



# BACHELORS OF A DIFFERENT SORT

QUEEN [REDACTED] MATERIAL CULTURE  
AND [REDACTED] INTERIOR IN BRITAIN

John Potvin

# Bachelors of a different sort

QUEER AESTHETICS, MATERIAL  
CULTURE AND THE MODERN  
INTERIOR IN BRITAIN

*John Potvin*

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*to my two beloved companions in life, aesthetics and domesticity,  
the doctor and the earl*

## Preface

**I**N DECEMBER 2010, in front of friends and family and in the domestic spaces of our closest friends, I married my husband. Our choice to marry was a public declaration that our relationship, companionate, sexual and domestic in nature, would be recognized, that, it would become part of the public record and that despite an ever-increasing neo-liberal and conservative world, we would not be silenced. Our choice of location was as much political as it was practical. We chose to be married in a domestic setting, the site of our cherished community, the location of friendship, love, heated debates and laughter. Given that the men in this book have been with me for some time now, some longer than others, I was repeatedly reminded of them in the many days leading up to, during and long after the day of our wedding. I thought about how their lives, whose partial stories fill these pages, were in various ways and to varying degrees silenced through the closing of their homes' doors, the painful and deafening sound of time marching on. The fact I was able to stand before my husband, in front of friends and family, speaks to a long, and long from over, struggle many are all too familiar with; a struggle I hope my friends' children will not have to bear, but will also never forget.

In many ways the contents of this book resemble my own design for living in which life, work and aesthetics are so tightly interwoven they become inseparable, one never valued over the other. While I may have gotten married in the process of writing this book, I have certainly not set out to valorize neither one form of domesticity over others nor a particular or singular expression of sexual identity over the myriad forms queer sexuality takes. Some of the men in this book maintained domestic relationships with each other for over 50 years, often within the fraught and permissive space that an open relationship offers. Some were tragic in their love affairs, finding solace in their work and domestic havens, while others were forced into despair and exile from their objects

of desire, both human and material. Common amongst my collected group of *bachelors of a different sort* is how they defied and overcame experiences, moments and expressions of shame to design, for themselves, not a room, but an *entire home of one's own*. Given that the book ends loosely around 1957 with the publication of the Wolfenden Report, it might seem obvious to state that none of the men featured in this book was married to or entered into a civil union with another man. This fact, I suggest, remains an important one, especially in our period of more progressive laws and seeming tolerance: as a result we tend to take much for granted. It is precisely for this reason that I have dared to briefly insert myself here; not as a way to elevate my own status, but to include one more, nascent form of sexuality, one these men never could have fathomed or even perhaps would have desired for themselves. Perceptions of sexuality and identification with its signs and codes change as rapidly as industrial and interior design does today. The future offers, I hope, uncharted design and sexual territory, which will yield richly textured and challenging narratives.

I am grateful to the memories of the men I have included in this book as much as to those who helped along the process of researching, writing and producing it. My research and the ability to reproduce images in this book has been greatly enabled by staff at the National Art Library and the Design Archives of the Victoria and Albert Museum (London), the Tate (London), the Billy Rose Theatre Division of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, the British Library, The Fitzwilliam Museum (Cambridge University), National Portrait Gallery (London), Leamington Spa Art Gallery and Museum, the University of Bristol, the Cecil Beaton Studio Archive at Sotheby's, Maggi Hambling of the Estate of Cedric Morris and the Lewes House Archives, Lewes District Council. I owe a special debt to all those not listed above who also kindly granted me permission to reproduce the beautiful images which help to enliven the spatial narratives and material cultures of the men in this book.

I will always be indebted and immensely grateful to Amelia Jones, Matt Cook, Penny Sparke, Dirk Gindt and Joseph McBrinn for their insightful and thoughtful comments at various stages of the process. There were others who have also shared much for which I am honoured: Anne Anderson for her baffling knowledge of all things Victorian as well as for many of the images which help illustrate Lord Gower's interiors, Penny Sparke for her continuous inspiration, encouragement and incomparable devotion to the study of the modern interior, Janice Helland for her support over the years and Emma Brennan of Manchester University Press and the Studies in Design series editors Christopher Breward and Glenn Adamson for their patience and diligence. I am, as always,

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Parts of Chapter 3 have appeared in the following forms in two different volumes: 'The Aesthetics of Community: Charles Shannon and Charles Ricketts and the Art of Domesticity', in Jason Edwards and Imogen Hart (eds), *Rethinking the Interior: Aestheticism and the Arts and Crafts Movement, 1867–1896* (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2010), and 'Collecting intimacy one object at a time: material culture, perception and the spaces of aesthetic companionship', in John Potvin and Alla Myzelev (eds.), *Material Culture in Britain, 1750–1920: The Meanings and Pleasures of Collecting* (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate: 2009). As well, part of Chapter 4 appeared as 'Askesis as Aesthetic Home: Edward Perry Warren, Lewis House and the Ideal of Greek Love', in *Home Cultures: The Journal of Architecture, Design and Domestic Space*, vol. 8, no. 1 (March 2011).

John Potvin  
Toronto/Stockholm/Montreal

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## 1 ✧ Men of a different sort: the seven deadly sins of the modern bachelor

THE BACHELOR has long held an ambivalent, uncomfortable and even at times an unfriendly position in society. As late as 1977 Alan G. Davis and Philip M. Strong published what is surely one of the oddest sociological surveys ever performed in the postwar era, in which they investigate the 'social problem' commonly referred to as the bachelor. The authors note how the world of the bachelor – the social institutions that catered to and aided his lifestyle – had long since dissolved. As a result, the contemporary bachelor 'experience[s] many occasions when he is alone and known in public settings'.<sup>1</sup> They suggest that given both the figure's 'biographical deficiency and the stereotypes ... they must do their best to "pass" as a normal person ... They cannot rely on someone who "really" knows them to help interpret the puzzles of everyday life ... Given these difficulties; no one with whom to rehearse their identity; no one to explain and evaluate others' behaviour.'<sup>2</sup> By war's end, the figure of the bachelor had become a social pariah, an odd misfit of pity and suspicion, a figure clearly out of its depth when it concerned quotidian and social customs. Perhaps this apparent lack spoke less to the nature and condition of the bachelor than how it betrayed a social structure that privileged heteronormative companionate coupling. Their study underscored how marriage guaranteed, as it still largely does today, social knowledge, navigational skills and entrance into society. This sociological portrait is in many ways a logical extension of the one that emerged and developed in popular consciousness throughout the long nineteenth century. First and foremost, the bachelor was a lover of luxury and comfort, an aspect of his personality, which, if we were to take Davis and Strong's characterization at face value, was the cause of his apparent social awkwardness. As a result, the bachelor was also often thought of as similar to if not the same as the connoisseur, the eccentric and free-loving globetrotter, unbound and unrestricted, unfettered by familial obligations in his