

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

The Face of the American Gay Male

Posted: 7 Dec 2010, 9:30AM

When advertisers brainstorm on how to depict gay men for corporate accounts, what image of us should they conjure? Should the "typical" gay male American be portrayed as being young, muscled, tattooed, HIV-positive, well-dressed, athletic, and handsome, or not? Are we masculine or effeminate, politically savvy or ditsy, Renaissance men or sex-obsessed clones? This question matters to the advertising agency because if it misrepresents us, and we subsequently don't buy the product, it loses money, as does the corporation that hired them to find us. It matters to us gay men too, because like every other minority, we often end up seeing ourselves as we are presented to others.

In 1930, for instance, the artist Grant Wood painted "American Gothic," the portrait of a serious looking farmer, holding a pitchfork, standing erect next to his spinster daughter. Initially thought by critics to be a comical presentation, the painting became an icon during the Great Depression, offering Americans an identity of endurance to guide them through their suffering. The painting is now commonly parodied, but if Grant Wood could paint an iconic representation of gay men today, how would he have us standing, with whom, and what might we be holding? Barbells? A baby? What he painted might become us.

Recently, Ray and I recoiled in horror at the immature antics of the affected, young gay men on Logo's reality television program *The A-List*. "Should we keep watching or turn it off," my spouse asked me after 10 minutes of squirming. "These are the people you've spent your whole life working so hard for?" he added. We watched until the end of the program to see if there were any gay men with whom we could identify. There weren't. Nevertheless, while I wish the guys in the TV show had been more emotionally healthy, I was still grateful that they didn't need to be as frightened by their sexuality as we had been at their age. We fought hard so that these twenty-something gay men had the freedom to be ditsy. But, I prefer that they don't end up in the imaginary Grant Wood's painting, or in the advertisers' portrayal of me.

A few nights before we watched this television program, as we sat waiting for the opera, *Turandot*, to begin, Ray and I paged through the booklet for the Florida Grand Opera, and were delighted to see how many pictures of gay male couples were in the list of major financial donors. I smiled with contentment that an image with which I could identify was being acknowledged with gratitude by wealthy art patrons. Yet, I wonder now how *The A-List* boys would respond to the wealthy, white, older men being portrayed as "American Gay Gothic."

After participating in the Washington, DC conference of the National Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce a couple of weeks ago, I went to the National Portrait Gallery with my very good friends Bob Witeck and his husband Bob Connelly, Vic Basile, and Fort Worth Councilman Joel Burns and his spouse J. D. Angle. (Joel, as many people might recall, recently spoke tearfully with his

colleagues about the impact of anti-gay bullying on his life. Three million people have seen [Joel's City Council speech on YouTube.](#))

The exhibition we were all eager to see was "Hide/Seek—Difference and Desire in American Portraiture," the first such presentation in a national museum on the importance of sexual difference and desire in portraiture. The art was not something you couldn't see in other exhibitions, but the sexuality of the artists and/or the intent of their creation would probably not be as honestly discussed elsewhere. The exhibition had a powerful impact on me, not unlike that of being at the vibrant Chamber of Commerce gathering where 700 gay and lesbian entrepreneurs sought guidance on securing corporate accounts, or otherwise succeeding. In both the "Hide/Seek" exhibition and the conference, I saw gay men and women being affirmed or affirming themselves in unprecedented ways.

When Vic Basile, the first executive director of the Human Rights Campaign, and Bob Witeck, the pioneering gay public relations professional, and I stood together looking at the painting "American Gothic," which was included in the exhibition because Grant Wood was gay, I felt personally vindicated that what we had fought so very hard for in our lives was finally being valued by our country. I then spotted Joel and J.D. exploring a photograph by Robert Mapplethorpe, and I felt both very old, and very hopeful. These two wonderful young men represented to me the future of the gay civil rights movement.

The "Hide/Seek" exhibition was poorly attended, I felt, not like the exhibit of Norman Rockwell's paintings on the next floor up in the museum. Rockwell, as anyone my age knows, depicted American life as Americans wanted to see themselves in the last half of the 20th Century. Elbow-bumping numbers of families edged themselves past each *Saturday Evening Post* cover, smiling with delight at the romantic innocence, decency, patriotism, and patriarchy painted by Rockwell, loaned to the Portrait Gallery from the collections of Steven Spielberg and George Lucas. Sexuality was the theme of the collection one flight down. Asexuality permeated the beloved renderings of Rockwell. That was the nostalgic image the large crowds craved to see and be.

Some of us respond positively to cartoons of ourselves, such as *The A-List* and "American Gothic," and let them become iconic images we accept as our identity. Others of us respond positively to images of ourselves that honestly reveal our passions and pleasures, but we aren't eager to have others think that these images represent us, such as the photography of Robert Mapplethorpe. We seek and we hide. There are also those of us who are afraid of what we might become if our representation is anything but the romantic ideal. Norman Rockwell met such needs. How we see ourselves, and how we want ourselves presented to others, depends a great deal on our age, our privilege, our oppression, and the numbers of times we get to see ourselves portrayed. If there were more images of gay men presented more often for all others to see, I'd be less concerned about what advertisers come up with to represent me today.