friends with an ambiguous desire and love between them, obscuring the boundaries of gender and sexuality, especially within a presumed heterosexual relationship. Through her artistic skills in portrait painting and book illustrating in a stylized Art Deco/Art Nouveau style in Paris and Copenhagen, Gerda produced a significant body of work, particularly capturing fashionable, beautiful women.

After Gerda gained visibility in Paris, modernist poet Guillaume Apollinaire praised her work, stating in the Paris-Journal on July 11, 1914 that “Mrs. Wegener [is a] delicate and spiritual young woman. [Her] graceful and unprudish drawings have given her great success and recognition as one of the Parisians’ own.” But Gerda was more than an icon of modern femininity. As stated by Andrea Rygg Karberg, “[Gerda] alternated between participating in important art exhibitions, primarily in Paris, […] and supplying enormous amounts of advertising, newspaper cartoons and book illustrations in the fields of fashion, satire, humour,

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8 Gether (eds.), Gerda Wegener, 61.
and the erotic. 9 In addition to the fashionable Art Deco style of Wegener’s art, the modernness of her work is evident in her nuanced portrayals of ambiguous gender identity and sexual relations. But this went unrecognized. In their historical moment, the qualities that Apollinaire and Perceau (in his dedication to *Les Délassements D’Eros*) attributed to Gerda assigned her to the lesser half of the prevailing aesthetic binary: the decorative, the popular and the feminine may be modern, but they are not modernist. Prizing the daring masculinity of modernist artists, Perceau and Apollinaire could not have perceived Gerda’s innovative play with gender identity. Indeed, when Perceau describes her work as elegant and graceful, he goes on to claim that she has the sensibility of a woman who understands young women devoted only to “Grâces and Volupté,” (Graces and Sensuality). Titillating readers with this picture of a woman modern enough to understand female sexual pleasures, Perceau also associates Gerda and her subjects with the eternal feminine when he capitalizes Grâces and Volupté. He suggests that these are ancient idols and that the sexually excessive young women—and the artist who understands them—belong to a female cult. Wegener’s illustrations of female sexual pleasure, gender ambiguity, and fashion are visible throughout *Les Délassements D’Eros*.

**Research Questions**

Regarding the erotic book, numerous questions arise: What was the nature and extent of the freedom of women in Paris in the 1920s, particularly women artists? What was the historical and social context for erotica in France in the early twentieth century, particularly in reference to

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9 Gether, *Gerda Wegener*, 17. Wegener illustrated magazines/periodicals, such as *Montjoie!* (from 1914), *Le Rire* and *Fantasio* (from 1894), *La Baïonnette* (from 1915), *Le Journal des Dames et des Modes* (from 1914), *La Vie Parisienne* (from 1915), and *Le Sourire de France* (from 1917) to name a few.
its “lesbian” content? Were female-female sex scenes common in erotica at this time period? How was the work received? How did the use of classical motifs and allusions to *I Modi*, the pornographic 16th century book by poet Pietro Arentino, painter Giulio Romano and engraver Marcantonio Raimondi, legitimize the work? How did the use of Lili in Wegener’s works address concepts of gender expression and identity? Are the illustrations notably enriched in combination with Perceau’s poetry? Perceau states in his dedication that, like Aretino, he wrote the poetry in response to Wegener’s works, not vice versa. How does this claim challenge our assumptions about male dominance of cultural production? Focusing on these aspects concerning Wegener’s illustrations along with Perceau’s poetry allows us to examine the erotic work’s complexities and locate it within the discourse of art history, which typically ignores erotic art and marginalizes women’s work.

**Structure of the Study**

Chapter 1, *Masking: Fashioning Lesbianism and Gender in French Erotica*, historically and socially contextualizes the concepts of gender and sexuality, specifically female same-sex desire, in Paris during the early twentieth century. Sexology provided scientific language to discuss sexuality and sexual behavior, while maintaining society’s traditional and acceptable ideal of sexual desire – heterosexuality. Sexuality and gender are notably interconnected, especially with reference to those who follow versus reject gender norms. Greater female independence after World War I threatened the social dynamic of the sexes, equating “lesbians” and unnatural female desire with women who sought liberation from the nuclear family and their “motherly” duties. However, within the realm of erotic art and literature, prevalent “lesbian” representations and fantasies were constructed for the male gaze and sexual satisfaction.
Wegener’s erotic illustrations are more complex than standard showcases of female-female sex partly because using Einar as her female model introduces ambiguity into gender identity. In each of the erotic aquarelles, Wegener includes a black mask borrowed from costumes worn at the fashionable masked balls she and Einar attended. This motif functions as a declaration and disguise for alternative gender and sexual identities and practices. The concept of masking both reveals and obscures the other underneath, who is freed to explore their inner self in the unconventional environment of balls that dated back to the eighteenth century. The balls were occasions for sociable exploration of gender and sexual identity. Gerda creates visually appealing and evocative identities through clothing trends or, perhaps more accurately, through trends in carnival ball costumes, which could be anachronistic and thus, paradoxically, à la mode. Donning eighteenth-century dress at these carnivals or masquerades allowed revelers to imagine that they were part of the pre-Revolutionary aristocracy as well as distinguished members of present-day fashionable society. Gerda’s erotic watercolors are consistent with her breezy and elegant fashion and magazine illustrations and product ads. Her two-page spread for a 1919 issue of La Baïonnette [Figure 1] is not erotic, and yet it features the same modish masquerade costumes that she pictures in Les Délassements D’Eros.¹⁰ We see a joyous, perhaps drunken, parade of 18th-century aristocrats, mythological figures—a satyr carrying a Bacchante—and characters from the Commedia Dell’arte, which include a female Pierrot leading the cavalcade.

Chapter 2, Motifs and Past Traditions of French Erotica in Les Délassements D’Eros, analyzes the concept and production of erotica during the nineteenth and early twentieth

¹⁰ La Baïonnette (published 1915-1920) was a weekly satirical magazine devoted to the subject of World War I.
centuries in France to historically contextualize *Les Délassements D’Eros* and its erotic themes influenced by past traditions. Allison Pease examines how sexual representations became perceived as an art form in both literary and visual works during the twentieth century.\(^\text{11}\) She traces the history of the pornographic and the aesthetic from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and how that impacted and influenced the incorporation of the erotic into the realm of art during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Pease argues that the prevalent opposition between aesthetics and pornography before the nineteenth century was because “pornography threatened the class hierarchies upon which aesthetic theories of the eighteenth century rested by exposing common experience in bodily sensation” instead of a heightened, between aesthetics

and pornography before the nineteenth century was because “pornography threatened the class hierarchies upon which aesthetic theories of the eighteenth century rested by exposing common experience in bodily sensation” instead of a heightened, intellectual state.\textsuperscript{12} Wegener and Perceau’s book shows that despite this, it was possible to at least attempt to legitimate erotica as art by citing past traditions. While \textit{Les Délassements d’Eros} is modern, it is not innovative due to adopting classical themes of lesbianism, voyeurism, masturbation, and rape.

Issues of censorship, regulation, and obscenity, specifically portraying female same-sex desire, were social realities, even in ostensibly liberal France. Lucienne Frappier-Mazur examines various erotic motifs, including the perennial theme of lesbianism, with the historical context of their representation.\textsuperscript{13} In addition to legitimizing erotica, use of time-tested motifs ensures that the reader will be enticed into buying a book that promises familiar pleasures. This suggests that the reader remains heteronormatively male. Lesbianism is represented in more than half of the twelve illustrations by Wegener, but this does not necessarily challenge gender roles and power. Frappier-Mazur analyzes erotica’s effect from a reader’s perspective, stating “lesbianism is a pretext for scenes of voyeurism, in which secret observation asserts the [male] observer’s superiority.”\textsuperscript{14} Women are the subject and object within erotica written by men to service and provide pleasure to male readers in various scenarios, particularly female-female sex as continued in Wegener’s erotic illustrations.

Chapter 3, \textit{Les Délassements D’Eros and Louis Perceau’s Erotic Poetry}, interprets Wegener’s aquarelles in their original artistic context, the book of combining illustrations and

\textsuperscript{12} Pease, \textit{Modernism, Mass Culture}, xii.
\textsuperscript{14} Frappier-Mazur, “Marginal Canons”, 115.
poetry, appearing across the page from one another. Although the text reinforces the erotic book’s connection to and appropriation of past traditions, specifically Pietro Aretino’s *I Modi*, it is modernized through its erotic interpretations of unconventional sexuality (female-female sex) and ambiguous gender identity. In response to Perceau’s self-aggrandizing dedication likening himself to Aretino, I compare and contrast the book of poetry with Aretino’s *I Modi* to analyze its influence on Perceau as well as the differing qualities between the two works. There are complex relationships, and sometimes contradictions, between the poems and the images in *Les Délassesments D’Eros*, particularly with the ambiguous depictions of gender in the imagery versus the unambiguously male terminology in certain poems. This may signify the artistic disjunction between Wegener and Perceau – either Perceau does not acknowledge these “feminine” figures as performing “lesbian” acts or he does not perceive or consider Gerda’s representation of gender and sexual identity as unfixed, unstable, and fluid. Connecting the text and illustrations provides a dynamic historical and visual analysis, showing that representations of gender identity, sexuality, and erotic themes were not transparent and easily legible. Returning the images to their historical context and to the context of the book rescues them from independent circulation on the internet, where they float freely (migrating from one Pinterest board to another) as charming racy pictures. Analysis of the poetry in combination with the illustrations in association with past traditions and differing representations of erotic themes provides an intriguing interpretation of the erotic book of poetry.
Methodology and Purpose

Through historical contextualization, visual analysis, and implementation of queer theory, one gains further insight into the illustrations. In addition to the omission of female artists in art history, the negation of queer and unconventional topics persists. As stated by Jennifer Doyle:

Sexist and homophobic institutions have had a profound impact on art and literary history: they have indisputably “hidden” sex stories from view—actively suppressing artists’ homosexuality, censoring openly homoerotic art or ignoring homoerotic content in favor of “formal” analysis, or cordoning off women artists and feminist art as superfluous categories. The facts of homophobia and misogyny make the telling stories of exclusion and censorship a matter of not only interest but urgency.¹⁵

Both queer theory and gender studies are important in properly analyzing the life of Wegener in relation to first, the lesbian imagery in her artworks, second, the context of the social and historical lives of women at this time period, and third, the reception of Einar Wegener/Lili Elbe. Adrienne Rich analyzes how and why women who choose to be with women are invalidated and hidden, in addition to the complete neglect of lesbian presence in history and writings.¹⁶

However, the lesbian imagery that exists are representations of lesbian sex meant only for men because lesbians are not visible as readers. While questioning the assumption that most women are innately heterosexual, Rich states that, “lesbian existence has been written out of history or catalogued under disease, partly because it has been treated as exceptional rather than intrinsic.”¹⁷

Almost a hundred years after Les Délassements D’Eros, concepts of sexual and

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¹⁵ Jennifer Doyle, Sex Objects: Art and The Dialectics Of Desire (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xix – xx.


¹⁷ Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality,” 50. Oral tradition states that Wegener sexually embraced both men and women, positioning herself as a possible queer artist. I am not arguing that she was a queer artist based on limited information and possible hearsay.
gender identity have changed substantially and become more solidly defined, through radical
analysis, which provides valuable tools to reexamine the negation of queer narratives. Queer
theory is key to this project because without it art history is not up to the task of writing this book
of erotic poetry into the history of art. While it is the case that queer theory has shed light on
gender and sexuality, it underscores the complexity of actual and represented identities, such that
the ambiguity of the figures and relationships in Wegener’s images makes a kind of sense. The
historical context and visual analysis make it possible to be more precise about the paradoxes,
giving art history its due. Through these multidisciplinary approaches, art history can be more
inclusive with respect to queer topics and history and make scholars reconsider how we draw the
boundaries of our work.
CHAPTER 2

MASKING: FASHIONING GENDER AND LESBIANISM

IN LES DÉLASEMENTS D’EROS

One of the most prominent motifs in French erotica was lesbianism as evident in Gerda Wegener’s illustrations for Les Délassements D’Eros: Douze Sonnets Lascifs (“The Amusements of Eros: Twelve Lustful Sonnets”). During the nineteenth and early twentieth century in Paris, besides being an erotic motif, lesbianism was a reality among all classes of women, especially in the artistic community. According to Chadwick and Latimer, “Lesbianism was not at this time perceived as a ‘fact’ marked on the body, nor…as a particular sexual object choice or sexual practice between women, nor was it (as yet) a modern identity or subjectivity.”¹ The concept and perception of female same-sex desire during this time period was intricate and ambiguous, regarding language, laws, reception, and portrayal. In addition to the cross-dressing of women, regardless of sexuality, men participated as well, specifically Wegener’s husband, Einar. The motif of a mask is common throughout Wegener’s work, symbolizing the disguises worn by both lesbians and cross-dressers due to their non-traditional sexuality and gender norms in a heteronormative, patriarchal society. Themes of gender and female sexuality are represented and deconstructed in the erotic book of poetry by Wegener, pushing the boundaries of social norms during the 1920s in Paris.

