Most neoclassical works based on the discoveries at Herculaneum and Pompeii were imitations of an art thought to be formally and morally superior to that of the eighteenth century. Objects and paintings gathered from the sites that failed to meet this standard were stashed away in a “secret cabinet of obscene objects” in the Naples Museum, which, with some brief interludes, was locked up for two hundred years and only in 2000 put on public display. Long before this, however, the repressed erotic and deviant underside of the Vesuvian remains came to light again, if at first in veiled form.

Joseph-Marie Vien created a sensation at the 1763 Salon with his painting La Marchande d’Amours, based on a fresco from Stabiae published in the Antichità di Ercolano. In the rather spare source engraving (see page 82), two women inspect amorini proffered by a vendor. Although Vien added sumptuous furnishings including an incense burner, increasing the sensory charge of the image, he removed the large amorino between the buyer’s legs, with its hands mischievously lost in the dark folds of her skirt, and miniaturized the others, rendering them harmless infants (though the one held up by the kneeling salesgirl holds its forearm in a provocative manner). His title, The Seller of Loves, while referring to cupids, nevertheless also implies bought sexual pleasure. The erotic connotations of the painting did not go unnoticed and indeed accounted for some of its popularity.

Describing the proliferation of works of art copied from Herculaneum, the Abbé Ferdinando Galiano noted in 1767, “I have seen that painting of a woman selling cherubs as chickens at least ten times.” A contemporary cabinet drawing makes it clear that the chickens the woman is selling are, specifically, cocks. Bringing the subtext of the antique painting and its copies to the fore, the artist has depicted women coming to a priapic fountain to buy winged, straining phalli from an old procurer. These horny buzzards are only too eager to oblige the ladies, whether the women are seated, standing, reclining, or bent over. Spent birds perch limply in trees or at the vendor’s feet. Significantly, this drawing was intended for private consumption. While there were other eighteenth-century artists and authors inspired by the sexually provocative artifacts unearthed, it was only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that the sexual life and liberties of Pompeii and Herculaneum came to dominate popular literary and artistic interpretations of the sites.

Even before August Mau discovered an ancient inscription reading SODOM GOMOR on the wall of a house in Pompeii in 1885, the city’s destruction had been likened to the fate of those biblical cities and used to point out the dangers of sexual decadence and perversion. The moralizing frame or lesson provided by the eruption, though, licensed all sorts of titillating description and became increasingly perfunctory as the nineteenth century wore on. Furthermore, antiquity’s freer sexualities came to be celebrated by artists, authors, and early homosexual-rights activists.

By the twentieth century, Pompeii’s metaphorical significance had largely eclipsed its moral charge. In his analysis of Wilhelm Jensen’s Gudrun, Sigmund Freud concluded that there is “no better analogy for repression, by which
something in the mind is at once made inaccessible and preserved, than burial of the sort to which Pompeii fell a victim and from which it could emerge once more through the work of spades.”

For both Freud and Jensen, Pompeii functioned as a metaphor for the unconscious and libidinal impulses, and archaeology as a model for the psychoanalytic process.

The equation of burial and repression was taken up by later authors, some of whom saw the interment of Pompeii as a metaphor for society’s repression of homosexuality in particular. In Marcel Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu*, the gay brothels of the Parisian underworld are decorated with Pompeian paintings, and
during an air raid, under the “lava” of the “German Vesuvius,” the narrator is initiated into the world of S&M by witnessing a whipping scene like that in the Villa of the Mysteries frieze. Proust emphasizes, however, the impossibility of final repression and burial. Citing God’s failure to eradicate the race of inverts with the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, he claims the “descendants of Sodomites [are] so numerous that we may apply to them that other verse of Genesis: ‘If a man can number the dust of the earth, then shall thy seed also be numbered.’” Moreover, the threat of imminent death does not, in the novel’s World War I Paris, provoke repentance and behavioral reform; on the contrary, during the air raids people on the street, “like the Pompeians upon whom the fire from heaven was already raining,” descend into “the Métro, black as catacombs” because they will not “be alone there,” and in the darkness “hands, lips, bodies may go into action at once.”

