A Passion to Preserve

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Published by University of Wisconsin Press

Fellows, Will.  
A Passion to Preserve: Gay Men as Keepers of Culture.  
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THE PRESERVATION-ORIENTED gay men profiled in the preceding chapters exemplify a cluster of interrelated traits: gender-atypicality, domophilia, romanticism, aestheticism, and connection- and continuity-mindedness. This chapter examines these traits in a larger context, historically and culturally, to show how the culture-keeping impulse is related to religious and secular care-giving vocations that focus on the restoration of order and wholeness.

These ideas are not new, just largely unexplored. A century ago psychiatrist Carl Jung and psychologist Havelock Ellis both contemplated non-sexual dimensions of gay men’s natures. Like Freud, Jung tended to see the gay man as having a mother-based neurosis. Jung, however, saw something positive in this: the gay man “may have good taste and an aesthetic sense which are fostered by the presence of a feminine streak. He may be supremely gifted as a teacher because of his almost feminine insight and tact. He is likely to have a feeling for history, and to be conservative in the best sense and cherish the values of the past. Often he is endowed with a wealth of religious feelings.” Ellis made similar observations: gay men frequently have superior intellectual and artistic abilities, they are prominent in the religious arena, and many of them are drawn to “the study of antiquity.”

By managing change in ways that allow us to retain a sense of where we’ve come from, historic preservation fosters continuity, enriching our sense of connectedness and identity as members of families, communities, nations. The architectural preservationist, for example, sees old buildings as landmarks and sources of memory. These stable features of the landscapes we inhabit help to orient us to the place and its history and so help us to define ourselves.

The built environment has become a significant focus of the preservation impulse during only about the last two hundred years, as change has been accelerated by many forces: industrialization, urbanization, the population explosion, the automobile, and massive tapping of fossil fuels. Previously
architectural styles, materials, and methods changed slowly, and the fabric of buildings and cities tended to hold together for centuries-long stretches. Because change in the built environment was so slow in relation to the human life span, the sense of continuity was not much threatened, and thus special efforts to manage change were not needed.

In times and places that do not experience an unsettling degree of change in the built environment, it’s likely that preservation-minded gay men would gravitate to religious vocations. Though they differ in their focuses and methods, both historic preservation and religion seek to foster identity, community, continuity, wholeness/holiness. Indeed, the Latin origins of the word *religion*—to bind together again, to put back together again—make plain the “re-li-gious” nature of the preservation enterprise. Like counseling, social work, nursing, and other care-giving professions, historic preservation is a secular counterpart to the religious arena and seems to attract the same sorts of men. The same men, in many cases; clergy have figured prominently in historic preservation from its beginnings.  

Across time and cultures gay men have been strongly attracted to the religious arena. Carl Jung and Havelock Ellis noted the phenomenon, as have more recent observers. John Boswell remarks on the substantial evidence of homosexual clergy from the beginning of the Christian era to the fourteenth century. Rictor Norton notes an abundance of love poems addressed by Buddhist priests to their temple acolytes from the tenth to the thirteenth century. It’s not much of a stretch to suggest that Thomas Cahill’s *How the Irish Saved Civilization* might have been more precisely titled *How Queer Irish Monks Saved Civilization*. In the twentieth century gay Episcopal priest Malcolm Boyd was astonished to find so many gay men in the seminary, drawn by the mystery, beauty, music, and ritual of the church. In New Orleans, so goes the anecdote, half the occupants of a French Quarter gay bar on any Saturday night are Roman Catholic postulants, seminarians, or priests. This may explain why a gay preservationist in that city uses the phrase “a member of the church” as a euphemism for gay. A gay man who grew up in Kenya says he finds it funny that gay men in Africa “are all so religious.”

Writer Philip Gambone captures the essence of gay religious aestheticism. When he and his lover lived on Boston’s Beacon Hill, they attended the Church of the Advent, a famous Anglo-Catholic church: “In those days, the late seventies and early eighties, the Advent’s congregation was made up almost exclusively of gay men and Boston Brahmins, a strange and tenuous coalition at best. What brought these unlikely factions together was a shared passion for the Mass—for the mystery of the Mass, and for its high church aesthetic. The Advent knew how to ’do it right.’ Every genuflection, every
reverencing of the altar, every swish of the thurible was done with utmost style and taste and dignified seriousness. There was, in so much of this fastidious attention to the choreography of the Mass, a preciousness that bordered on the ludicrous. But we told ourselves—and I suppose there was truth in this—that all of the pomp and circumstance, the ‘smells and bells,’ as we called it, was for the ‘greater glory of God.’”

