

FACULTY DEVELOPMENT ENDOWMENT FUNDS

Nathan Deutsch Development Fund

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NATHAN DEUTSCH FACULTY ENDOWMENT

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Compulsory Heterosexuality in Eighteenth-Century French Visual Culture

Southeastern College Art Conference, Roanoke, VA

Synopsis of my presentation

In debates over the definitions and parameters of same-sex sexuality in the eighteenth century, *philosophes* and others argued that lesbian sexuality was part of the natural order, i.e. because sex between women existed, it was presumed to be natural. While Denis Diderot and others claimed lesbian sexuality as natural, however, their assertions are belied by representations of lesbian sexuality in eighteenth-century visual culture. In images from both high art and popular culture, opposing notions of lesbian sexuality developed, neither of which defined it as natural. In several paintings by François Boucher of a disguised Jupiter seducing the nymph Callisto from the 1740s and 1750s as well as in pornographic pamphlet imagery of Marie Antoinette from the 1780s, lesbian sexuality is presented as a foil to natural heterosexuality; it is shown either as a harmless accident easily remedied as in Boucher's depictions or as a dire threat to gender boundaries as in pornography featuring the Queen. These divergent constructions, in effect, served to define heterosexuality itself, while at the same time marginalizing same-sex sexuality. A lesbian that desired another woman neither from ignorance nor from the longing to play a male role was all but invisible in visual culture.

The premise of my research is significant in that it confirms à la Michel Foucault that modern notions of sexuality as well as gender boundaries were being actively and vigorously defined in the early modern period. While this phenomenon has been explored in relation to written primary sources, there has been little research on the topic vis-à-vis visual culture.