The notion of antiquity’s less restrictive sexual politics continues to facilitate homosexual identification with and interest in Pompeii. In Richard Friedel’s 1981 novel *The Movie Lover*, the gay protagonist commissions an artist to paint a Pompeian mural in his apartment. The sexual liberties of the Romans, however, are no longer scandalous; although still an important historical precedent, the ancients were disappointingly unimaginative and technologically unadvanced. In a lengthy excursus on baths, the narrator informs us, albeit facetiously, that when it came to sex, the Romans sorely lacked ingenuity. Oh, the baths were filled with hundreds of bodies writhing in Dionysian abandon—limbs intertwined, genitals aflame with desire, mouths stuffed with grapes. Diaphanous Persian boys were handed out as party favors . . . [but] one wonders how they ever got along without deluxe enema kits, chrome anal balls and vibro-butt plugs. In 1993 San Francisco artist David Cannon Dashiel took Pompeii’s Villa of the Mysteries frieze as a framework within which to explore queer sexuality,
plugged and unplugged. Consisting of twenty-eight acrylic emulsion reverse paintings on Plexiglas panels, Queer Mysteries was first exhibited at the San Francisco Art Institute and is now part of the permanent collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. While there are other full-scale variations on the Pompeian mural depicting a ritual initiation into the mysteries of Dionysus, Dashiell’s is the only one to revisit the equation of Pompeii’s destruction with that of Sodom and Gomorrah in order to extend the comparison to the AIDS crisis. His mystery cult threatened by persecution and looming catastrophe is the homosexual community threatened by prejudice and ravaged by a lethal virus. San Francisco, with its highly visible gay population, its bathhouses (pre-1984), and its fault line, is not an inapt modern counterpart to Roman Pompeii. By inviting this comparison, however, Dashiell, who died of AIDS the same year he created the work, was hardly aligning himself with the religious right.

More than any other ancient artifact, the Villa of the Mysteries frieze has been subject to psychoanalytic interpretation: it is said to represent psychoanalytic principles, the mechanisms of identification, and even the analytic progression itself. Taking the idea of Pompeii and the Mysteries frieze in particular as the symbolic bedrock of Western psychoanalysis and psychosocial identity, Dashiell’s work constitutes an archaeological exploration of the formation of individual and group identities. Employing a system of visual-verbal punning akin to Freudian dream logic, Dashiell’s alternative archaeology both recovers and remakes a monument to queer identities and communities, past, present, and future.

Most archaeologists and art historians agree that the first-century B.C. fresco cycle depicts the initiation of one woman, who is shown several times, into the cult of Dionysus. Dashiell follows the reading of the Mysteries frieze as the initiation of one person who is pictured at different stages of the ceremony, but he doubles it to give us two narratives, one reading left to right and the other right to left. Clockwise, we follow the induction of a futuristic female earthing into an alternate, virtual reality of lesbian aliens; counterclockwise, that of an early twentieth-century male into a certain society—a “gay Edwardian cannibal porn cult,” to be specific. Both narratives explore and exploit available readings of the Pompeian frieze in different ways, bringing its sexual content to the fore; both also literalize and graphically illustrate popular homophobic stereotypes.

The work’s initial move is thus a queering or querying of archaeological and art-historical practices of making identifications. Despite its almost all-female cast, nudity, and scenes of flagellation and inter-species sucking; despite the “double-sexed character” of Dionysus and the fact that the cult’s male followers were thought to be “men very like women” (simillimi feminis mares), and its rites sexually “deviant”; and despite the veritable “pornotopia” the publishing world has created from its reproductions, the ritual depicted in the Villa of the Mysteries frieze is invariably read as a bridal shower of sorts, the preparation for a real or mystic heterosexual marriage. Enabled and even invited by the kitsch iconicity of the earlier work, Dashiell’s revision—an archaeological dig in both senses—confronts the disciplines’ interpretive heteronormativity.

The left-to-right, futuristic narrative begins with the appearance of a female figure from the outer world, literally from outer space (A.). Having already doffed her fishbowl helmet, she is distinguishable from the rest of the characters,
who are green, like the Orion slave women Captain Kirk was always lusting after on Star Trek. The fully dressed Pompeian initiate (A) and this Barbarella-esque newcomer (we'll call her Barbarella from now on) pass a seated woman and standing child. In the antique frieze the child is reading from a scroll, probably describing the ceremony to come (B). In the Dashiell painting the child also seems to be previewing the ceremony. Her eyes are lowered, an index of the interiority of the experience, and she holds something resembling a Viewmaster (B). The name of the device suggests visual access to and control over the upcoming rites, but the Viewmaster toy is known for its old-fashioned pictures of foreign places and ancient monuments, including Pompeii. Potential doubleness of orientation is perhaps the master trope of Dashiell's frieze and manifests itself in various figures; here the instrument's double vision echoes that of the frieze itself, which also looks both forward and backward.