Pittsburgh preservationist James Van Trump’s hankering for religious smells and bells led him to become high-church Episcopal. “That way I could have all the lights, incense, color, flowers, and music without subscribing to the rigid doctrines of Rome,” Van Trump said. “I have a great feeling for the church rituals. I feel that the old solemnities had a certain use. And I feel that we are poorer for the loss of some of these things. I always thought that religion . . . was a stabilizing influence. Now I realize that by subscribing to a formal religion I am believing a legend. But for me this is a necessary myth.”

A common explanation for the disproportionately large presence of gay men in the religious world is that it has long provided them with safe cover. No doubt many gay men have found the religious arena to be an agreeably cloistered niche, but why have they been so well suited to it, and it to them? Certainly there are niches far more culturally marginal than religion to which queer men might have retreated through the centuries. Gays and the religious arena have been well suited to each other because gay men’s sensibilities have been central to the creation of that arena. Gay men have not only been extraordinarily drawn to religious work; they have excelled at it, preeminent as creators and keepers of the religious aesthetic.

There is substantial evidence that gender-atypical males of homosexual or bisexual orientation have fulfilled sacred roles in many cultures since the time of the earliest known religious traditions. Their blend of feminine and masculine traits enhanced their proficiency in these roles. Matthew Kelty, a priest at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, says he believes that gays make the best monks “because they’re already on the road to a life integrating the masculine and the feminine sides. They don’t need a woman to awaken and arouse their feminine side. They already have it.”

There is rich anecdotal evidence of the strength of the gay religious/spiritual sensibility, even among the unchurched. This includes my own impressions of an intriguing number of domestic altars and shrines among contemporary gay men with whose lives I’m acquainted: Ray Kwok’s altar in memory of his mother; Michael Bemis’s quirky assemblage of Buddhist-Episcopal meditation paraphernalia; Liberace’s shrine to Saint Anthony at his home in Palm Springs; Dale Pflum’s collection of holy-water fonts hanging on his bedroom walls; Bruce Benderson’s collection of sacred memorabilia; John Anders’s bust of the Apollo Belvedere atop a small green table; Dean
Riddle’s evocative arrangement of eighteen smooth pebbles on a chartreuse Russel Wright plate; Doug Bauder’s heirloom sea chest, dusted reverently each week, with which his great-grandfather’s great-grandfather came to America. “I have a little shrine I brought home from San Francisco,” Mark Doty writes, “an upright wooden box painted celestial blue, with a yellow horse floating on a field of stars. The wooden door slides open, so that the box becomes a little theater, revealing its interior. It used to hold three crude images of gods—Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva—but they didn’t speak to me, so I’ve replaced them with one perfect smooth river stone I found someplace, a token of—fixity, I think, serenity.”

A. L. Rowse remarked on this gay religious sensibility as it was evident in Walter Pater, a nineteenth-century aesthete and writer who originally intended himself for holy orders. With his eyes focused reverently on the past, Rowse wrote of Pater, “there always remained an odour of the clerical about him.” Indeed, this “odour” seems to be a quintessentially gay trait: a gentle, punctilious solemnity, an earnest, high-minded queenliness, which often begins to emerge in childhood. The quality makes for outstanding altar boys, ministers, priests, rabbis. Finbar Maxwell, for instance, is a gay Roman Catholic who entered the seminary when he was seventeen. Growing up in Dublin, Ireland, Maxwell’s deep sense of the unity and connectedness of people led him to immerse himself in the work of a parish-based social welfare group, the Ballyfermot Peace Corps. That vocation led him into many years of cross-cultural work as a missionary priest in Pakistan. “At the heart of it all is entering into the broken parts of people’s lives, with great reverence and respect, and helping them move towards healing, unity,” Maxwell says.