Terminology

Although the term “lesbian” was not well-known or widely adopted in the 1920s, I will primarily use this phrase to reference women who loved women, both emotionally and physically, without the modern concept of sexual identity because there was no consistent consensus of language used during the early twentieth century in France. With the notable obscenity trial surrounding the publication of Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* in 1928, the concept and construction of the term “lesbian” became more pronounced within society and gained visibility for lesbian culture.\(^2\) However, prior to 1928, the language surrounding female same-sex desire was more complex. The term “sapphism” was more commonly used at this time in period literature to denote same-sex desire between women who engaged in oral sex, with its connection to the ancient Greek poet, Sappho.\(^3\) Another word, “tribade” denoted women who “had sex by rubbing their genitals together,” exemplifying how this term and “sapphism” restrict lesbianism to specific sexual methods.\(^4\) Further, due to the emergence of sexology in the nineteenth century by foundational practitioners Richard Freiherr von Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis, this science provided language and theories for sexual desires. Coined by sexologists, “female inversion” or “sexual inversion” “signaled a sexual disorder in which men’s desires inhabited women’s bodies, resulting in lesbian alliances that were markedly promiscuous,

\(^2\) Radclyffe Hall was a prominent British author. *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) is known as the pivotal novel for lesbianism, portraying a story of love between two women. It remains a valued and controversial literary text on themes of gender and sexuality.


\(^4\) Merrick and Ragan, *Homosexuality in Modern France*, 179.
unhappy, destructive, and manipulative,” as stated by Shari Benstock.5 Therefore, sexologists focused primarily on those who reversed one’s gender role in society by dressing in the opposite sex’s clothing, equating it to a heterosexual born in the wrong body instead of understanding it as same-sex desire. According to Laura Doan, “prior to 1928, and for some years after, the terms ‘lesbian,’ ‘homosexual,’ ‘sexual invert,’ or ‘Sapphist’ often overlapped with one another and… did not generally connote a specific sexual behavior, identity, or appearance.”6 These culturally prescribed meanings of language measure the social limits of acceptability within gender and sexuality during the early twentieth century.

The emergence of psychiatry and sexology in the nineteenth century created new frameworks in which to discuss and analyze sexual behavior. Chadwick and Latimer articulate that, “homosexuality, which was widely perceived as both a symptom and a cause of social degeneration and a threat to the continuing viability of the family as a social unit, came to occupy a prominent place in both medical and juridical debates of the period.”7 For example, Havelock Ellis determined that the rise in “lesbianism” was due to “the growing independence of the women [and] their lessening need for marriage.”8 Advancement in women’s freedom and autonomy greatly occurred during and after World War I in France. With French men fighting in the war, women gained power to leave and work outside the home as well as attend professional

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8 Ibid, 8.
schools to a degree that had never been available before. This change in the gender role dynamic threatened to destroy the social distinctions between the sexes. Accusations of lesbianism were used as a scare tactic to keep women within their socially and culturally accepted gender roles. Feminism and female independence became closely associated with lesbianism and the “unnatural” within society. Unless a woman was willing to accept the label of being unnatural, she conformed to the expectations of her gender and accepted sexuality. Antifeminism and the connection between lesbianism and feminism are greatly exemplified by psychiatrist William Lee Howard in 1900 who lamented:

The female possessed of masculine ideas of independence, the viragint who would sit in the public highways and lift up her pseudo-virile voice, proclaiming her sole right to decide questions of war or religion, or the value of celibacy and the curse of woman’s impurity, and that disgusting anti-social being, the female sexual pervert, are simply different degrees of the same class – degenerates.

Howard clearly equates the female sexual pervert (lesbian) and the feminist to being depraved individuals for wanting a political and cultural voice within their society as well as emphasizing how the two are one in the same.

Women in the Early Twentieth Century

Feminists and lesbians were viewed as not enriching the structure of the family in society with the gain of independence and working outside the home in addition to a decreased focus on procreation (especially from the lesbian perspective). For example, “in 1906, women

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represented nearly 38 percent of the French labor force, and 20 percent of married women worked, one of the highest proportions in Western Europe,” yet most women worked domestic and lower paid jobs. After World War I, French culture shifted from a war economy to a mass consumer society, which further altered women’s roles and gendered social relationships. The French lost 1.3 million young men in combat, which sent a grave panic into the nation due to the declining birthrate after 1918. Fear of national extinction was prevalent due to the “combination of factors evident in France after 1918 – an increase in the number of women working outside the home, a decline in the birthrate, and somewhat easier access to birth control and abortion.” Conservatives thoroughly advocated for procreation and vigorously fought against birth control and abortion. Through these fear tactics, the underlying message was against homosexuals, lesbians, and independent women who threatened the structure of marriage and procreation, specifically the family. Natalist apprehension and nationalist propaganda translated into antifeminist and homophobic condemnation in order to compel French inhabitants to procreate and follow their traditional patriarchal order. Challenging patriarchal values embodies the male fear within society, which cultivates a sexist and misogynistic culture as evident at this time period. As illustrated by Lillian Faderman, “love between women, coupled with their emerging freedom, might conceivably bring about the overthrow of heterosexuality – which has meant not only sex between men and women but patriarchal culture, male dominance,

13 Merrick and Ragan, *Homosexuality in Modern France*, 204.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid, 204-205.
Like feminism, lesbianism is perceived as a political act against traditional gender roles and male supremacy within society that equates it to the status of a degenerate or abnormality. With the emergence of freedom and some established independence for women after the war, the unthreatening, invisible “lesbian” previously was now a target that posed a risk to their patriarchal and heterosexual structure, especially in relation to procreation and the family.

Although there were fear mongering tactics to compel women to follow their womanly expectations set by patriarchal society to deter them from sexual deviance with women, lesbianism was not explicitly condemned by the law in France at this time. This lack of action was “due in part to a motivated ignorance about, and lack of interest in, the question of female sexuality on the part of male legislators and in part to the absence of women generally in the public eye.” Further, all women were restrained to male-controlled, heterosexual claims, as previously addressed, that dominated over the “lesser sex,” primarily reinforcing a non-threatening environment. Overall, lesbianism was viewed as harmless and even pathetic – “intimate female friendships were considered to be the result of plain or poor women’s failure to attract male lovers.”

**Sexual Freedom in Paris**

Due to its tolerance of deviance and lenient sexual laws in comparison to other countries, Paris gained an international reputation in 1900 as the capital of lesbian love and even identified

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18 Benstock, *Women of The Left Bank*, 47.
as “Paris-Lesbos”. Expatriates and homosexuals flocked to the city to savor the pleasures offered by the French in the early twentieth century, including Renée Vivien, Natalie Barney, Radclyffe Hall, Gertrude Stein, and Romaine Brooks to name a few – all apart of Paris’s artistic society. An annual carnival in ‘Magic City’, an amusement park opposite the Pont de l’Alma, “was known as the annual refuge for among others all homosexuals in Parisian nightlife until as late as 1935.”

Gerda Wegener captures this annual phenomenon in *Carnival at ‘Magic City’* [Figure 2] depicting ‘the great masquerade’ with Gerda and Lili (Einar as a woman) together on a merry-go-round enjoying the festivities, illustrating the open atmosphere for Lili to freely be herself in public. Lili holds Gerda from behind on top of a pig themed merry-go-round, gazing out at the audience and the crowd below, inflated by the wind and floating, if not flying in the air above the figures. However, the city held moral and political distinctions regarding same sex love. These contradictory claims are best interpreted by Elyse Blankley:

Paris was thus a double-edged sword offering both free sexual expression and oppressive sexual stereotyping. It might cultivate lesbianism like an exotic vine, but it would never nourish it. In front of [Renée] Vivien – and, indeed, every lesbian – yawned the immense, unbridgeable chasm separating men’s perceptions of lesbian women and lesbian women’s perceptions of themselves. Moreover, lesbianism’s public image might enjoy a certain vogue in limited circles, but for women actually living the life style, each previous freedom was extracted at a price. Few lesbian women were able to live as bravely as Natalie Barney; most, in fact, grew weary of playing the sex-role game according to Paris’s rules – rules more painful because masked by many illusory freedoms.

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Misconceptions about the ‘freedom’ and lives of lesbians in Paris are attributed to patriarchal society and the myths heterosexual and homosexual men constructed, especially in erotica and literature. Women who announced their homosexuality in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were at times treated with repulsion and fear. Although lesbianism was not explicitly punished by the law, laws were established to deter lesbian behavior. This included “laws against cross-dressing and against lesbian practices in institutions such as schools, hospitals, prisons, and houses of prostitution.” However, as Laura Doan cautions, masculine attire

22 Benstock, Women of The Left Bank, 50
adopted by women in the 1920s did not equate lesbian or transsexual identity. What we may associate as distinctly lesbian with our modern lens may represent that time period’s modern fashion.

**Fashion and Sexual Identity**

After World War I, constructions of gender and sexual identities were in a disoriented state, yet remained more fluid than permanent. This fluidity was evident in the Parisian fashion as noted by the modern woman’s clothing. Fashion became a liberating element for women to appropriate to their needs, unlike its constricting gender realities before the war. The masculine attire adorned by women in this time period consisted of male accessories (such as ties), cropped hair, cigarettes, trousers, and starched shirt collars. Although women were prohibited from wearing trousers since the nineteenth-century in France, many women wore them regardless, especially due to it being loosely enforced. This new modern fashion liberated all women from the constraints and conventions of femininity in addition to challenging the social and cultural structure. However, it functioned symbolically, making no change in actual power relations. French magazines, such as *Vogue, Vu,* and *La Garçonne,* illustrated the modern masculine fashion that women adopted, especially in the 1920s. Gerda Wegener understood this reality as an illustrator for *Vogue* in addition to the 1920s trendy magazine *Fantasio,* which depicted a cartoon by Wegener entitled “L’Eternel Ménage à trois” [Figure 3], featuring several women

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“smoking, sporting the latest fashions, [and] sharing an *aperitif* at a sidewalk café.”

It’s caption, “Mais les éléments ne sont plus les mêmes,” seems to ask “but what does it matter who plays the parts, as long as the roles themselves don’t change?”

This statement reaffirms how the practice of female cross-dressing was acceptable as long as it did not impede on the status quo, which it did in varying ways. Women cross-dressers viewed themselves as finally being considered an equal to the male – the clothing provided women with an essence of power and freedom to assert themselves within society on the same level as men in contrast to their

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26 Ibid.
traditional feminized dress. Cross-dressing was not the exception but the norm, demonstrating the wide range of female masculinity and its use to seize and appropriate male privilege.

Dressing in male attire represented a spectrum of women who participated in this social and cultural phenomenon, yet were heavily stereotyped as lesbian, thus creating discrepancies between the public images of the lesbian versus reality. Although “lesbians” in France, such as Radclyffe Hall, Romaine Brooks, and Natalie Barney, embraced the masculine fashion for women, not all women with same-sex desire followed this garb, critiquing the generalizations placed on lesbians and their representation. Laura Doan solidified how this perspective was perpetuated by sexologists like Richard von Krafft-Ebing who “linked lesbianism with ‘masculine’ traits and cross-dressing” and Havelock Ellis who “noted ‘traits of masculine simplicity…[and] frequently a pronounced taste for smoking cigarettes” as connected to female inversion as portrayed in Figure 2. Krafft-Ebing focused on both the physical and behavioral aspects of female cross-dressing, whereas Ellis analyzed the behavioral components that they attached to lesbianism. This perspective exemplified sexologists’ concept of sexual inversion and the reversal of gender roles, which misinterpreted the representation of female same-sex desire. The theories that unquestionably associated lesbianism with masculine fashion negated how “masculine fashion for women was also associated with educated or so-called advanced women, spinsters and feminists, among other unconventional women.” Women who cross-dressed were identified as challenging the patriarchal order and gender roles of French society,

28 Doan, Fashioning Sapphism, 100-101.
especially for female emancipation, and who better to characterize as a consistent threat to this order in appearance, actions, and behavior than the sexual invert/lesbian.

“Lesbianism” in Erotic Literature

As previously mentioned, misconceptions of lesbians were perpetuated in other areas of society, such as erotic literature, by both heterosexual and homosexual men. Lesbianism was greatly illustrated within erotica for men’s satisfaction, yet disregarded and looked down upon within French society. As asserted by Chadwick and Latimer, “the intertwining of lesbian identity and artistic representation – which raises a different, gender specific set of questions about art and about modernity – remains a blind spot in the historiography of modernism in the visual arts.”30 This statement reinforces how the lesbian remained invisible yet visible due to their unrealistic depiction and portrayal in society, especially within the realm of art and literature. Historians Merrick and Ragan articulate that “while the day-to-day lives of these early lesbians seldom reach us, ‘lesbian acts’ fantasized or even invented by the broader culture were made quite visible and even enjoyed widespread popularity.”31 Representations of female same-sex desire were constructed by men who manipulated and profited from their exotic and erotic manifestations, symbolizing men’s longstanding misogyny.32 Men dominated the realm of art and literature in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the portrayal of female love, indicating how lesbians’ identity and representation were molded by an outside, privileged, and prurient male perspective for society to believe and consume. Well-known male artists

31 Merrick and Ragan, Homosexuality in Modern France, 187.
32 Benstock, Women of The Left Bank, 53.
participated in this theme within their work as evident by Gustave Courbet’s *The Sleepers* (1866) [Figure 4] and Henri de Toulouse-Latrec’s *Two Women in Bed* (1895) [Figure 5]. However, the realm of erotic literature considerably influenced and generated lesbian misconceptions and fantasy to appeal to male society and their voyeuristic gaze. Although the discovery of remnants of Sappho’s poetry in the 1890s enabled lesbians to reclaim their literary and historical traditions, gendered social constraints kept women with same-sex desires from gaining a collective voice and representation within society.\(^{33}\)

Figure 4: Gustave Courbet, *The Sleepers*, 1866, oil on canvas.