Reappearing past the seated woman/standing child pairs, the initiates in both murals have disrobed and slipped into something more comfortable and revealing—note Barbarella's visible pubic hair (she's a natural redhead), and the Pompeian woman's slit skirt that folds out at the genital area (C). Both advance toward the scene of the initiation, the Pompeian carrying a platter of sacred cakes as offerings, and Barbarella some sort of wiring-up devices, plugs or implants. Next, instead of a woman seated at a table examining a mystic basket and washing her hands (D), we see a woman at a computer console who is probably loading the program the initiate will experience or the site she will explore, perhaps entering the initiation sequence (D). A more sinister reading also presents itself: given that this is an induction into a cult, the initiated may be preparing to program or reprogram the initiand.5

The initiatory experience here will be a virtual one, an initiation into the matrix. William Gibson, the author of Neuromancer and spearhead of the 1980s cyberpunk movement, described the matrix as a "consensual hallucination" which Bacchic cult experiences likewise seem to have been. The entrance to the ecstatic Dionysiac world in the Villa of the Mysteries is marked by Silenus playing a cithara at the edge of a rocky landscape (E). Entry is gained through enchantment, music inducing mental and physical transformation: the initiate becomes a goat kid and is suckled by a panise, a female satyr (F). In Dashiell's frieze we are not granted visual access to the ecstatic realm. It is introduced by a techie monitoring Barbarella's vibrations as she dons Virtual Reality headgear and breast, genital, hand, and foot stimulators and sensors (E - F). Through these she will hallucinatory drink in cult secrets like the sucking goat (on all fours she becomes an infant or a "kid" again, if we define childhood by quadrupedality, as in the Sphinx's riddle). The gray and male figures starting to appear are part of the reverse narrative, which we will analyze in its turn.

In her next appearance, the Pompeian woman, in human form again, draws back in fright at a mysterious revelation (G), while Barbarella also experiences a vision that we cannot see (G). Lips parted, tongue visible, she is in the grip of an ecstatic communion ("ecstasy" derives from ἑστίας, "standing apart," which the initiates in both friezes are literally doing). After an enigmatic divination scene in the Pompeian frieze (H) and an equally elliptical vision in the Dashiell (H), an intoxicated, reclining couple—Dionysus and Ariadne—appear in the original (I), and a pair of female aliens in the later work (I). Dashiell literalizes


25. In an earlier, explicitly autobiographical project, Dashiell described his father's dallings with Christian fundamentalist cults after being diagnosed with terminal cancer. The inmate's brother is taken to a "deprogramming" center from which the inmates eventually emerged "with shaved heads, singing Christmas carols." David Cannon Dashiell, Invert, Oracle (San Francisco: Ethan J. Wagner, 1989), 28.

26. William Gibson, Neuromancer (New York: Ace, 1984), 51. The first exhibition of Queer Mysteries was accompanied by two literary texts running loosely parallel to the painted narratives, printed in one reversible volume. The text relevant to the female initiation we are following, by Nayland Blake, is the record of a group's "infomating" session on "Archeosite #12098377389" (probably but not definitely Pompeii, also a Northern California phone number) held in cyberspace by a team of alien archaeologists. One of them reflects, in old-school, futuristic allcaps, that even at the time of the actual site's building, "THE INFANT 'FACE'," i.e. interface or matrix, "WAS MAKING ITS PRESENCE FELT AS COMMUNICATIONS SYSTEMS, WATER WAYS, DRUGS, PHEROMONES, ESP, VIRUSES," in other words, that this reading is not as anachronistic as it might first appear. Nayland Blake and Rebecca Solnit, Q (San Francisco: San Francisco Art Institute, 1993), unpaginated.
Room 5, Villa of the Mysteries, 60-40 B.C.
Fresco, Pompeii, Italy.
Scala/Art Resource, N.Y.
the inspiration the alien women are receiving: it comes through their respirators. The inflated orbs they are sitting on, which supply their high, reinforce the pneumatic nature of this prosthetically mouth-to-mouth experience. 27

The revelation of the mystery follows. The Pompeian initiate unveils what is contained in a liknon (winnowing basket), most likely a phallus (\( J - K \)), and Barbarella breaks eggs from a chalice-like container (a classic symbol for the matrix or womb—cyberspace is here an intrauterine realm), getting her fingers wet and sticky (\( J - K' \)). What she is experiencing in virtual reality has nothing to do with the eggs we see; these are stand-ins for several things. The breaking of the eggs comments on the nonreproductive nature of lesbian sex and is of course an image of ball-busting; 28 the egg is also a standard shape for female vibrators. The revelation the initiate is virtually experiencing here is how to lubricate and get lubricated: the mystery is the secret of secretion.