Besides being exceptionally drawn to the performance of religious rituals and the restorative, culture-keeping work of the clergy, many gays are keenly attracted to the work of “re-membering” in the secular realm. They rescue and rehabilitate degraded buildings and objects. They research and document family and community history. They bring neglected neighborhoods back to life. “It’s a priestly role, in the sense of the shamans and the continuers of the culture,” says Richard Wagner. “Society needs it, but doesn’t always value it.” Though deeply held by his Roman Catholic heritage, Wagner found his own priestly vocation outside the church. Since settling in Madison, Wisconsin, in the 1960s, he has been a leader in strengthening that city’s social and cultural fabric through historic preservation coupled with city and regional planning. True to type, Wagner owns several houses in one of Madison’s oldest neighborhoods, all in the same block and all rehabilitated by him.

However trite they may seem, gay stereotypes are useful in examining gay men’s natures. “Artistic,” “musical,” “nervous,” “sensitive,” “sophisticated,”
and “temperamental” have served as euphemisms or code words for gay. They are all based in the reality of gay men’s lives. The truth suggested by these stereotypes was apparent to Edward Carpenter, who observed a century ago that because the gay male temperament combines masculine and feminine elements in close and constant interaction, it is “exceedingly sensitive and emotional.” The truth is no mystery to Emory, a.k.a. Emily, the antiques-dealing interior decorator in the 1970 movie The Boys in the Band. While reminiscing at a gay party about having been in charge of decorations for his high school prom, Emory observes in a melancholy tone, “Mary, it takes a fairy to make something pretty.”

The archetypal truth in these stereotypes is evident to cultural commentator Camille Paglia: “Gay men are aliens, cursed and gifted, the shamans of our time.” Calling gay male consciousness “stunningly expansive and exquisitely precise” in its “fusion of intellect, emotion, artistic sensibility,” Paglia notes the intricate intertwining of male homosexuality and art and suggests that it is the result of gay men’s psychic duality, “caught midway between the male and female brains.” She says that “the effeminacy of gay men—which emerges as soon as the macho masks drop—is really their artistic sensitivity and rich, vulnerable emotionalism.”

The truth in these gay stereotypes became obvious to Andrew Ramer’s father, a straight interior designer whose work involved him with many gay men and inspired him to speculate about a gay prehistory. “One day we went to an exhibit of cave paintings, which we both loved,” recalls Ramer of an outing with his father. “At one point he turned and asked me who I thought had created them. I said I didn’t know. ‘It had to be the fags,’ he explained. ‘All the other men are out hunting and killing. There’s a bunch of fags sitting in the back of the cave, complaining about how ugly it is, wondering what they can do to make it look better. So they decide to paint some bison on the walls.’”

Robert Hopcke says it’s a pervasive fallacy that only heterosexuals contribute meaningful “creativity, fecundity, and longevity” to human culture. Recognizing the prominence of gay men in all the arts throughout the ages, Hopcke writes that there is “a certain kind of creativity that gay people have that does provide for longevity and progeny and transformation, and always has, throughout Western civilization and probably beyond.” Paglia concurs, rescuing gay men’s creative aestheticism from its usual dismissal as mere frippery: “There is nothing trivial about fashion,” she writes. “Standards of beauty are conceptualizations projected by each culture. They tell us everything.”

The arts of theater, dance, music, and poetry have their origins in religion. Especially in preliterate societies, the devising and remembering of
artistic rituals made it possible for a society to transmit essential information, such as their history and sense of identity, from one generation to the next. Religious work involves preserving and perpetuating these forms of ritual artistry through time. Thus artistic sensibility, religious inclination, and the preservation impulse are simply different facets of the same lens, a lens through which many gays are predisposed to view the world.

In *The Necessity for Ruins* John Brinckerhoff Jackson gets at the connections between religion, aesthetics, and preservation when he states that the historic preservation movement “sees history not as a continuity but as a dramatic discontinuity, a kind of cosmic drama.”

First there is that golden age, the time of harmonious beginnings. Then ensues a period when the old days are forgotten and the golden age falls into neglect. Finally comes a time when we rediscover and seek to restore the world around us to something like its former beauty.