Figure 5: Henri de Toulouse-Latrec, *Two Women in Bed*, 1895, oil on cardboard.

Nineteenth century French literature and authors were the main culprits in using the lesbian as a stock image and subject, affirming male assumptions about lesbianism and their experience. Lillian Faderman argues that the lesbian image became widely used by French authors/artists in order to shock the bourgeoisie and attack their prudish morality in an attempt to assert and make themselves distinct from the bourgeois power regime. In addition to eliciting shock, the image of female same-sex love aimed to arouse the reader, created from the male imagination. The image of lesbianism metaphorically equated to immorality and corruption of society, particularly in relation to the bourgeoisie, to express the horror and terror of vice, primarily sexual deviance. Charles Baudelaire’s *Fleur de Mal* (1857) was exemplary of this

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34 Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, 264.

35 Ibid., 264-265.
practice as noted from the obscenity trial that surrounded his poetry due to its lesbian erotic content that was deemed as pornographic. Faderman attributed the increase and popularity of lesbian eroticism in literature from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century to Baudelaire’s renowned reputation, especially after his obscenity trial. The love between women in these numerous works and erotic poems dwells primarily on the sexual elements, as evident into the early twentieth century from the erotic illustrations by Gerda Wegener in the erotic poetry entitled *Les Délassements D’Eros* (1925). In erotica lesbianism signifies that a woman’s refusal of family life is the consequence of lust rather than a bid for the liberation of women. Every illustration depicting female same-sex love in this book of erotic poetry portrays women in the process of a sexual act meant for the male, voyeuristic gaze. Even though a female generated these works, Wegener was commissioned by a man, Louis Perceau, to create the illustrations in association with the poetry (which I will analyze in the Chapter 3), which primarily conforms to the ideals of lesbian eroticism as previously discussed. Did she have much freedom with the scenes created for the erotic poetry? Did Perceau dictate how Wegener designed her illustrations? Did they collaborate together on the project? Unfortunately various questions arise from the writer and artist relationship, which I cannot fully answer, but with speculation, particularly regarding the dedication to the legendary erotic poet Aretino in the book of poetry by Perceau, discussed in Chapter 3.

Further, a primary source for these representations and experiencing “lesbian” life by writers came from frequenting brothels. Novelists had the luxury of seeing this public portrayal of lesbianism through prostitutes in the bars and cafés, attended by those to escape their

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simplistic lives and indulge in pleasure. According to Merrick and Ragan, “this type of ‘pornography’ had become, by the 1900s, standard fare at the ‘better-class’ brothels, which made their largest profits on the viewing of the assorted ‘tableaux vivants,’ along with sadomasochistic practices and ‘lesbian scenes’ staged for customers.”

Brothels became a fashionable meeting place for writers and artists to meet. “The favorite of Toulouse-Latrec and Conder, for example, was the Rat Mort in Pigalle, where the colorful prostitutes had the added panache of their interest in lesbianism, which they openly displayed.” Customers paid to watch and observe lesbian passion and sexual acts, enjoying the immoral, deviant behavior of “Sapphic love,” while also demeaning it and the women who lived such a life. Brothels were known for cultivating a female sexual culture both inside and out. For example, as Merrick and Ragan explain, the conquest of a fellow brothel inmate who had not experienced lesbian sex resulted in a celebration with two champagne bottles placed next to the two lovers to publicly display this sexual victory to everyone.

Although female-female sexual acts were exploited for heterosexual male pleasure as well as denounced by the male viewing public, lesbian relationships did exist within the prostitution setting. Letters from sex workers to female lovers confirm this reality, showing “how tough the lives of lesbian sex workers were, especially on the street, where they had to expect fierce retribution from male pimps whose control they refused.”

Brothels and prostitution commodified “lesbian” sexual acts for the pleasure and voyeurism of the public, primarily men, in an unrealistic portrayal continuing to maintain the focus on sex and not the

37 Merrick and Ragan, Homosexuality in Modern France, 187.
38 Faderman, Surpassing the Love of Men, 282.
39 Merrick and Ragan, Homosexuality in Modern France, 189.
40 Ibid, 190.
lives of lesbians. This culture permeated into the works of writers and artists who frequented these establishments for the “lesbian” experience as evident in their erotic literature and artworks, perpetuating the misconceptions of female same-sex desire.

**Gender Identity and Einar Wegener**

Besides the overarching portrayal of lesbianism throughout literary and artistic works, with specific reference to *Les Délassements D’Eros*, Gerda Wegener unconventionally used her husband, Einar, as her female model in many of her works, including her aquarelles, which eventually influenced his sexual transition. As noted by English scholar, Pamela Caughie, the term “transsexualism” was actually coined in 1923 (unlike the 1930s as many modernist scholars argue) “by Magnus Hirschfield, founder of the Institute for Sexual Science in Berlin, where the first transsexual surgeries were performed.”

I will use “transsexual” or “transgender” in reference to Einar Wegener/Lili Elbe because it denotes the “adoption of the gender role opposite to birth sex by men and women who held an unswerving conviction that they were assigned the wrong sex,” as Einar changed his born sex.

The term “cross dresser” or “cross dressing” will be used as well regarding Einar dressed as the opposite sex before his transition, in addition to “lesbians” dressed in masculine attire.

According to the 1933 memoir *Man into Woman*, Einar began to model for Gerda when, one day, Gerda’s model Anna Larsen, a famous actress in Copenhagen, could not attend her sitting. Larsen recommended that Einar should model in place of her, especially because of his

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nice legs. Gerda implored him until he gave in, putting on feminine clothing and high-heels. Anna Larsen eventually showed, and excited and delighted by Einar’s appearance, stated “you know, Andreas [aka Einar], you were certainly a girl in a former existence, or else Nature has made a mistake with you this time.” Soon after, Larsen named Einar “Lili,” which began the cross-dressing pattern. Einar dressed and modeled as Lili and made regular public appearances with the success of “passing” as a woman with his feminine exterior. The popularity of Gerda’s artworks spread and she gained more and more success with Lili as her model. As declared by Gerda in the memoir, “When she [Lili] poses for me as a model, a strange feeling comes over me that it is she whom I am creating and forming rather than the girl on canvas…” This solidifies Gerda’s considerable role and support in Lili’s development, formulating an artistic creation on canvas as well as a reality in life. Living a double-life grew tiresome and Einar eventually wanted to make Lili permanent. After consulting numerous doctors and through the help of Gerda and a friend, Einar eventually found a doctor in Berlin at Magnus Hirschfield’s Institute to willingly operate on him. The German surgeon executed three effective surgeries in Dresden. A fourth surgery implanting female organs for Lili to be a mother ended in her death in 1931 due to its unsuccessful operation.

44 Hoyer, ed., Man Into Woman, 52.
46 Ibid, 73.
Castration was forbidden in France and sex surgery was unthinkable in French hospitals at this time, even through the 1940s, exemplifying the struggles Einar faced. Our society is structured along the lines of a binary gender order – male and female. As stated by Zabus and Coad, “the transgendered subject usually passes as a man or a woman on account of his/her own gender performance and/or our ingrained habit of reading someone’s gender as either male or female, thus turning a blind eye to all ambiguities.”

“Gender, therefore, is not an essence, but is rather derived from a set of practices, processes of inscription, encoding, and decoding that produce specific meanings.” Gender and transsexuality are intrinsically connected and their context differs within other socio-cultural frameworks and how they are performed or implemented. “Arguably, human beings are constantly ‘putting on fronts’: adopting presentations of self which may have the simultaneous effect of expression and concealment whether intentionally or unintentionally.” Richard Ekins adopts the concept of ‘masking’ – “a term which denotes the simultaneous display of core facets of identity with the hiding of others” – to describe how transgender people conceal aspects of their identity.

“Masking” in Wegener’s Erotic Illustrations

I want to explore this concept of masking within the imagery portrayed in Gerda’s erotic illustrations. A common symbol in all of her illustrations within the Les Délassements D’Eros is

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49 Zabus and Coad, *Transgender Experience*, 86.

50 Ibid, 87.


the depiction of a black mask, prominently located at the bottom border. As previously addressed, Lili was commonly used as the model throughout Gerda’s works, particularly these images of erotica. As discussed by Ekins, “masking” is a process used by cross-dressers or transgender people to “pass” in society or disguise their true sex to refrain from suspicion and avoid punitive societal consequences. This prevalent imagery of a black mask may symbolize Gerda’s signature in addition to the mask that Einar wore when modeling for Gerda’s artworks, disguised as a woman in women’s clothing. As stated by Gerda in Man Into Woman, “it was I who many years ago enticed Lili out of Andreas [Einar], in wanton play, as a chance masquerade!” The use of the word “masquerade” by Gerda highlights the concept of Einar disguising himself under a different persona as a woman. Gerda supported and helped cultivate this new ‘mask’ of Einar, especially by finding a willing doctor to guide him through his transition and prevent Einar from committing suicide. At this time support for a crossdresser/transsexual from a spouse was extremely rare and even more so regarding surgical measures. Ekins terms this supportive process as “dyadic doing.” This method is when “the male femaler males females with another person who is fully aware of, and assists his male femaling by variously participating in it.” Gerda and Einar’s relationship displays this dynamic with Gerda encouraging Einar to explore his “feminine” side and even proclaiming Lili her “playmate.” Einar felt comfortable enough to be who he really was with Gerda, as she helped foster his true self into Lili.

53 Hoyer ed., Man Into Woman, 141.
54 Ekins, Male Femaling, 97.
The mask and the masquerade highlight the concept and issues of identity, particularly cross-dressing and transsexuality as well as lesbianism in this instance. Since the times of carnivals and masquerades, especially during the eighteenth century, masks cultivated an atmosphere of freedom from sexual, social, and psychological constraints. In this setting, identities were concealed while new ones were created through masks and costumes to escape the realities of society regarding sexual, social, private, and political statuses, developing a liberating ambience. Erotic and romantic fantasies are associated with the mask and its disguising qualities of the person, becoming a “classic prop in pornographic representation.”

Although the masquerade attained this sexual and liberating atmosphere, there were negative perspectives regarding this sense of freedom and space. According to Terry Castle, “the masquerade represented diverse things: the decay of civilization, frivolity and freedom, sexual and moral chaos, a liberating escape from decorum.” Those who enjoyed the culture of the masquerade were viewed as a corrupt pleasure-seeking populace.

Part of this moral chaos and decay of civilization was the existence of cross-dressing/transvestism at masquerades. Castle illustrates how “both transvestite and animal disguise [were] two of the most popular costume types throughout the century.” The transvestite was seen as highly sexualized and eroticized because they were ones of great mystery and disguise. As previously addressed, the occurrence of the mask in every illustration by Gerda relates to this cultural phenomenon of transvestites/cross-dressers at masquerades. Both Gerda and Lili


frequented masquerades/carnivals often, particularly when Einar began dressing as Lili because this public space provided a safe haven for gender expression and identity. Costumes, such as the pierrette, Harlequin, Cupid or some other such figure, were worn by both at these festivals. In a photograph of Lili and Elna Tegner at a Carnival during the early twentieth century [Figure 6], Lili is dressed in a similar fashion to a pierrette, a female character in French pantomime, with her flowy white blouse, whitened face, frilled collar, and a tall, wide brimmed, elaborate hat. A painting by Gerda entitled *Carnival, Lily* [Figure 7] illustrates this costume of Lili, except now she holds a green mask in her left hand, solidifying the atmosphere of a masquerade as well as Lili’s dual personas through “masking.”

The use of a mask represents a mediation and exploration of self and other, which Einar was experiencing within these artworks as he dressed in women’s clothing to model for Gerda’s works. Throughout masquerades, women changed into men, and men into women, as well as people dressing up as devils, demons and animals. Masks and costumes created this realm of ambiguity, not knowing who or what was behind the exterior. For instance, the domino cloak or the Venetian cloak was worn by masqueraders who wanted to obscure their form and sex, with its long flow and common black color. Within two of Gerda’s illustrations, a woman dressed in a long black cloak is reminiscent of the domino cloak with its color and form [Figures 8 & 9]. Although her form and sex can be seen by the viewer as the cloak is supposed to conceal, its representation evokes this sentimentality from masquerades, but with a fashionable twist from

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59 Christian Gether, Stine Høholt, Andrea Rygg Karberg, and Amalie Grubb Martinussen (eds.), *Gerda Wegener* (Denmark: ARKEN Museum of Modern Art, 2015), 19-20. In an interview during a visit to Denmark Wegener says: “I love to go to the Carnival […] I remember once I was dressed up as a young girl. I must have kept up the illusion excellently – at any rate I found to my surprise that I was being wooed by nothing less than an English bishop!” (*København* 8.3. 1924, 5).

