

Library Company Opens Groundbreaking Gay History Exhibition

Written by Australian Business

PHILADELPHIA, Feb. 13, 2014 /PRNewswire-USNewswire/ -- Late gay activist Harry Hay said history knew more about gay people than it knew it knew. "That's So Gay: Outing Early America," running through October 17, at the [Library Company](#), proves the point. Benjamin Franklin's library, with its extensive collections of books, prints, ephemera, and photographs covering more than three centuries of early American history, contains stories about all kinds of loves and gender identifications.

The exhibition does not try to say definitively whether an historic figure was lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. Rather it looks at individuals who took part in same-sex relationships, wrote poems and novels celebrating such relationships, deviated from gender norms, and suffered for transgressive behavior. The [gayatlcp.org](#) blog invites remote visitors to view exhibition material and participate in the conversation.

Walt Whitman and Harriet Hosmer are examples of people whose lives and works reveal a gay sensibility. In the third edition of his *Leaves of Grass* (1860), Whitman added a section of forty-five Calamus poems, which celebrate relationships between men. (In Greek mythology, Kalamos was a youth who chose to drown rather than outlive his friend Karpos and was transformed into a marsh reed.) Regardless of what Whitman may have done behind closed doors (or along the "margins of pond-waters"), his Calamus poems have become important texts for readers looking for gay content.

The sculptor Harriet Hosmer depicted strong women in myth and history who persevered despite adversity at the hands of men. Hosmer had "short, thick, brown curls, which she tosse[d] aside with her fingers, as lads do." Living in Rome,

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Hosmer was one of the "jolly bachelors" in actress Charlotte Cushman's social circle.

Throughout the 19th century, sex-segregated activities were so common for both men and women they were rarely remarked upon. Recently, biographers have proposed that Abraham Lincoln may have had intimate relationships with one or more of his male friends. Similarly, it is easy now to see temperance activist Frances Willard (1839-1898), with the "smashes" she developed on girls at school and the other passionate relationships she formed with women, as a gay person.

The exhibition also looks at gay cultural expressions—in fiction, poetry, and art. Placing characters in same-sex environments allowed artists to explore the dynamics of intimate same-sex friendships. Consider Melville's description of Ishmael and Queequeg in *Moby-Dick* as a "cosy, loving pair." Similarly, scenes of women in private settings became popular in Victorian genre stereographs (shown in 3D in the gallery).

The Library Company has previously made pioneering contributions to historical research in African American History and Women's History through diligent curation of our unrivaled collections of print and visual source material. With "That's So Gay" we hope to have a similar influence on scholarly research in the field of Queer Studies.

The Library Company of Philadelphia The [Library Company](#) is an independent research library specializing in American history and culture from the 17th through the 19th centuries. Founded in 1731 by Benjamin Franklin,

the Library Company is America's oldest cultural institution and served as the Library of Congress from the Revolutionary War to 1800. The Library Company was the largest public library in America until the Civil War and includes the personal libraries of prominent early American bibliophiles such as James Logan

. Open to the public free of charge, it houses one of the world's largest holdings of early American imprints. Particular strengths of the collection include economic history, women's history, African American history, history of medicine, history of philanthropy, and visual culture.

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