But there has to be that interval of neglect, there has to be that discontinuity; it is religiously and artistically essential. That is what I mean when I refer to the necessity for ruins: ruins provide the incentive for restoration, and for a return to origins. There has to be . . . an interim of death or rejection before there can be renewal or reform. . . . Many of us know the joy and excitement not so much of creating the new as of redeeming what has been neglected, and this excitement is particularly strong when the original condition is seen as holy or beautiful. The old farmhouse has to decay before we can restore it . . . ; the landscape has to be plundered and stripped before we can restore the natural ecosystem; the neighborhood has to be a slum before we can rediscover it and gentrify it. That is how we reproduce the cosmic scheme and correct history.

Are we perhaps trying to reenact some ancient myth of birth, death, and redemption?24

As one small manifestation of the gay propensity to foster continuity and connection in the face of endless discontinuity and demise, consider twelve-year-old Oscar Wilde's romanticism and rich, vulnerable emotionalism following the death of his nine-year-old sister. Wilde was described by the attending doctor as “an affectionate, gentle, retiring, dreamy boy whose lonely and in-consolable grief found solace in long and frequent visits to his sister's grave in the village cemetery and in touching, boyish, poetic effusions.” A lock of his sister's hair was among Wilde's few remaining possessions when he died. He preserved it in an envelope that he decorated with their interlocked initials.25
It’s no great leap from Oscar Wilde’s artistically enveloped keepsake to the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt, a grand gay work of ritual artistry. Throughout the United States and many other countries, thousands of people created three-by-six-foot panels in memory of individuals who had died from AIDS. By 2000 the NAMES Project in San Francisco had assembled a quilt that included about forty-five thousand panels, many of them incorporating clothing, photographs, and other mementos of the lives lost. Whenever any portion of the quilt is displayed, each of the twelve-by-twelve-foot sections comprising eight panels is unfolded and placed on the ground in a solemn and highly choreographed manner; this ritual is reversed at the closing ceremony.

The AIDS Memorial Quilt—its conception, creation, and manner of exhibition—is a singular manifestation of gay male sensibility in response to devastation and death. It’s unlikely that such a moving and massive production would have emerged from the plague if AIDS had hit any group other than gay men so hard. Some have criticized the quilt: “Where is the quilt for those who died in Bangladesh?” Camille Paglia asks. “Who will go to Bangladesh and find those names? What privileges the deaths of so many white middle-class gay men?” Paglia’s often keen insight into gay men’s lives fails her here. Long drawn to roles as stretcher-bearers, medics, chaplains, and morticians in the ritual handling and memorializing of all human injured and dead, gay men found in the quilt a medium in which to respond to the death of their own kind. That this collective response spawned an over-the-top production of exceptional size and richness actually confirms Paglia’s generalizations about gay culture. The AIDS Quilt is the inevitable result of gay men’s extraordinary sensibilities—romantic, artistic, domestic, connectional—intersecting with their essential drive to preserve and memorialize. These dynamics were amplified by a centuries-long legacy of gay lives being obliterated and a sense of impending doom.

Religion, social work, counseling, nursing: in collaboration with women gay men are prominent practitioners in many enterprises that center on restoring people or things, making them whole or healthy or beautiful again, “re-membering” them. David Nimmons documents these long-unexamined propensities in The Soul beneath the Skin: Compared to nongay males, gays are extraordinarily nonviolent, highly inclined to serve as volunteers, and disproportionately numerous not only in artistic and creative fields but also in typically female-associated jobs that call for empathy and personal care giving.

“I see gays as a kind of perpetual Peace Corps,” says gay clergyman Malcolm Boyd. It’s surely no coincidence that AmeriCorps, the domestic version of the Peace Corps, is headed by a woman and a gay man. Nor is it
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coincidental that, along with women, gay men have been extraordinarily drawn to serve in the Peace Corps. “From the day the Peace Corps was established, I was very interested in it,” says Gary Broulliard. Since the days of his Peace Corps service he and his life partner, Rick McKinniss, have made great contributions to house restoration and neighborhood improvement in Lafayette, Indiana.