Figure 6: Lili and Elna Tegner at the Carnival, n.d. Photographer unknown (Rudolph Tegner Museum).

1920s Paris. However, ambiguity dominates because no genitals are depicted in either illustration, emphasizing a play on gender. Dress and costume speak symbolically of the human beneath in diverse facets and representations.
Figure 7: Gerda Wegener, *Carnival, Lily*, Paris, 1928. Pencil, watercolour and gouache on paper.
(Image: *Gerda Wegener* ARKEN Catalogue, 18).

Figure 8: Gerda Wegener, *La Paleur De Pierrot* in *Les Délassements D’Eros*, 1925.
Pencil, watercolour and gouache on paper.
Further, the mask elicits a sense of freedom due to obstructing a visual of the exterior, which promotes the wearer to lessen their inhibitions and act without restriction. With this visual obstruction, the other is released from cultural and social conventions, such as gender and sexuality. While presenting a new identity, the true self remains elusive, signifying a dual identity, such as Einar presenting himself as a woman although he physically and culturally remains a man underneath (until surgery). This ambiguity was viewed as encouraging an erotic undertone due to its peculiar erotic and sexual possibility of “doubleness.” According to Einar’s memoir, both Einar/Lili were two completely separate identities and personalities, an existing concept of having two selves, usually female and male, that do not integrate. Although the act

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of wearing a mask generates these concepts of identity and duality, I want to argue how Gerda’s illustrations, while possibly making a connection between the two with the presence of the black mask, may represent another statement of not needing the use of the mask anymore. With the exception of two illustrations displaying two probable male individuals wearing masks, a mask is not worn by any other figure; therefore, the lack of a figure wearing the black mask and its location in the foreground symbolizes the comfortable state Einar was in at this time period to not need a mask. Through his process of cross-dressing and going out in public as a woman, this may represent a “coming-out” moment in his life, representing himself as his true self – Lili Elbe – without a visual obstruction.

In addition to the disguises and masks of crossdressers or “transsexuals” at masquerades, the liberating space cultivated female sexual freedom and female emancipation, where women were free to attend unescorted, protected by masks.63 As previously discussed, the appropriation of male clothing and accessories by women and “lesbians” enabled them to function more freely in a male-dominated society. Cross-dressing or attendance of “lesbians” and homosexuals was a common occurrence at masquerades. According to Castle, historically, “women certainly, but also, in more coded ways, homosexuals – seem to have had at the masquerade unusual opportunities for erotic experimentation and release.”64 In some instances, women dressed as men had the sexual connotations of satisfying unnatural erotic desires with the same sex in this sexually deviant atmosphere. Some writers blamed these masked gatherings for breeding lesbians and homosexuals, a realm of sinful and pleasure-seeking opportunities.65 Four of the

63 Tseëlon., eds., Masquerade And Identities, 33-34.
64 Castle, Masquerade And Civilization, 41.
65 Ibid, 47.
twelve erotic illustrations by Wegener at the “Carnaval Galant” section of the book of poetry, depicting sexual ambiguous scenes at a masquerade – the sex of the person is not always explicit. One illustration, *La Loge D’Artémise* [Figure 10], is definitively two women in a sexual encounter, one woman going down on another underneath her Victorian dress. Both are identified by their feminine dress and female anatomy, specifically the exposure of breasts. However, the other three artworks are more ambiguous – two portraying a pierrot character with a woman and one with two ambiguous characters with one woman. Both pierrot figures [Figure 8] are obscure in their gender and showcase more feminine features unlike their masculine title of “pierrot,” illustrating a cross-dressing perspective. (I will discuss this play between the poetry and illustrations more in Chapter 3.) Women and lesbians utilized the space of the masquerade to sexually express themselves freely through masks and disguises and cross-dressing, gaining freedom outside the patriarchal, heterosexual realm.

![Figure 10: Gerda Wegener, *La Loge D’Artémise* in *Les Délassements D’Eros*, 1925. Pencil, watercolour and gouache on paper.](image)
Portrayals of lesbianism and cross-dressing/transsexuality are prominent motifs within Gerda Wegener’s illustrations in *Les Délassements D’Eros* in accordance with the social and cultural contexts of erotic literature and art during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These representations, while harking to past traditions of erotica, created a modern context and style exemplifying 1920s Paris, particularly the reality of female sexuality and gender identity through Wegener’s husband. The connection between sexuality and gender expression is evident in the masquerade and adoption of the mask used to escape the confines of a binary institutionalized society. Pleasure and freedom of expression, both sexually and physically, were acquired through the utilization of the mask to conceal the exterior from the interior, resulting in a less restrictive environment. Masking, a prominent motif in Wegener’s erotic illustrations, promotes ambiguity of sexuality and gender to challenge the binary order of society.
CHAPTER 3

MOTIFS AND PAST TRADITIONS OF FRENCH EROTICA IN

LES DÉLASSEMENTS D’EROS

Although erotic art and literature have existed for centuries, it remains a modern phenomenon that did not become as widespread until the nineteenth century with the emergence of a print culture and increased literacy among the masses.\(^1\) Erotica, or what others deem as pornography, developed between the creative exchange of authors, artists and engravers who pushed the boundaries of what was considered “appropriate,” while criticizing religious and political power.\(^2\) Criticisms and “inappropriate” content led to censorship and regulation of erotica, particularly regarding texts that acknowledged lesbian, gay and flagrant desires, helping “create communities of deviants, whether existing purely in the minds of users or actually formed through the circulation of texts.”\(^3\) France has long been recognized as the great source of erotica, ranging as far back as the twelfth century, with the added component of wit and a sense of humor. “In France, unlike in the United States, French erotic writing attracted the support and participation of writers and artists throughout the spectrum of society, including women,”\(^4\) as

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notable in Gerda Wegener’s erotic publication *Les Délassements D’Eros: Douze Sonnets Lascifs* (“The Amusements of Eros: Twelve Lustful Sonnets”). By contextualizing the traditions and culture of French erotica from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, I aim to situate and analyze Wegener’s erotic illustrations in Paris, encompassing their conventional, yet exceptional artistic and erotic connotations.

From most scholarly perspectives, the terms erotica and pornography have differing interpretations from one another. Zalin Grant defines “eroticism as sexual desire expressed with a more subtle sensibility than pornography, which seeks to excite – without intellectual or emotional adornment – the basic instinct.”\(^5\) Lucienne Frappier-Mazur distinguishes it even more stating that erotica are “those stories which represent a succession of sexual acts connected by a narrative thread, and which are perceived at some point in time as transgressive because they violate both the norms of discourse and of sexual behavior.”\(^6\) Both scholars overall provide a similar perspective regarding the concept of erotica and how it involves an intellectual component with a descriptive story to induce sexual arousal and emotion. Distinction between these terms remains a scholarly debate, with stigma attached in differing ways. Not all erotica have illustrations that coincide with the text, like Wegener’s and Louis Perceau’s erotic publication. Erotic literature and novels may or may not have artwork that embodies the text to provide an added visual component and dialogue for the reader. Gaining access to the full work (both text and illustrations) in modern times can be a struggle due to copyright or censorship issues, in addition to the work’s accessibility and location. As Lisa Siegel asserts, historically,


“few archives collect pornography, and those that do are often subject to political pressures,” exemplifying the “stifled generations of scholarship” on the subject. Erotica continuously faced and faces conflicts over censorship and regulation by governing powers.

Censorship and regulation has affected erotica for centuries as far back as the Renaissance with harsh penalties. During the sixteenth century, *I modi*, one of the most famous Renaissance erotica written by Pietro Aretino with drawings by Guilio Romano and engravings by Marcantonio Raimondi, and its original engravings were soon destroyed after publication ordered by the Pope, as was a second edition published a few years later. Further, Raimondi was put in jail, Romano already left Rome, and Aretino fled before he could be implicated. Although the originals were demolished, copies survived and it remains an inspirational work of erotica that other authors and artists followed, such as adopting the format of writing erotic sonnets and illustrating sexual positions. The erotic poetry by Louis Perceau and illustrations by Wegener evoke Aretino’s style, which I will analyze later in this chapter as well as the following chapter on the text of the poetry to exemplify Aretino’s enduring influence on erotica, in addition to other French erotic authors, such as Charles Baudelaire and Pierre Louÿs.

**Erotic Literature in France**

Since the sixteenth century, France produced and circulated large numbers of erotic publications, deeming it a country with sexual autonomy. Audiences for this erotic material

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from the eighteenth to the twentieth century were the individual, the couple, and the group.\(^9\)

Nineteenth century France saw a great influx of literary indecency trials. Although France has a long history of creating erotica, this does not mean that it was a country free of censorship, obscenity laws and state or religious suppression. For instance, in the nineteenth century, “the publication of erotic books had meant at all times great risks for both author and publisher, for if discovered both would be liable to hard punishment.”\(^{10}\) In addition to erotic literature, other materials such as plays, song lyrics, essays, and poetry were prosecuted in France for indecency.\(^{11}\) During the nineteenth century, regulation over book publishing presented itself as a false reality where one could attempt to publish anything. Although this is true, there were always stipulations attached when processed through the governing bodies, resulting in the possibility of being brought to trial or banned, along with fines and prison sentences for everyone involved, such as the author, publisher, and artist.\(^{12}\) These punishments are similar to the ones enacted during the Renaissance; however, the frequency of trials and literary limitations increased considerably during the nineteenth century due to increased literacy rates and innovative printing techniques.\(^{13}\) The combination of these two circumstances vastly expanded the reading population, particularly women and the working class who posed a threat to the governing bodies in power through their access to knowledge and sexual content.

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9 Hunt, eds., The Invention Of Pornography, 262.


12 Ladenson, Dirt For Art's Sake, 10.

13 Ibid.
Although various forms of erotic literature faced judicial action during the nineteenth century, Charles Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857) was “the first volume of serious poetry to be brought up on obscenity charges in France.”\(^{14}\) Six poems were banned due to their sexual content and the “lesbian” themes developed throughout. Baudelaire’s first title planned for his volume of poems was *Les Lesbiennes*, indicating the prominent theme he designated within his work to entice and provoke his audience.\(^ {15}\) However, the term “lesbian” denoted a different meaning at that time period than our contemporary mindset. The title *Les Lesbiennes* corresponds with the concept of Sappho first and the sexual components subsequently. As discussed in the previous chapter, another more common term used during this time to signify women loving women sexually was “tribade,” which derives from the Greek verb “to rub,” emphasizing sexual performance, unlike the term “lesbian.”\(^ {16}\) Baudelaire was one of many writers during the nineteenth century that cultivated the theme of “lesbianism” throughout their published narratives, such as Theophile Gautier’s *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835), Honoré de Balzac’s *The Girl with the Golden Eyes* (1835), Émile Zola’s *Nana* (1880), and Pierre Louys’s *The Songs of Bilitis* (1894). However, Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du mal* was deemed indecent and taken to trial unlike other authors’ works at the time. As stated by Elisabeth Ladenson, “Baudelaire’s lesbian poems did not go away as a result of the verdict; on the contrary, they played a central role in the explosion of treatments of this theme in French literature in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.”\(^ {17}\) Further, Baudelaire’s work influenced and impacted

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\(^ {14}\) Ladenson, *Dirt For Art’s Sake*, 50.

\(^ {15}\) Ladenson, 73.

\(^ {16}\) Ibid, 74.

\(^ {17}\) Ibid.
the visual arts as well. Artists Auguste Rodin and Gustave Courbet both created illustrations inspired by Baudelaire’s poetic artistry. In 1887, Rodin was commissioned by Paul Gallimard to illustrate a copy of the 1857 edition of *Les Fleurs du mal*, focusing on the banned poems in particular. The banned poem “Femmes damnées: Delphine et Hippolyte” thoroughly inspired Courbet’s *The Sleepers* (1866) [Figure 11], among his other works, and graced the cover of the Livre de Poche edition of *Les Fleurs du mal*. Condemnation of the poems essentially aided in its legacy in French erotic literature, which eventually led to its exoneration in 1949 through the passing of a law, deeming the poems no longer obscene.

![Image of Courbet's The Sleepers](image)

**Figure 11:** Gustave Courbet, *The Sleepers*, 1866, oil on canvas.

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18 Ladenson, *Dirt For Art's Sake*, 75.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid, 47.
Not all literary erotic works experienced judicial trial due to obscenity, especially regarding themes of women loving women. However, all erotic works, while open to publish freely in France, functioned under the constant possibility of being censored, banned and/or fined by the governing powers. Certain tactics, such as pseudonyms, were utilized by authors, artists, and publishers to keep their identities anonymous to refrain from legal punishment and restrictions. This is evident even into the twentieth century in the 1925 erotic book of poetry *Les Délassements D’Éros* created by Louis Perceau and Gerda Wegener. Perceau functioned as one of France’s leading publishers of erotic literature during the 1920s and 1930s with the use of numerous pseudonyms to avoid the authorities.\(^\text{21}\) Perceau used the pseudonym Alexandre de Vérineau in the book of erotic poetry to hide his true name. Two other erotic publications entitled *Priapes* (1920) and “Au bord du lit” (1927, *At the Bedside*) applied the same Vérineau name in place of Perceau’s identity.\(^\text{22}\) Gerda Wegener was never identified within the book; none of the illustrations have a signature. Despite the fact that Perceau celebrates the artist in his dedication, she is not named, not even with a pseudonym.\(^\text{23}\) Her identity remained unknown as the artist to possibly protect her reputation entirely, since Perceau never named the illustrator throughout the book of poetry. However, Perceau subtly insists that the illustrator is a woman who knows women, through grace and pleasure. After his arrest in 1906, Perceau remained cautious of using his name in erotic publications, adopting other pseudonyms such as Jacques Oncial for his erotic work titled *Les trésor des équivoques* in 1909.\(^\text{24}\)


\(^{22}\) Green, *The Encyclopedia of Censorship*, 437.


