



# Queer Objects

Positionality, Ideology and the Museum



Exhibition Proposal, Room III  
[A Work in Progress ]





# Queer Objects

## Positionality, Ideology and the Museum

### Concept

The exhibition 'Queer Objects' asks, through the Warren Cup, how objects reflect on us, the public, and how a museum, as a place of power and authority, can influence the way we think and behave. The Warren Cup, has since its acquisition in 1999, inspired text, image, merchandise and even actual reproductions. The manner in which these are juxtaposed, the language used and the nuance of meaning in which they manifest whether implicitly or explicitly is a commentary on the creation of ideology society, identity and citizenship.

The display physically positions the museum visitor on display, as voyeur and viewed, like an object in an exhibition. The project aims to highlight the dynamics, discourse and knowledge generated once the visitor becomes a spectator in a museum. This queer reading of the Warren Cup is used as an example which explores this by looking at the affects and effects an object prompts through its interactions with both museum and public both internally and externally.

The Warren Cup, a mid 1<sup>st</sup> century AD silver Roman drinking vessel (*kantharos*), is relevant to the viewer-viewed because it encapsulates a great deal of ideologies that intersect and diverge at a number of levels. The cup is famous/infamous, for its representation of explicit homosexual sex, its rejection, recent appropriation, and the £1.8 million paid for its acquisition in 1999.

The ways we look at objects (display, position, interpret and research them) are *reflections* of ourselves, as well as *products* of who and where we are: our *Positionality*. Therefore the objects, in a manner of speaking, create and objectify us. And so it seems that we invite the world, through our museums not to look at the collections, but to look at ourselves viewers-viewed, keepers, curators and collectors.



## Reflections and Thoughts

Listed below are ideas and questions, a result of some very basic and preliminary research on the Warren Cup. As immediate and undeveloped thoughts these constitute a rough sketch of the proposed trajectory for this exhibition.

### Sexuality

Repeatedly the Warren cup is depicted and hailed as an LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) symbol. Certainly, the cup is a testament to social change, but it suggests very little progress in ideology and power dynamics. Whilst the cup indeed depicts homosexual sex, it nonetheless, clearly states hierarchy through interpretations of age, class and dress. The juxtaposition of *eromenos*, 'the passive, younger beloved' versus *erastes* 'the older, active lover' and the uncritical use of such vocabulary simply recognises a specific and heteronormative type of sexuality. This, from a queer and feminist point of view, rather consolidates patriarchy and misogyny.

Are we also, through this glorification, approving of or simply ignoring the hugely problematic demarcation of age, which suggests sexual intercourse with a minor? Where is the line drawn? True, the manner in which we interpret gender and sexuality is very different from that in antiquity, but does that warrant this lack of criticality in our interpretations? It goes without saying that the Warren cup is a value-laden object that has been used very actively to push for a specific narrative and ideology. How then, do we decide to celebrate or vilify an object and what it stands for? Is this cup celebrated, and if so, *why*? Is it our positionality, therefore, that actually determines what an object is, so that truly, objects are subjectivities never constant in time or space?

### Geopolitics

The Warren Cup is geopolitically provocative because its find-spot seems to be totally rendered inconsequential and to have little bearing on its contemporary significance. Although there's no concrete proof the cup was found in Bittir, a Palestinian village southwest of Jerusalem, it is intriguing to notice the seemingly arbitrary pattern of origin citation in text throughout the Museum. For example, the object postcard (E01380) and object label (case 12a, room 70) only cite Bittir and Jerusalem. The LGBT Objects at the British Museum leaflet stops short of Jerusalem, whilst the exhibition catalogue (Opper, *Hadrian: Empire and Conflict*) has no mention whatsoever of origin or find-spot. When Palestine is mentioned in Parkinson's *A Little Gay History* it is never on the same page with Jerusalem or Bittir. IS there a consciously political/diplomatic intention behind this? What sort of geopolitical significance does this reasoning have, and what does this exclusion/inclusion tell the public?

Furthermore, whatever reference to Palestine and its location is connected only to the history of Ancient Beththar and serves merely to assert Roman presence and influence at that time. Roman tableware is discussed in the broad sense with very little exploration in terms of the non-Roman social dynamic and infrastructure that might have existed in ancient Palestine. The cup is almost treated as an imposition and part of a material culture that seems entirely removed from its find-spot context and the non-roman peoples of the area.

### Art

The Warren Cup is described as *an important masterpiece of Roman art* (Williams, 1999). This exhibition looks at art and asks whether it's through art that we allow ourselves to accept that which would have otherwise been obscene or inappropriate. What sort of implications does art render unto an object deemed a masterpiece? Is art, in effect, a form of reductive categorisation that limits rather than expands the scope of an object in a museum? Is artistic value a ticket into the museum, or a virtue bestowed by the museum?



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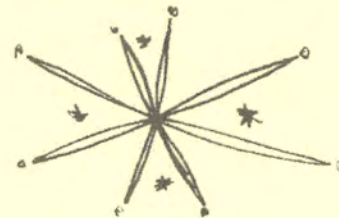
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## Exhibition Proposal for the International Training Programme 2013 – The British Museum

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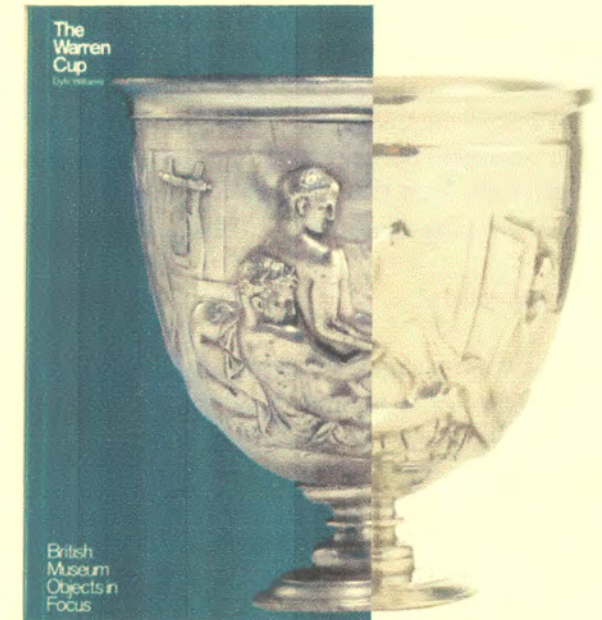


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