The rich overlap of culture keeping and care giving is evident in the elderly gay antiquarian who told me that he was attracted first to the ministry, then to nursing and counseling. It’s also apparent in the life of Ralph Navarro, who planned to become a priest but instead became a gay activist and amateur social worker. “I never knew anyone who cared about the underdog more than Ralph did,” his mother said. When she visited Navarro, she noted, “he’d be getting calls at one and two in the morning. I told him that I couldn’t sleep! But he always answered that phone and helped people with whatever they needed.” A man who lived next door to Navarro for twenty years said, “I was blessed with one of the finest neighbors and backyard-fence chatters you’d ever want to meet. He was a meticulous homeowner who cared about his neighbors and who—despite a round-the-clock schedule—kept his home, yard and garden in better than average condition.”

This gay penchant for care giving is nothing new. In the 1920s the anonymous author of The Invert and His Social Adjustment observed that among the many men he had known whose lives included significant works of charity, “the incidence of inversion was above the average.” The American Red Cross knows that gay men were extraordinarily generous blood donors until the panic surrounding HIV led to their being barred from giving. And it’s no mere coincidence that Father Mychal Judge was gay; the New York City fire chaplain was killed while ministering to victims at the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001.

The writer James Norman Hall decided to join the Royal Army Medical Corps as a stretcher-bearer instead of reenlisting as a machine-gunner during World War I: “I would not be with my old C Company comrades,” he wrote, “but . . . I would be sure to find a band of brothers among men who had chosen, for war service, the work of salvaging human bodies instead of destroying them.” Walt Whitman was drawn to similar work during the Civil War. In Manhattan, Whitman made frequent hospital visits in order to tend to the needs of sick and injured men, many of them stagedrivers. It was in the army hospitals of Washington, D.C., that Whitman fully discovered his calling as “a regular self-appointed missionary to these thousands and tens of thousands of wounded and sick young men . . . many of them languishing, many of them dying.”
“I believe,” Whitman wrote, “that even the moving around among the men . . . of a hearty, healthy, clean, strong, generous-souled person, man or woman, full of humanity and love, sending out invisible, constant currents thereof, does immense good to the sick and wounded.” He devoted himself especially to one hospital that drew the worst cases and the fewest visitors. “Mother, I have real pride in telling you that I have the consciousness of saving quite a number of lives by saving them from giving up,” he wrote. “It is impossible for me to abstain from going to see and minister to certain cases, and that draws me into others, and so on.”

“A great mothering sort of man, a bearded stranger hovering near,” Whitman went on his rounds for more than a year. His hundreds of hospital visits, ranging from several hours to all day or night, brought him into contact with tens of thousands of hospitalized soldiers: “Mother, I see such awful things . . . but it is such a great thing to be able to do some real good; assuage these horrible pains and wounds, and save life even—that’s the only thing that keeps a fellow up.” In his last years Whitman looked back on his Civil War mission as the most fulfilling of his life and understood it more deeply: “People used to say to me, ‘Walt, you are doing miracles for those fellows in the hospitals.’ I wasn’t. I was, as you would say, doing miracles for myself.”

Walt Whitman was one prominent nineteenth-century manifestation of the mothering sort of man. Just after the Civil War, former minister Horatio Alger moved to New York City and dedicated himself to improving the lives of homeless boys. Drawing on those experiences, he wrote scores of inspirational books: out of poverty and adversity Alger’s boy-heroes lead exemplary lives and gain honor and wealth. Charles George Gordon, a contemporary of Whitman and Alger, was a military hero of imperial Britain whose maternal urge led him to take street-dwelling children under his wing, bathing and feeding them and mending their clothes. A scene in Michael Lowenthal’s novel The Same Embrace offers a contemporary snapshot of this gay mothering impulse. In a Boston gay bar Jacob finds himself drawn to a teenager named Danny: “His wan complexion . . . induced a warm, almost maternal feeling. Jacob wanted to cook healthy food for Danny, to buy him vitamins. He wanted to make sure he dressed warmly enough.”