“Perceau produced many reprints of the classics of erotic literature, scholarly editions of 17\textsuperscript{th}- and 18\textsuperscript{th}-century anthologies of libertine verse, and new editions of the major erotica of the 18\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th} centuries, all of which appeared in deluxe limited editions.”\textsuperscript{25} The rarity and history of these publications did not deter the authorities from confiscating and destroying them in anti-pornography raids. Perceau’s great exposure to and knowledge of earlier erotic traditions translates into his poetry and through Wegener’s illustrations in \textit{Les Délassements D’Eros} to make literary and visual connections to other works and to classical erotic themes.

**Motifs of Erotica**

Motifs of erotica, such as defloration, rape, lesbianism, masturbation, bisexuality, sodomy, and group sex, are prevalent throughout French literature and may reflect the male reader’s preference for certain forms of substitute gratification.\textsuperscript{26} However, various women wrote erotica also following these motifs even when treated differently, such as less painful defloration.\textsuperscript{27} These motifs are visible within Wegener’s illustrations for the erotic book of poetry. Frappier-Mazur explains that, “the erotic scene represents a fantasized version of sexual dominance and can stand as a (more or less) playful outlet, or a metaphor, for other forms of control,”\textsuperscript{28} especially to assert the male as dominant with the woman as submissive. This concept of hierarchy is further embodied by the author and reader being predominantly male. Even though Wegener was not a male or the author of the erotic literature, her illustrations

\textsuperscript{25} Green, \textit{The Encyclopedia of Censorship}, 437.

\textsuperscript{26} Frappier-Mazur, “Marginal Canons”, 114.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid, 115.

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid, 114.
follow these same motifs very similarly. Did she have much freedom with the scenes created for the erotic poetry? Did Perceau dictate how Wegener designed and interpreted his poetry in her illustrations? Did they collaborate together on the project? Unfortunately, without archival research or documentation, only one can speculate about their professional arrangement, especially with reference to the dedication of the publication, which I will analyze in Chapter 3.

Regarding erotic themes, Frappier-Mazur further specifies that, “historically the two most recurrent motifs have probably been defloration and lesbianism, two euphemized forms of domination in male erotica: if not brutal, defloration has to be markedly painful for the woman, and lesbianism is a pretext for scenes of voyeurism, in which secret observation asserts the observer’s superiority.”29 Women are the subject and object within erotica written by men to service and provide pleasure to male readers in various scenarios, “given that the tradition of inventing female desires that fit with men’s fantasies formed the backbone of the pornographic tradition from Aretino forward.”30 According to Lynn Hunt, “for their own sexual arousal, men read about women having sex with other women or with multiple partners. The new fraternity created by these complex intersections of voyeurism and objectification may have been democratic in the sense of social leveling, but in the end it was almost always a leveling for men,”31 reaffirming the hierarchical power men maintained within society.

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31 Hunt, The Invention Of Pornography, 44.
Voyeurism

Eight illustrations of women loving women are represented within the series of twelve watercolors by Wegener. Dorothy Kosinski poses the mindset that “one must think about what the work of art reveals about the male heterosexual approach to female sexuality, and more general implications about the role of art in sexual fantasy and imagination, voyeurism and titillation, dominance and abuse.”\(^{32}\) Although a woman created these erotic works, they were formulated through a commission by a man and within the conventions of utilizing the popular theme of lesbian images in illustrations of literary texts for patriarchal society. Voyeurism and lesbian imagery is a predominant theme in erotica by Wegener. One watercolor entitled *Après Le Bal* (“After the Ball”) [Figure 12] includes an active voyeur in the background while two women are interacting sexually. All figures wear Victorian dress that was typically worn to a masquerade from the eighteenth century to the early twentieth century: the voyeur wears a pointed hat with a grey mask covering his face hiding behind a maroon partition, a woman is dressed in a black domino outfit with a ruffled collar of a pierrot, and the other woman is clothed in a large, blue Victorian dress with an elaborate white wig on her head. The voyeur stands behind the partition between the loges, a balcony in the theatre that provides a semi-private space. Although the other spectators can see who sits at the edge of the loge, it is possible for someone to remain hidden if seated further back. Reserved for the wealthy and privileged, people observed how other haute bourgeois women dressed, while men could also gaze at women arrayed in the other balconies. Enthralled in each other’s grasp in Figure 12, the woman

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in black gripping the other woman’s hips from behind with her bare backside rubbing up against her pelvis and genitals, neither woman is aware of the male voyeur diagonally positioned from their stance. Both are absorbed in their pleasures, behaving as if there is no witness to their sexual performance. The woman dressed in black may represent a masculine sexuality due to being dressed similarly to a pierrot, wearing pants and grabbing the other woman from behind in a thrusting motion, whereas the woman being thrusted is clothed femininely in a Victorian dress, addressing a gendered dynamic of sexual imagery. The voyeur is only a pawn within the sexual scene, with the two women and their half-naked bodies as the central objects and main focus for the reader. Within the tradition of erotica, although the voyeur is excluded, he cannot be a part of the erotic display unless he discovers it secretly. Jean Marie Goulemot asserts that “the picture is always seen through a gap, a narrow window, a secret door, a two-way mirror. The picture perceived by him is an invitation to take part in the festivities…this witness is the very figure by which the reader’s own desire is written into the text.”33 \textit{Après Le Bal} [Figure 12] affirms this practice, as the voyeur is seen through a gap between the partition and a column, peering behind these objects to take part in the sexual act. The frame of the image cuts him off, only depicting his head behind the framework, creating a secret space for him to gaze freely upon the women and eventually insert his presence. His hand grabs the partition in front of him as if he is in motion or desires to join the women that he sees before him. Further, as noted by Frappier-Mazur, “the voyeuristic character actualizes the reader’s own position as voyeur and this specular relation enhances the staging of the body and its erotic effect on the omnipotent

Through the visualization of the voyeur, the reader can envision their fantasy as such character and gain greater pleasure from the erotic illustration.

Figure 12: Gerda Wegener, *Après Le Bal, Les Délassements D’Eros*, 1925. Pencil, watercolour and gouache on paper.

Extending the concept of voyeurism, although a specific voyeur is not depicted in each illustration, the shape and frame of the artwork represent almost a ‘peephole’ into these intimate and sexual moments. For instance, the oval shape of the illustrations produces a peephole imagery for the viewer to see a sexual act in a voyeuristic manner without having their identity known. As indicated by Allison Pease, viewing erotica “is not a passive act of watching, but rather a consumption, a taking in of an image for personal use, a subjection of the image to the body,” which is further emphasized by the peephole frame of the illustrations. Framing the image creates a barrier to keep the reader at a certain distance, accentuating their outsider gaze.

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“This presence of the gaze, a palpable but almost uncertain reality of the voyeur in the scenic disposition of the erotic illustration, is symbolically indicated by an outsider witnessing the moment.”  

Shaping the frame as a peephole places the viewer as a sexual spectator and voyeur, forming an intimate setting for their unbridled, secretive pleasure.

**Drapery**

Many illustrations are framed by the use of a curtain, which provides a decorative component as well as composes an intimate setting for the viewer to partake in. The use of drapery to separate the space and create a private environment for sexual pleasure encourages and entices the viewer to stare into the artwork as a voyeur, especially to enjoy the female form and its erotic impact. According to Anne Hollander, in Western art, “the nude body and draped cloth became essential elements of idealized vision; they came to seem correct for conveying the most valid truths of life, entirely through the persuasive force of their appearance in works of art…”  

Hanging cloth behind a portrait subject became a convention when hanging it in honor behind the stance or throne of the king, which permeated into Renaissance portraiture to provide a decorative and dramatic backdrop to the subject.  

Drapery or a curtain can function as a movable architectural element similar to a screen to frame the scene or create a certain ambiance for the setting. In Wegener’s illustration of *La Paleur de Pierrot* (“Pierrot’s Lividity”) [Figure 13], a feminine figure (although labeled a male pierrot) dressed as black pierrot rests on a lavish

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chair as she receives cunnilingus from a blonde woman wearing a butterfly themed dress. In the midst of oral pleasure, the woman in black grasps the blue drapery behind her and wraps it around their intimate moment, shielding it from outside spectators. The drapery frames the scene and provides a more private sexual encounter, contributing to a dramatic atmosphere with its darker tone and to a voyeuristic vision for the reader. There is a "yin yang" quality to the image that juxtaposes black/marine blue with yellow/ice blue. This may create a gendered division that puts pierrot in a higher/masculine position, which the image also makes obvious with the placement of the figures.

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Figure 13: Gerda Wegener, *La Paleur de Pierrot* in *Les Délassements D’Eros*, 1925. Pencil, watercolour and gouache on paper.

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39 Thus far I have not been able to find much information about Pierrot Noir. In 1896, artist, publisher and satirist Adolphe Léon Willette dressed as Pierrot Noir to lead the legendary Promenade de la Vache enragée, a cavalcade of Montmartre artists and locals. In 1925, the most immediate reference for Pierrot Noir would have been the Montmartre cabaret performances of Russian emigré art singer Alexander Vertinsky.
Masturbation

Drapery is a consistent visual element implemented throughout Wegener’s erotic illustrations in addition to adhering to classic erotic motifs, such as masturbation. Of the twelve watercolors, only one captures a person exploring their body sexually alone entitled *Illusion* [Figure 14]. Propped up with numerous billowy pillows behind her on top of a plush bed, the rosy-cheeked woman gazes down at her vagina with the aid of a mirror that she holds in her other hand to gain a more intimate glimpse and experience with her body, her other hand free for stimulation. Left knee bent and right leg held in midair enables the woman to achieve greater visibility and access to her genitals for maximum pleasure, while framing the imagery as well. Yellow drapery with green and blue floral design hang behind and frame the woman, pulled back slightly as a modest invitation for the viewer to watch and obtain pleasure, while maintaining its private setting within a bedroom.

Instead of self-satisfaction without the use of a mechanism, inclusion of the mirror adds a visual and sexual dynamic with the operation of a tool. A contemporary drawing by Helena Varley titled *An Up-to-date Young Lady* (1920) [Figure 15] illustrates the use of a mirror for self-inspection during masturbation. Pease states “to know oneself through the self-reflexive action of the mirror is to be sexually acquainted with oneself,” symbolizing the sexual power women were gaining during the twentieth century, yet did not fully claim until the 1960s. Unlike in Wegener’s *Illusion*, the woman in Varley’s drawing has an additional aid on the floor beneath her legs. According to Pease, a medical sexual manual lies on the floor encouraging the

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41 Ibid, 103.
woman’s self-exploration, exemplifying “a scientifically sanctioned validation of the sexual body.” This statement contextualizes the emergence of sexology and its effects on society, particularly within the realm of erotica, to be more sexually educated and open to a certain degree. The two masturbation illustrations, only five years apart in creation by female artists, show similarities with the bedroom setting and use of drapery to frame and produce an intimate ambience for the subject and reader. However, other elements contrast against one another. Varley’s scene is zoomed out more than Wegener’s, capturing a wider space for this moment, particularly the addition of the floor to reveal the literary visual aid. With the inclusion of the medical sexual manual, the woman is not resting comfortably on her bed as Wegener’s portrays

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in her illustration. Instead, she sits on the edge of her bed, legs wide open, and mirror in one hand under her genitals with the other hand pleasuring herself, in order to acquire a clear visual of the sexual book on the floor that promotes her self-exploration. Varley’s young woman positions herself frontally and wears less clothing than Wegener’s, who retains a pink night gown and night cap. Both women avert their gaze from the viewer and focus on their sexual pleasure and exploration, while inviting the reader’s gaze through their open gestures and pulled back curtains. These masturbation illustrations evoke the continuation of this classic erotic motif.
into the early twentieth century and how their representations reflect contrasting, yet comparable artistic portrayals.