William Warrington’s care-giving urge found satisfaction in both social rehabilitation and architectural restoration. The mansion he purchased at 1140 Royal Street in the New Orleans French Quarter was notorious as the site of extraordinary abuse and torture of servants in the 1830s. The house was transformed a century later into the Warrington House, the headquarters of an organization dedicated to the assistance of homeless and unfortunate boys and men. “William J. Warrington, founder of the institution, who has devoted his life and a large fortune to this work, personally directs
activities,” states a French Quarter tourist guidebook of the 1930s. “Visitors are welcome to see the magnificent murals and charming interior.”

Collecting old photos has been an outlet for Russell Bush’s care-giving impulse. “When I first started collecting old photographs, I felt very much like I was rescuing things that would just be burned or thrown away,” Bush says. “This may sound corny, but I felt very passionately that I was collecting these things with a love for these people. That by my recovering them and loving them, these people’s lives meant something. I often feel a strong melancholy when I go through a stack of photographs at a flea market, and especially when I go through a photo album. These are representations of people’s lives that have been disposed of and forgotten about. To most people they are meaningless. It makes me sad that so many people who have lived are unknown, lost, and forgotten.”

David Deitcher reveals that a similar compulsion to rescue lost lives informs his strong emotional attraction to old photographs. “I am drawn to the orphaned picture—to the castoff that lies unnoticed and undignified at the weekend flea market. . . . I identify with the weathered object. In its tears, scuff marks, and dents, I see the signs of age, and more. I see the stigmata of their abandonment and mistreatment as so much discarded junk. To be drawn so empathetically to inanimate objects suggests a form of identification with them; that, and a decidedly morbid relation to the past. . . . I’ve long considered that gay men hold a special franchise on this dismal sense of beauty.”

Distinct roles for gender-atypical males have been documented in societies throughout the world. Prominent elements of these “third-gender” roles include healing, ritual artistry, prophecy, wizardry, and priesthood. A member of the West African Dagara society says that gay males have long filled spiritual roles among his people. It is because they are gay, he says, that they are able to help the tribe “keep its continuity with the gods and with the spirits . . . of this world and spirits of the other world. . . . This kind of function is not one that society votes for certain people to fulfill. It is one that people are said to decide on prior to being born.”

James Marston Fitch identifies another culture-keeping role in African tribal cultures in which gay men have surely been prominent: “the village historians—elderly keepers of the oral tradition who are almost certainly the last generation of their species. The knowledge they hold, not only of the remote past but also of the recent past, is priceless.” In societies without written records, these men are the keepers of information that is central to their tribal identity: the genealogies of local kings, the boundaries of tribal lands, the appropriate rituals for community celebrations.
Third-gender roles have been documented in many American Indian tribes. Through the last two centuries of tribal demise, these androgynous men have played key roles in the preservation of their cultures. One of these berdaches, Hastíín Klah, was a Navajo medicine man, artist, and traditionalist. He showed an interest in religion at an early age, learning his first ceremony by the age of ten. Though most medicine men mastered only one or two ceremonies in a lifetime, Klah eventually mastered eight, all of them cultural or peace rites rather than ceremonies of war. Klah’s aunt taught him much about native plants. He mastered weaving and developed sand-painting weaving, a style that blended the women’s domain of weaving and the men’s domain of religious sand painting. Klah helped to develop Navajo religion into a more potent vehicle for the identity and unity of his tribe, then worked for its preservation along with other traditional cultural forms and values. As a result of his friendship and collaboration with a wealthy non-Indian woman in the 1920s and 1930s, Klah was able to record his vast knowledge of Navajo myths, prayers, and songs and to establish in Santa Fe the Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian.

A gay Mohave of the same stripe, Elmer Gates told an interviewer in the 1960s that he specialized in traditional crafts and dances: “It seems like I’m the only one that’s keeping these traditions alive.” Even today there are berdaches among us, though they may prefer the label two-spirit. Like their berdache forebears, two-spirit males play culture-keeping roles in their tribal communities, preserving old knowledge and traditions and working as artists, healers, mediators, and community leaders and organizers. Clyde Hall is a contemporary berdache of the Shoshone tribe. “The last twenty years of my life have been devoted to collecting Indian art,” he says. “I have a great love of tradition. People come to me and ask, How do you do this? Or, How should this be made? Or, What kind of song should be sung here? I mean, that's what I'm doing here. These powers and talents are an integral part of a way of being. It's something that Spirit gives you when you're born.”

Whether it’s the American Indian berdache or any of the many other alternative gender identities or roles for males with a pronounced feminine aspect, one is talking about an intermediate or third gender. Despite the odds against him in Victorian England, Edward Carpenter pioneered in making an earnest case for what he called the intermediate male. He saw this type, of which he himself was one, as dual natured, with dynamic interaction of masculine and feminine elements, highly sensitive and emotional. Because of his double temperament, Carpenter said, the intermediate man is more observant, discerning, and creative. At least partly as a result of their special temperament, intermediates (which he also called Uranians) perform valuable work in the arts, education, and social work. “The best
philanthropic work . . . has a strong fibre of the Uranian heart running through it,” Carpenter wrote. “No one else can possibly respond to and understand, as they do, all the fluctuations and interactions of the masculine and feminine in human life.”

Carpenter recognized himself and his fellow intermediate males as members of a third sex, men with much of the psychologic character of women. He saw these individuals as contemporary manifestations of a type that had always existed in all human societies, and he lamented that since the Christian era this type had been persecuted or only marginally tolerated. Did it occur to no one, he wondered, that as a result of their intermediate nature these men might serve positive and useful functions in their societies? Carpenter saw abundant historical and contemporary evidence of these contributions, most notably in the religious arena: “The connection of homosexuality with priesthood and divination seems to be worldwide and universal.”

Carpenter’s nineteenth-century vision for his tribe of intermediates found a twentieth-century apostle in gay liberation pioneer Harry Hay. With his characteristic flair Hay proposed “that we Gay Men of all colors prepare to present ourselves as the gentle, non-competitive Third Gender men of the Western World with whole wardrobes and garages crammed with cultural and spiritual contributions to share.” Hay saw third-gender men working at the frontier between the seen and the unseen, the known and the unknown, using exceptional creativity to help the larger culture adapt its traditions to changing conditions. Andrew Ramer answers Hay’s call: “The more I become who I am, the less like a man or a woman I feel,” he says. “The more we gay men become ourselves, the more we do become different. I think the future of the world . . . depends upon us, that men who love men are the only people who can save the planet. That’s our job, our purpose. The world is looking to us even though it doesn’t know it.”

Andrew Harvey fantasizes an ideal world in which all human beings are assisted in developing their unique, inherent capacities. Like the American Indian berdaches, gay men in this utopia are seen as having been born with a pronounced feminine streak that gives them artistic and spiritual gifts essential to the health of society. In contrast to Western civilization’s overwhelming focus on power, control, and conquest, these men’s lives emanate “the feminine principle of relationship that connects all things to each other.” They are able to assist society in discovering a new ethic of ecological responsibility that is informed by a vision of the planet as a sacred unity.

Males have great inclination and capacity for creating and building new, but females and gay males possess the greater inclination to re-create, rebuild, restore, preserve. This latter impulse seems to emerge from a decidedly femi-
nine ethos that places great value on continuity of identity, maintaining connections, remembering. This aesthetic humanizes old buildings and objects because of their associations: used by one’s forebears, they are not simply old things to use or discard. They are human, tangible bonds with the past, shapers of one’s identity.

Claude Wheeler, the protagonist in Willa Cather’s novel *One of Ours*, exemplifies this continuity-cherishing sensibility. A young, unhappily married American who is in France during World War I, Wheeler wonders what shape his life will take once the war is over. Lying in the woods with his friend David, he dreams of buying a little farm in France and living the rest of his life there. “There was no chance for the kind of life he wanted at home, where people were always buying and selling, building and pulling down,” he told himself. “Life was so short that it meant nothing at all unless it were continually reinforced by something that endured; unless the shadows of individual existence came and went against a background that held together.”

Eighty years later, American writers David Leavitt and Mark Mitchell looked to Europe for a background that held together. They found it in the Maremma, the poorest province of Tuscany, where they purchased Podere Fiume (River Farm), a long-abandoned farmhouse. “When we were first living in Italy, the prospect of restoring a country house seemed so daunting to us as to be unthinkable,” the couple write. “And yet . . . Podere Fiume had a good soul (not to mention good bones); indeed, as we walked through it that first afternoon, the idea that we would bring the house back to life suddenly seemed natural, even inevitable.” Life in the Maremma for Leavitt and Mitchell “is rather like being caught between the seventeenth and twenty-first centuries.” They choose to live there “because it feels like home,” because it’s “a place that balances the past and the present.”