**Sexual Deviance and Rape**

Scenes of rape, group sex, and sexual deviance are rampant throughout French erotic literature and illustrations. These motifs are exposed within Wegener’s watercolors, specifically *Cabinet Particulier* (“Strange Alcove”) [Figure 16]. Furniture, glasses, and food are in disarray as a grey masked character (most likely male) throws a woman wearing a pink butterfly dress over a circular table, pulling up her dress and thrusting himself inside of her. Another blonde woman wearing a red devil suit stands on the other side of the table, holding and restraining the butterfly woman's arms as she watches with joy the sexual antics before her eyes. The butterfly woman's facial expression does not show pleasure or enjoyment from the sexual actions happening to her, splayed across a table; instead, her mouth and eyes are wide open indicating shock, surprise, and unwanted pleasure – a scene of rape. Disarray of the setting creates a chaotic atmosphere, establishing the force used against the woman to place her into submission on the table, as her legs shake and tremble in midair, solidifying the violent, undesired sexual activities occurring to the central woman. Presence of a grey mask on the assaulting figure provides mystery and anonymity for him to act freely without scrutiny of his identity from the present characters and reader, as well as continuing the theme of voyeurism. Inclusion of the devil preys on various facets throughout the work. Three characters connote a group sex scene, even though the devilish character is not proactively enjoying in the pleasure. However, the thoughtfully placed champagne bottle standing erect in a metal bucket under the devil provides a phallic object to illicit its sexual gratification. Moreover, as the champagne glass on the table
tips over, pouring out liquid onto the ground, captured in white paint on top of the watercolor, the devil and possibly the masked figure have reached sexual climax through this symbolism. The devilish figure is portrayed as a woman, with blonde hair protruding from the outfit and rosy-red cheeks, signaling a sexually deviant scene even further with the presence of two females and one male. Both assaulting figures wear smiles on their faces as they take over the woman sexually in a strange alcove (from the title), which implements an aura of pleasure without an overpowering violent nature to make the reader or viewer at ease and more comfortable witnessing the rape scene. Motifs within erotica were not pleasant and portrayed images of dominance and submission, representing other sexual spaces and fantasies, especially from and for a male perspective. Wegener’s illustrations were not exempt from these erotic motifs.
Erotica continues to be a controversial topic within art and society, as it was centuries ago, but within a different social and cultural context. Issues of censorship and regulation remain contemporary realities as in the past. Motifs commonly used in erotica of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are visible within Wegener’s illustrations to exemplify its continued tradition, particularly with the popular imagery of lesbianism, voyeurism, masturbation, and rape, capturing diverse sexual desires to validate their existence and visibility in history. Past practices in erotic literature greatly shaped and influenced the writing and imagery depicted as exemplified through Wegener’s illustrations in the erotic publication *Les Délassements D’Eros* in 1925.
CHAPTER 4

LES DÉLASSEMENTS D’EROS AND LOUIS PERCEAU’S EROTIC POETRY

Just as Aretino did for the images of Marc-Antoine, I tried my hand at creating twelves sonnets for the twelve images of Delassements d’Eros. I made them as erotic as one would desire them to be as they attempt to explain the scenes in these erotic images. Yet, I do not believe that my sonnets will have the elegance and grace of these masterpieces for which they were written.¹

– Louis Perceau, Les Délassements D’Eros

In this chapter, I analyze Gerda Wegener’s illustrations with the juxtaposition of the poetry written by Louis Perceau for the images, producing further context for the traditions of erotica and its representations, and the complex relationship between image and text. The images on the internet now circulate without the text. As stated in the previous chapter, this erotic book of poetry has historical connections to past traditions of erotica, specifically to the Renaissance poet and writer, Pietro Aretino. The dedication indicates the legitimizing connection to this tradition. However, overall, the book embodies a modern style and interpretation of these erotic scenes through modern portrayal of fashion and gender identity. Through analysis of the images with the poetry, various disjunctions are detected – an image

portraying something not explicit in the text or vice versa. Although this signifies the possible disconnection between the poetry and the illustrations, generally speaking they reinforce each other and make for a richer reading experience. Through historical and visual analysis between both text and imagery, I will argue that the book takes a modern approach to the representation of gender and sexuality, often in a humorous tone. Ambiguous gender and transgender figures with numerous portrayals of female-female sex make this artwork different from traditional representations.

When I first stumbled upon Wegener’s erotic works through a simple Google search, there was no context or information about it existing within a book of poetry at first. The illustrations were dispersed without their text by Perceau. Many of Wegener’s works have gained greater access on the internet, including the erotic illustrations to Les Délassements D’Eros, with a growing surge of interest in her and her husband Einar’s story with the release of the 2015 movie “The Danish Girl” based on David Ebershoff’s novel in addition to the biggest Gerda Wegener exhibition held at ARKEN, the Danish Museum of Modern Art in Denmark, in late 2015. A 1999 book by Zalin Grant titled The Two of Us: Forbidden Tales of the French Erotique published Wegener’s watercolors or aquarelles with a brief excerpt about the works and Wegener’s life, one of the only books where I could access all twelve of her erotic illustrations with some context of their creation. ² Although the artworks in the book are by Wegener, the brief synopsis is dominated by Wegener’s husband and his transition, a common reality in the discussion of Wegener’s career. In The Two of Us, the illustrations are published without the

poetry, continuing to not display the complete work as a whole. Although the greater accessibility to Wegener’s works is tremendous for researchers and public knowledge overall, accessing the complete work of the Les Délassements D’Eros remains limited, specifically gaining proximity to the poetry.³

Analysis of Book of Poetry

Analyzing Wegener’s works could have been accomplished without having the erotic poetry written by Perceau. However, access and knowledge of the entire work provides a richer and in-depth study into the collaborative work by both Wegener as the artist and Perceau as the poet that is infinitely more intriguing. Les Délassements D’Eros as a bound book has various components which include thirty-seven leaves and a cover with the illustration of putti frolicking in the clouds and a bow and arrows surrounding the title. A dedication, three categories of the poems and illustrations, and a table of contents in the back represent the overall layout of the book. Throughout the dedication, Louis Perceau likens the work to Pietro Aretino, the sixteenth-century Renaissance erotica poet who wrote I Modi, after being inspired by the images. Perceau lays claim to being the new Aretino in the dedication, which is self-aggrandizing as well as a defense of the legitimacy of erotica. In addition, this increases his importance in relation to the

³ Fortunately, with close proximity to Illinois, Indiana State University held a copy of Les Délassements D’Eros in their special collections, the only library possessing the book of erotic poetry within the United States, highlighting issues of reproduction and copyright. The only other locations to access the complete work of erotic poetry is the BCU Riponne in Switzerland and the Bibliothèque Nationale in France, besides the private collections that it may reside in elsewhere. Its location at the Bibliothèque Nationale in France is interesting considering the history of the library. During the nineteenth-century, a collection of books called “L’Enfer de la Bibliothèque Nationale” contained forbidden and censored erotic literature, encompassing around nine hundred volumes. "The name Hell (L’Enfer) comes from the fact that these books were initially to be burned; while waiting for an auto-da-fé, they were amassed on shelves to allow the destruction of a considerable number of them at a time." Wegener’s and Perceau’s erotic book of poetry could have been stored in this location of the library after its creation.
unknowns about the relationship of him and Wegener as co-creators of the book. As Lynn Hunt contends, erotic literary works related to the international pornographic tradition where “the authors took care to include their works in the galaxy of reputed works of pornography by advertising them as imitations of Aretino.” By referencing past erotic traditions and great writers such as Aretino, Perceau legitimizes his work within the realm of erotica both past and present. Perceau provides brief background about Aretino and his famous erotic work, titling it _Sonetti lussuriosi_ as its name has changed and been renamed over the years. The process and creation of the poetry of _Les Délassements D’Eros_ is compared to Aretino’s method, similarly inspired by the illustrations Perceau explains the scenes as erotically as possible. Perceau praises Wegener’s illustrations labeling them as masterpieces with elegance and grace that his sonnets cannot measure to, epitomizing the illustrations as the main works of artistry with his words as second. This statement exemplifies how there was a mutual exchange between Perceau and Wegener instead of the male author fully dominating the artistic creation. Further, from the dedication, the illustrations were likely created first with the poetry generated after, in relation to the erotic imagery portrayed in the watercolors. Insisting on the images coming first allows him to emphasize the unusual and titillating feminine sensibility as the foundation for the book. Although the sonnets were written after and in conjunction with the illustrations, this does not nullify Perceau’s influence and direction of the entire work, including Wegener’s illustrations.

As referenced in the previous chapter, Perceau possessed great knowledge about the past traditions of erotica, particularly with his dedication to Pietro Aretino. Additionally, he was a

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well-renowned publisher of many reprints of the classics in erotic literature. Compiled in 1930, his Bibliographie Du Roman Érotique au XIXe Siècle was noted as the best bibliography of its genre, indicating his robust erotic insight. However, his first published bibliography of hundreds of erotic works of the L’Enfer in Paris, coauthored by the poet Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918) and Perceau’s associate publisher of erotica, Fernand Fleuret (1883-1945), emerged in 1913, asserting his knowledge of and exposure to erotica from the 17th century and onwards. His partnership with Apollinaire, the father of modern poetry, might have initiated the connection between Gerda Wegener and Perceau, since Apollinaire was a considerable proponent of Wegener’s work. Describing her in such unmodern, ladylike terms reinforces her status as a woman artist in a male-dominated world. Academically trained at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts and through extended travels throughout Europe, Wegener acquired awareness and artistry of past erotic traditions, as evident in her and Perceau’s collaborative and evocative erotic work.

**Format**

Following the dedication, twelve poems are juxtaposed to the right of the erotic illustrations by Wegener. Three sections categorize the poems with the first section labeled Mythologie (“Mythology”), the second section as Carnaval Galant (“Amourous/Gallant Carnival”), and the last section as Jeux Féminins (“Feminine Games”). Each of these titled themes resonate throughout the imagery and the sonnets. Three poems are featured within the

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5 Jonathon Green, *The Encyclopedia of Censorship* (New York: Facts On File, 1990), 437. Perceau’s Bibliographie Du Roman Érotique au XIXe Siècle provides a full description of all the novels, short stories, and other prose works published under the coat in France from 1800 to the present, and all of their reprints.

Mythology section, four poems in the Carnaval Galant, and five poems in the Jeux Féminins, demonstrating an ascending increase in poems as the reader moves from one section to the next. Every sonnet follows the Alexandrine formula still common in French poetry. Illustrations are compositionally arranged within a horizontal oval or circular shape with a thin black border around the edges, centered on the page. Although the first three mythological scenes present the book’s link to past erotica, they are outnumbered by images depicting contemporary contexts, in addition to modern interpretations of these past traditions. Unlike some earlier erotica, Les Délassements D’Eros comprises mostly non-heterosexual couplings: all five of the culminating section, the Jeux Féminins, represent the erotic activities of two women. This highlights the book's modern context and prompts a particular reading of the images and text.

Comparison to Pietro Aretino’s I Modi

In the dedication, Perceau praises Pietro Aretino for his erotic work of Sonetti lussuriosi during the sixteenth century and equates his process and creation to Aretino’s. Stated in the previous chapter, the original I Modi was destroyed by the papacy, as was a second edition published a few years after accompanied by Aretino’s sonnets. The original illustrations were presumably copied by Agostino Caracci, whose version survives, among other artists’ reinterpretations throughout the centuries. As Aretino-Romano’s I Modi exemplifies the first erotic work combining both text (poetry) and images, Les Délassements D’Eros follows the same formation except as a collaborative work with one artist, Gerda Wegener. Because they were considerable proponents of Aretino-Romano’s style and artistry, numerous correlations exist between the poetry and illustrations in Perceau’s and Wegener’s work, signifying their knowledge and admiration for past erotic traditions.
It is remarkable that traces of Aretino-Romano’s *I Modi* survived past the sixteenth century with the Pope ordering its destruction. Fortunately with its fame, additional editions, and imitators/copies, most of its essence endures today, inspiring artists and erotic art. Nine censored fragments of the presumed original engravings of sixteen sexual positions exist. However, there is evidence of the lost prints by the “Count Maximilien de Waldeck, an amateur archaeologist and romantic adventurer, [who] produced twenty ink and wash reconstructions of *I Modi* [in the 1850s] based on eleven tracings by a French sculptor, François-Antoine Gérard,” and supposed original prints he saw in Mexico. Although de Waldeck’s reconstructions are questionable, all nine fragments located at the British Museum are illustrated in his designs. With my analysis, I will reference and compare the illustrations of *Les Délassements D’Eros* to de Waldeck’s reproductions in addition to the analysis of the work’s poetry.

Themes, imagery, and textual interpretation correspond between Aretino-Romano’s Renaissance conception and the 1925 *Les Délassements D’Eros*. Both works notably focus on and emphasize sexual positions and pleasures. Illustrations in erotica depicting sexual positions are often termed “wanton pictures” after Aretino-Romano’s postures. Further, the capture of women’s pleasure and their active element during sex are prominent throughout each work of erotica, with a relative absence of perversity in *Les Délassements D’Eros*. Aretino captures dialogue between the male and female lovers during the sexual act in his sonnets, whereas

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9 Ibid, 14.

Perceau formulates a narrative. Most of the scenes represent a moment in time occupied in an intimate, boudoir setting with a narrative between characters as illustrated in other erotic literature, even poetry. For instance, regarding the similar portrayals of female-female love in poetry, Charles Baudelaire’s *Femme Damnées: Delphine et Hippolyte* (“Damned Women: Delphine and Hippolytta) of 1857 depicts a story about two women and their passions for one another as well as the perversity behind their relationship. Additionally, although the poems in Pierre Louÿs’s *Les Chansons de Bilitis* (“The Songs of Bilitis”) of 1894 portray intimate moments in time between women and reference classical motifs, majority of the content centers on love and emotion rather than sexual positions and pleasures. These differing examples of erotic poetry reiterate the overall difference and commonalities between Aretino-Romano’s work and Perceau-Wegener’s, including classical themes and narratives represented in various scenes.