Gay men in Europe were concerning themselves with continuity even in the eighteenth century. German archaeologist Johann Winckelmann was working among the ruins of ancient Greece, initiating a new Greek Renaissance and fostering the modern appreciation of ancient art. In England the artistic Horace Walpole was creating his Gothic castle, Strawberry Hill, collecting antiquities, and reviving Gothic taste in both literature and architecture. A. L. Rowse describes Walpole as “a good deal of a sprightly and clever old lady,” and Rowse ought to know the type.

By the middle of the nineteenth century many more gay men in Europe were drawn to the work of historic preservation, in reaction to the continuity-obliterating and anti-aesthetic effects of industrialization and the growing secularization of Western culture. Gays with an “odour of the clerical” about them were shifting their sights away from the church, beginning to
locate their experience of the sacred in art, architecture, and antiquities not necessarily related to religious practice. Increasingly their sacred impulse was manifested as secular artistic impulse. They became priests of aesthetics and cultural preservation.

William Morris figured prominently in this brotherhood. Like many in nineteenth-century England, Morris was repelled by his own urbanizing and industrializing times and was enchanted by an imagined medieval past where everything was more stable, honorable, and beautiful. Believing that religion had failed society but great art could change it, Morris abandoned his plans of entering the priesthood and created a life ministry in which art and socialist politics were closely entwined. In his socialist vision Morris had much in common with his contemporary Edward Carpenter, who called for the freeing of the body from religious and material oppression, returning it to health, wholeness, holiness. William Morris became a leading figure in the Arts and Crafts movement and a social reformer who did so much impassioned public speaking that he ruined his health. But Morris did not turn his back on the church altogether: he loved the ancient church buildings. It was his horrified reaction to the destructive “restoration” of medieval English churches that provoked Morris to help found the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings in 1877. For the rest of his life he traveled many miles and wrote many furious letters on behalf of imperiled old buildings, especially churches.

Like Morris and Carpenter, Walter Pater originally intended himself for the priesthood. He focused devoutly and aesthetically on the past. Oscar Wilde was Pater’s greatest disciple and has been called an unleashed version of Pater’s repressed self. In contrast to the earnest socialist religiosity of Morris and Carpenter, Wilde was a flamboyant, apolitical aesthete who lacked the characteristic clerical odour. But he was nonetheless a high priest of redemption. Wilde became a prominent preacher of the Arts and Crafts doctrine, delivering sermons on “The Decorative Arts” and “The House Beautiful” in England, the United States, and Canada.

Wilde embraced Morris’s dictum, “Have nothing in your houses which you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful.” Antiquities figured prominently in Wilde’s own homemaking as they did in Morris’s. Both were passionate collectors of blue-and-white china of both English and Oriental make. When Wilde was about twenty, furnishing his rooms at Oxford was one of his chief interests. It may have been after buying two large blue china vases that Wilde remarked, “I find it harder and harder every day to live up to my blue china.” In the final months of his life a degraded and destitute Wilde was captivated by Edward Carpenter’s recently published tract, Civilisation, Its Cause and Cure, reading and rereading it.
From the grimy vantage point of late nineteenth-century industrial England, Carpenter contended that civilization is not a desirable end but a dreadful stage that humans must make every effort to pass through: civilization corrupts our lives by disrupting our bonds with nature, with our true selves, and with our fellow humans. Carpenter longed for the time when civilization has passed away and “the old Nature-religion” has returned, restoring a profound unity to human life. Despite the physical, social, intellectual, and moral diseases of civilization, Carpenter believed that each human soul remembers a precivilization state of being that is more healthy, harmonious, unified. This earnest Uranian’s expression of faith in the age-old “tradition of a healing and redeeming power at work in the human breast” spoke powerfully to Oscar Wilde, so hopelessly in need of redemption.\footnote{61}
Toward a Larger View of Gay Men