**Satyr and Nymph Theme**

Classical motifs are prevalent throughout both erotic albums of poetry, specifically representations of satyrs and the story of Leda and the Swan. The first section of poetry in *Les Délassements D’Eros* encompasses Mythology in three erotic poems with Wegener’s illustrations. Entitled *Songe Païen* (“Pagan Dream”) [Figure 17], the first poem in the segment illustrates a satyr playfully caressing a sleeping woman’s genitals with a peacock feather from a distance. Although not a work of Aretino-Romano’s *I Modi* but possibly inspired by it, a sixteenth century Venetian woodcut “Satyr and Sleeping Nymph” [Figure 18] poses similarities of style and theme to their work as well as to *Songe Païen* with its depiction of a satyr spying on
Figure 17: Gerda Wegener, *Songe Païen* in *Les Délassements D’Eros*, 1925. Pencil, watercolour and gouache on paper.

and actively engaged with a naked nymph sleeping in her bed. Historically, the portrayal of the satyr and nymph relationship encompasses a rape or violation scene, such as pulling aside the nymph’s drapery as noted in both images, yet without violent overtones. Overall, the scene of the satyr unabashedly enamored with the woman or nymph in her moment of sleep is captured through both illustrations, yet there are various differences in setting, composition, and style as well.

Unlike the intimate bedroom setting of the Venetian woodcut, Songe Païen is located outside among nature in the grass underneath a flowery bush. The domestic setting for a mythological scene makes the image more erotic because it connects it to the everyday world of the reader doing away with any air of innocence. Moreover, the outdoors links the image to the traditional representation of the satyr/nymph, naturalizing the scene, while the bedroom evokes a human element. As noted from the poetry and illustration, both women depicted are nymphs lying asleep without awareness of the satyr’s presence. Although the nymph in Figure 18 is lying in a bed nude compared to the clothed nymph in a dress, both compositions evoke an exhibitionist atmosphere with the covers pulled off of the nude nymph by the satyr and the nymph’s dress blowing in the wind exposing her vagina for the satyr to play with his peacock feather, a comical phallic substitute. The nude nymph is physically more exposed than the other; however, her genitals are not revealed as the clothed nymph’s. Covering her face with her arms and shrouded around drapery, the nude nymph’s facial expression and face are hidden from the viewer whereas Wegener’s imagery portrays a content, sleeping nymph splayed over the grass with her arm over her head, showing a slight smile with rosy cheeks, presumably indicating her

pleasure. The nymph from the sixteenth century represents the Renaissance style with a semi-masculine body closed off from the viewer in contrast from the modern, feminine, doll-like nymph wearing fashionable, contemporary clothing with her body positioned openly.

Depictions of the satyrs are quite distinct from one another. In Figure 18, the viewer may mistake the satyr as a human male because his hooves are mostly concealed by the edge of the bed; however, his pointed ears and wreath on his head signify the figure as a satyr and his Dionysiac relation. As stated by François Lissarrague, “anatomically, satyrs are hybrids, half human and half equine. They have animal ears, and the lower part of their body is that of a donkey – complete with a tail and hooves.” Characterized by an insatiable sexual appetite and energy, satyrs used in the imagery of an erotic work is evident. Both satyrs claim the hierarchy within the composition, actively hovering above the unaware nymph in a voyeuristic pose and gaze. Defined musculature, a sinister gaze, and pronounced genitals distinguish the satyr as he actively stares at and engages with the sleeping nymph by placing his hand on her upper thigh. The satyr in Wegener’s work is clearly identified as a satyr with his pointed ears, horns, and lower body shown with hooves and a tail. Musculature is not emphasized in the body, which the reader may interpret as effeminate compared to the established muscles in the satyr of Figure 18, asserting his masculinity and aggressive posture towards the nymph. Further, rosy cheeks are illustrated on the satyr’s face, stressing the blurred gender lines that are indicative of Wegener’s style. Although the satyr is in a crouching position that is often associated with masturbation, his genitals are not pronounced and he maintains a playful distance from the nymph using a

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13 Halperin, eds., Before Sexuality, 57.
peacock feather without any physical contact with her body, unlike the satyr in the Venetian woodcut. Unlike the distinct male genitals of *I Modi*, among all of Wegener’s illustrations, *Songe Païen* is the only work slightly showing male genitalia of the satyr; otherwise, the female genitals are primarily shown, reiterating the gender ambiguity of male figures in addition to female-female sex and the emphasis on the female body.

**Disjunction Between Poetry and Illustrations**

In regards to the books of erotic poetry, text and images do not always correlate between one another, one providing or displaying context that is not explicitly represented in the other. Lynne Lawner affirms this reality about Aretino-Romano’s *I Modi*, stating the poem and print do not simply equate to one another. She articulates that “a daring disjunction of the sonnets from the images forces the eye to hop from text to picture and back, making everything more alive.”

This style and disjunction is represented within the poetry and imagery of *Les Délassements D’Eros*. Although the title labels the scene as occurring within a dream, the poetry attached to *Songe Païen* details further context. As indicated from her facial expression and the text, the nymph, Zoe, “smile[s] because of some pleasure, in an erotic dream softly begun.” Zephire, the Greek god of the west wind, lifts her dress and “softly graze[s] the half open rose.” This reprises the traditional equation of female genitals to flowers. Referencing Zephire instead of simply the wind, reiterates the classical motifs found throughout the work. Zoe succumbs to

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16 Ibid.
pleasure and dreams of a satyr “adroitly, playing with his hardening source of pleasure,” indicating the ithyphallic nature of a satyr, not clearly portrayed in the imagery. The poem sets up a kind of ménage a trois that makes the satyr look comical because he likely thinks he is the one who is arousing the woman. The umbrella is supposed to protect her from the elements, but she has dropped it and is thus exposed at this level as well. Various aspects illustrated in the imagery are not captured within the poetry, such as the satyr’s use of a feather and the presence of an umbrella lying over and next to the nymph. Although this signifies the possible disconnection between the poetry and the illustrations, they both reinforce one another and convey further messages that the reader can benefit from by their union, such as the comical aspect of the satyr not knowing about Zephyr and thinking he is the cause of the nymph’s pleasure.

As previously noted, a satyr represents a hybrid of a human and an animal, which may symbolize the reality of Gerda Wegener’s husband’s dual personality of Einar/Lili. As expressed in his memoir, Einar labeled himself as embodying two entities in one body: himself and Lili. In a symbolic sense, equating Einar/Lili to a satyr during the early twentieth century may suggest both are unnatural, yet sexual fantasies about hybrid beings were socially acceptable, particularly during masquerades as discussed in Chapter 1. This connotation can be observed as negative, equating Einar/Lili to a bestial creature who frivolously enjoys sex and other lewd acts, representing the destructive, immoral other in society that people refrained from becoming. Further, particularly during festivals, satyrs would be represented in the form of masks, connecting the theme of masks, anonymity, and duality to Einar/Lili. Compared to other

\[17\] Vélineau, *Douze Sonnets lascifs*, 9.
representations of satyrs that are aggressively masculine, Wegener’s hybrid figures are more ambiguous and less masculine, blurring the boundaries of gender imagery as cultivated by her prominent model, Lili.

Another illustration of a satyr scene entitled *Nymph et Satyre* [Figure 19] in the Mythology section by Wegener compares to posture 7 [Figure 20] in Aretino-Romano’s *I Modi* reproduced by de Waldeck. Contrary to the previous scene with the satyr and nymph, sexual intercourse occurs between the two figures, yet in differing positions. Posture 7 remains in the intimate setting of the boudoir with a bed, a metal hinged door, a water basin and a ceramic pitcher on a table. Although all of these components appear in the setting, the woman and satyr are positioned in the center of the composition surrounded by the bed and basin, not utilizing either element in their sexual pleasure. The jug, bath and removal of the slippers from the feet indicate that the woman has been surprised as she prepares to bathe. The satyr raising her leg prevents her from stepping into the bath. Spying on a woman bathing is a common theme, most prominently in Susannah and the Elders. The satyr is not as clearly identifiable lacking his hooves; however, his slanted eyes, unruly hair, and pointed ears indicate his character.

In *Nymph et Satyre*, Wegener continues the outdoor setting with the figures lying on grass underneath a grapevine with a green bush in the background. A body of water lies to the left with mountains in the far distance, reminiscent of Japanese woodblock prints. The grapes relate to the Greek god of wine, Dionysus, who instills intoxication and lifts sexual inhibition through alcohol and festivals. Unlike the satyr in Posture 7, this satyr is easily distinguished by the same qualities as the one in *Songe Païen* minus the pointed ears with horns, unruly hair, and fury hooves. Straddling the satyr, the nymph holds herself up by her arms on the ground in a
Figure 19: Gerda Wegener, *Nympe et Satyre* in *Les Délassements D’Eros*, 1925. Pencil, watercolour and gouache on paper.

curved posture with her head tilted upward, mouth open, eyes closed, releasing verbal pleasure. Gazing at the nymph as she mounts him for sexual intercourse, the satyr lies on his back with his arms behind his neck directing the viewer’s gaze towards her, enjoying his passive role. A more complicated sexual position is undertaken by the woman and satyr in Posture 7. Kneeling with one knee on a wooden bench by the bed, the satyr wraps one of the woman’s arms around him while he holds her right leg up in mid-air. She supports herself standing with her left leg, as she uses her right arm to reach below herself to grab the satyr’s penis to place inside of her. The muscles and anatomy are highlighted through their technique and form. As the satyr gazes at the woman in front of him, her head angles down with her eyes looking out and engaging with the reader – almost an act of enticement to see what happens next. In *Nymphe et Satyre*, the nymph keeps her eyes closed, focusing on her moment of pleasure, not engaging with the reader. Both woman and nymph are active and dynamic in their sexual encounters, taking charge of the satyr and their own pleasures, and even hierarchy in the case of the nymph.

An eighteenth century printed recreation of an *I Modi* posture [Figure 21] compares to *Nymphe et Satyre* through their similar sexual positioning, unlike de Waldeck’s. Although this print does not represent a satyr and nymph, but the Roman gods Mars and Venus, both works demonstrate the female dominating the male by being on top sexually. She actively straddles the male, controlling the sexual performance and her desire. However, the print illustrates the moment before penetration with Mars’ penis erect underneath Venus’s backside, as both figures embrace one another, gazing into each other’s eyes and leaning in for a kiss – a romantic element not seen in Wegener’s illustration. Unlike Mars, the satyr lies there passively engaged with the nymph commanding the scene, focused on sexual satisfaction without the overall physical
contact as seen in the print. The intimate bedroom setting reinforces the style of *I Modi*.

Stylistically, Venus displays a musculature body in contrast to Wegener’s soft lines and feminine form of the nymph, hair flowing over her shoulders, highlighting the distinction between the modern interpretation from past recreations.

**Sodomy**

Regarding poetry, Perceau’s words correlate well with Wegener’s imagery, capturing the moment of the nymph frolicking around the satyr in Sicily until she succumbs to sexual desire for him and straddles him until she orgasms.\(^{18}\) Eros, the Greek god of love, is given credit for

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\(^{18}\) Referred to sometimes as a faun and sometimes as a satyr because of the demands of the Alexandrine form for syllable count.
bringing the nymph to the satyr, stating “towards the lustful Faun, the young perverted Eros, has brought her today, open and easy prey,”\textsuperscript{19} acting as an intermediary but not a fantasy figure for the woman, unlike Zephyr. Perceau narrates the scene and moment of the figures for the audience, giving insight into the setting and mindset of the characters, but not from their own voices. Aretino’s poetry is rather different from Perceau’s, creating a dialogue among the figures that is explicitly sexual, describing the sexual act between the two characters. His text presents a voice for the characters, beginning with the woman asking where the satyr will put his penis, “behind or in the front?”\textsuperscript{20} She asks would it make him unhappy if she accidentally put it in the rear and he states not at all. Dominated by the satyr’s voice afterwards, he expresses what she should do with him by placing him inside of her rear along with the pleasure he feels, emphasizing his experience and not hers.

This is an act of sodomy, which Aretino obsessively portrayed in his sonnets due to his fascination with alternative sexual positions.\textsuperscript{21} Fierce laws prohibited sodomy during the Renaissance, even though it continued to be practiced in society.\textsuperscript{22} Several other sonnets discuss the act of sodomy, such as Posture 2 and 8 by Aretino. \textit{Cabinet Particulier} (“Strange Alcove”) [Figure 22], like many of the illustrations including sodomy, does not explicitly depict the sexual act. It is primarily deciphered through the juxtaposing text, reiterating how the poetry provides an extension of the narrative or voice. When analyzing the \textit{Cabinet Particulier} poem with the artwork, the two do not cohesively interact with one another. Although it is not explicit,

\textsuperscript{19} De Vérineau, \textit{Douze Sonnets lascifs}, 13.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid, 43.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
penetration from the rear is more apparent in Wegener’s illustration than Romano’s due to the woman being straddled from behind with her rear in the air as the masked man grabs her from her hips, inserting himself inside her. Her shocked face could indicate this further as well as reaffirm her unwillingness for any sexual relations, as I have previously analyzed in Chapter 2. From the imagery, I argue that it represents an act of rape as the devilish character holds down her arms on the table, while the masked figure takes her from behind. However, according to Perceau and his poetry, he interpreted Wegener’s work differently. Perceau writes:

Already the Butterfly, both hands
Held within the little devil’s nervous fingers,
Falls on her stomach in the middle of the party,
Offering to the excited old man her beautiful naked bottom.

Confronted with such beautiful charms offered without restraint,
The bearded man takes out his frighteningly hard rod
And enters her at once without any lubrication;
But feeling too at ease inside of her,  
He pulls out of her to place himself  
Inside a less known but much more tight space.²³

Perceau equates holding someone’s arms down as the woman offering herself to the masked man, emphasizing how it is given without restraint. No use of lubrication indicates the swiftness of the moment and the lack of consideration for the woman, which escalates to the masked man entering the woman from the rear. The Butterfly has no voice within the poem, focusing on what the masked man desires and his sexual actions. Although the poetry attempts to downplay the scene as not rape, it also subtly confirms its true interpretation of dominance over the Butterfly.

**Leda and the Swan**

Another popular classical motif captured in *I Modi* and *Les Délassements D’Eros* is Leda and the Swan. Although the print I illustrate here is not from the originals created for *I Modi*, the engraving of “Leda and the Swan” [Figure 23] by Agostino Veneziano in the early sixteenth century was borrowed by de Waldeck to “reinforce the theme of ‘the loves of the gods’ he believe[d] ran through *I Modi.*”²⁴ *Léda Incomprise* (“Misunderstood Leda”) [Figure 24], the second poem of the Mythology section, reinterprets this popular motif in a modern context compared to past traditions. The classical Greek story portrays Zeus who transforms into a swan in order to seduce and rape Leda, a representation of the human and the divine. However, the context of rape is no longer interpreted in *Les Délassements D’Eros.*

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Figure 23: *Leda and the Swan* by Agostino Veneziano, 16th century, engraving. (Image: Lawner eds, *I Modi: The Sixteen Pleasures*).

Figure 24: Gerda Wegener, *Léda Incomprise* in *Les Délassements D’Eros*, 1925. Pencil, watercolour and gouache on paper.
Following the traditional motif of the classical narrative, both artworks illustrate the scene in an outdoor setting among nature. The one chosen for *I Modi* is more private. It renders Leda lying down on a stone tablet at an angle with her legs wrapped around the swan as it kisses her underneath a tree with a far off town and landscape shown in the distance. Her nude form wraps itself around the swan with her rear slightly shown at an angle in addition to the side of her breasts, holding herself up by her left arm with the right arm draped over the swan’s neck. Most significant is the act of the swan’s beak (a phallic substitute) inside of Leda’s mouth, symbolizing his penetration and conquer of her vagina. Although depicted in the outdoor setting, Wegener’s illustration is located in a more public, formal garden with trees, bushes, stone walls, and a stone fountain. Leda maintains the hierarchy in the image, standing above the swan as it rests in the fountain. She exposes herself in an exhibitionist manner to the swan, lifting up her pink dress with her right arm with her other garments pulled down for her genitals to be bare, as she holds a white bonnet with flowers that she has removed. Looking down at the swan, Leda takes a step toward the animal on the ledge of the fountain, almost waiting for a reaction.

Inclusion of the poetry provides greater context for the scene. She is characterized as “provoking and playful”\(^\text{25}\) towards the swan, pulling her dress up and pants down before the swan arrives from a distance. Offering herself to the swan, Leda gains excitement seeing the swan’s white long neck, having phallic connotations, equated to a living javelin that will penetrate her.

Perceau finishes by stating:

> Under this strange desire, the fervor of which obsessed her,  
> She imagines letting in Leda’s lover  
> And finally believes she can feel the sting of its nature;

\(^{25}\) Vérineau, *Douze Sonnets lascifs*, 11.
But the big white swan looks at her with a puzzled look
towards the pubescent slit with its tight opening
And leaves without having any idea of what unfolded.26

With the last two stanzas, it seems that Leda imagines the penetration with the “sting of its
nature”; however, the swan is surprised by Leda’s genitals and leaves, not understanding what
happened. This is an unexpected interpretation of this theme because historically the swan
(Zeus) is portrayed as the aggressor seducing and raping Leda. Instead, Leda is the aggressor
and possibly forces herself onto the swan, through his bewilderment. Both the image and poem
emphasize Leda’s activity as opposed to the reader’s voyeurism, while undercutting because she
has the wrong idea about the swan. The poem directs us to read the image as representing the
comical innocence or ignorance of the girl who is too young to know that swans are not Zeus;
there are no more magical creatures in the modern world. Comical and whimsical overtones
dominate rather than being assertively erotic as in most historical depictions. Modern readers,
having prior knowledge of erotic motifs and myths, would find these differences amusing
compared to past portrayals. Further, the swan fails as an active voyeur, diminishing the reader’s
own fantasy, position as voyeur and sexual arousal. Although adopting classical motifs in
erotica indicates the influence of past traditions, as noted in these illustrations, more modern
interpretations enhance or create a different rendering of popular themes through history to put a
contemporary spin on them.

Although some influence from past erotic traditions, such as featuring classical themes,
style, and poetic juxtapositions as in Aretino-Romano’s I Modi, are evident in Perceau-
Wegener’s Les Délassements D’Eros, their collaborative work captures a unique modern

26 Vérineau, Douze Sonnets lascifs, 11.
variation. These themes, though centuries old, still have relevant messages for modern society to employ and reinterpret in varying contexts. Poetry and text provide a voice for the work, whether it is a narrator’s synopsis of the scene or a dialogue between characters. Text, when created and applied to an artwork, brings another degree of interpretation and extends its meaning in multiple facets, even when the two do not properly correlate, symbolizing the complexities and process of a collaborative work of art. Wegener’s illustrations accentuate ambiguity of gender and sexuality with occasional playful overtones, exemplifying the cultural atmosphere of 1920s Paris.
CONCLUSION

Although primarily dominated by Einar Wegener’s transition to identity as a woman, Gerda and Einar Wegener’s story has become more widely known and studied through their modern representations in both the novel and movie The Danish Girl. Additionally, the biggest Gerda Wegener exhibition held at ARKEN, the Danish Museum of Modern Art in Denmark, in late 2015 exemplifies the growing recognition of Gerda and her artistic capabilities, without being overshadowed by her husband. Although fictionalized, Ebershoff’s novel The Danish Girl (2000) helped pave the way for the other recent interpretations. Without archival research, the memoir Man Into Woman and historical analysis are the primary modes of information and exploration to contextualize their lives and Gerda’s artistic contributions.

Modern Representation

The modern portrayal of their story in the accessible and glamorous British, Hollywood film The Danish Girl (2015) has various shortcomings. One example includes the emotional turmoil shown between Gerda and Einar regarding his gender identity and transition. Anger, deceit, and animosity are overemphasized in the film. On a lesser scale, these feelings may have been a reality in the beginning due to shock, but overall, Gerda was very supportive and even cultivated this new gender identity for Einar as Lili within her works of art – the canvas and her artistry developed Lili into a reality. Although this perception is loosely based off the unreliable memoir, Gerda’s artworks capture the acceptance and love of Lili as early as 1904, soon after the
couple married, indicating the open and unconventional relationship they established. This depiction in film represents the heteronormative lens that our modern society continues to promote, instead of the complex and diverse forms love, sexuality and gender. As queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick reminds us:

Even identical genital acts mean very different things to different people […] Sexuality makes up a large share of the self-perceived identity of some people, a small share of others’ […] For some people, it is important that sex be embedded in contexts resonant with meaning, narrative, and connectedness with other aspects of their life; for other people, it is important that they not be. […] Some people, homo-, hetero-, and bisexual, experience their sexuality as deeply embedded in a matrix of gender meanings and gender differentials. Others of each sexuality do not.¹

Relationships vary and define themselves in diverse ways, regardless of sexuality. Gerda and Einar’s partnership encompasses more complexities and ambiguities then captured within the film, which demonstrates the continued limitations, particularly regarding queer topics, in our society.

Although the film and novel have their limitations, both have contributed to the overall awareness of the artists, particularly adding Gerda Wegener into the discourse of art history, with the result that her life’s work has been shown in ARKEN’s recent exhibition in Denmark. Through this dialogue and growing knowledge on Gerda, as evident from my thesis and the

exhibition, the future holds great potential for further research and analysis. For instance, eight scholars wrote informative essays on various aspects of Gerda Wegener’s works of art and career in the catalogue for the exhibition, including the journalist and Wegner expert, Nikolaj Pors. Themes of gender, sexuality, and gender identity are equally analyzed by these scholars within her body of work, as in *Les Délassements D’Eros*, but in a specific erotic context.

As previously addressed in Chapter 2, erotica faced issues of censorship and regulation that remain persistent today, but within a different social and cultural context. The pornographic and erotic remain stigmatized and synonymous with social decay in certain regards. However, over time and during the later twentieth century, relaxation over censorship allowed pornography to go mainstream. As asserted by Lisa Sigel, “Publishers no longer had to work in an underground economy or fight for the legitimacy of sexual information.” However, this evidence of sexual liberation can be limited: sexual conformity persists such that erotica fits within accepted cultural boundaries. Yet, erotica can provide a platform to illustrate diverse sexualities and gender identities, moved from margin to mainstream today. We can thus situate the queer works, which have become more prevalent since the 1960s, within a more accessible and differing context. Lisa Sigel writes that “It is in this sense that all pornography continues to play a transgressive role, both at a political and a personal level, and we have seen that French literary pornography, in particular, has preeminentely played this role for centuries.”

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3 Sigel, 18.

4 Ibid, 141.
Intent

Gerda Wegener was a successful artist during the twentieth century, who utilized unconventional themes in her artworks. Although she died at the young age of 54, she achieved great accomplishments throughout her life. Her artwork and life encompass controversial topics that have remained hidden or ignored for decades, such as being a woman artist in a male-dominated field, marrying a man who transitioned into a woman, and representing lesbian and sexual imagery and gender identity in her artworks, specifically Les Délassesments D’Éros. Analysis of theories of female sexuality and gender, the traditions and production of erotica, and the context of the complete work (poetry and illustrations) represent how Wegener redefined and interpreted unconventional concepts in society regarding gender roles, gender expression, and sexuality in her erotic illustrations. For men and women coming to terms with differing sexualities and gender identities, connections to the past can prove deeply empowering.⁵ Christopher Reed states that “The homogenization of historically distinct forms of [sexuality and identity] not only erases very real differences among cultures, but ultimately undermines the value of difference itself, short-circuiting impulses to validate expressions of difference.”⁶ Therefore, stories like Gerda and Einar Wegener’s are crucial to history and art history as evidence of the diversity of the human experience and expression; they need to be better addressed through scholarly research with multidisciplinary approaches, such as queer and gender theories. Further art historical research and analysis on Wegener, and artists like her,

⁶ Reed, Art and Homosexuality, 4.
remains to be done if art history wants to address themes and concepts that still resonate with contemporary society.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX:

EXAMPLE OF TWO ILLUSTRATIONS WITH THEIR JUXTAPOSEING POETRY

Pencil, watercolour and gouache on paper.
APRÈS le fin souper, deux tendres ingénues,
Un Lucifer candide, un Papillon mutin,
Vont combler du barbon cynique et libertin
Les lubriques ardeurs si longtemps contenues.

Déjà le Papillon, les deux mains retenues
Entre les doigts nerveux du petit Diablotin,
S'affale sur le ventre au milieu du festin,
Offrant au vieux ravi ses belles fesses nues.

Devant de tels appas étalés sans pudeur,
Le barbon tire un dard effrayant de roideur
Et l'entrée d'un seul coup sans le moindre graissage;

Mais se sentant à l'aise en l'amoureux détroit,
Il en sort aussitôt pour forcer un passage
Beaucoup moins fréquenté, mais combien plus étroit.

Pencil, watercolour and gouache on paper.
LÉDA INCOMPRISE

Hortense a soulevé sa jupe à crinoline
Et fait glisser en bas son pantalon léger,
Car elle voit au loin vers elle converger
Tous les grands cygnes blancs dont le bec dodeline.

Sur le bord du bassin, provocante et câline,
Elle s’offre au grand mâle, et pour l’encourager,
Lui sourit, puis tressaille en voyant s’allonger
Le beau col souple et blanc, vivante javeline.

Sous l’étrange désir dont l’ardeur l’obsèda,
Elle s’ouvre en pensée à l’amant de Léda
Et croit enfin sentir le dard dans sa nature;

Mais le grand cygne blanc lève un œil étonné
Vers la fente impubère à l’étroite ouverture,
Et s’éloigne déjà sans avoir deviné.

Louis Perceau, Léda Incomprisné in Les Délassements D’Eros, 1925.