We move on from this scene of simulation to one of actual physical stimulation: after the breaking of eggs comes the whipping—with a wired whisk (\( L' \))—

---

27. Dashiell may have consulted Fierz-David’s book, which contains a discussion of “pneumatics”; his self-described use of the stereotype of lesbians as “cold aliens” (Friedman, 15) may refer to Fierz-David’s characterization of the “Dionysian epiphany” as one of “cold breath,” which “women experience as their own coldness” (76, 97). Friedman refers to Dashiell’s “Jungian” motifs in “Big Gay Art,” Bay Area Reporter 23, no. 22 (June 3, 1993): 35.
and the eating of cake. The initiate with her head in a woman’s lap in both friezes (M, M) is explicitly performing cunnilingus in Dashiell’s: her tongue is out and the seated woman’s skirt is around her ankles. A broken egg oozes at her feet. Looking back for a moment to the respirator-wearing celebrants, we can deduce that their high either has to do with the effects of ether, or is a result of one or both of these ETs having had to eat her companion. After their respective climaxes the Pompeian initiate dances for joy at passing her test of hardship, and Barbarella removes her headgear (N, N,). Both women then put on new robes and dress their hair, Barbarella barely visible behind the figures of the male narrative of initiation (P, P,). The last scenes of both friezes show the literally and figuratively changed women, seated and looking reflective (Q,).

Dashiell’s frieze is reversible: like every human being, according to Freud, it goes both ways. In so doing, it centers the viewer’s experience around a reorientation which is temporal, spatial, and psychic, since identifying, and to some degree identifying with, the next initiate in order to follow his journey entails the
recognition of a new historical setting, a shift of gender alignment, and a physical conversion (turn-around). The counterclockwise initiation begins with the entrance of a turn-of-the-century male, an explorer or colonizer, complete with pith helmet ($A_j$). The puddle at his feet indicates that he is either wet from the elements or literally unable to contain his fear and excitement before the ritual begins (the urine signaling “you’re in”). As with the female initiate, whom he strongly resembles, we can keep track of the protagonist by his chromatic and sartorial difference from the initiated: he is neither gray nor masked.

Past a seated man and a child reading from a book entitled The Agenda—
evoking both sequential and ideological directives—the initiate disrobes and puts on a nightdress or hospital gown and nightcap ($C_j$). Carrying medical supplies, he approaches an operating table, beneath which can be seen a severed limb ($D_j$). The procedure the man will undergo is not, this time, the opening of the mind onto a different universe, but rather the opening and reorganization of the body in order to be literally incorporated into this society. The colonist coming from and traveling to geographically foreign parts will become part of a
new culture by giving and receiving foreign anatomical parts, by being literally transplanted.

Beyond the operating table the initiate’s entry into a more primitive, ecstatic world is marked not by Silenus, but by a jodhpur-wearing leatherman eating a forearm (E). Past him the initiate reappears, now nude, engrossed by this scene of cannibalism or physical incorporation. Crouching in the posture of the suckling goat, he salivates at the sight of one of the initiated eating a penis (F).

Incorporation here is a bodily procedure of internalization that effects a psychological identification. Although Freud posited this model of primary identification as the very basis of social organization, the history of Western psychoanalytic representations has nevertheless, as Diana Fuss points out, specifically trooped gay sex as “cannibal murder.” Dashiel painted Queer Mysteries two years after the release of Jonathan Demme’s film The Silence of the Lambs and the arrest of Jeffrey Dahmer, and he had these emblems of psychopathic homosexuality in mind when he literalized the man-hungry, cock-sucking gay man. He was perhaps also alluding to archaeological disputes over the identification of the Pompeian chamber as a dining room, and to the original name of the site, Villa Item (“eat ’em”).

The gray figures of those already initiated into the mystery and the post-op initiate are stitched up, assemblages of various parts (note the seams at the wrists and ankles of the two kneeling men, F). These sutures, evidence of things severed or sewn on or up, of surgical reconstructions, evoke Susan Stryker’s equation of transsexuals and Frankenstein’s monster. They also literalize the process of subjective development as one of identificatory assemblage. The initiate, in his moment of ecstasy and revelation, is thus shown eating—incorporating—one else’s dismembered flesh. Recalling the stories of ecstatic maenads ripping Orpheus, Dionysus, and others to pieces (Dionysus was both the “devourer” and the “devoured”), this scene gives way to another scene of dismemberment: decapitation or literal “giving head.”

In the Edwardian equivalent of the drunken Dionysus and Ariadne scene, one of the initiated reclines in the lap of a doctor figure (I). Whereas in the
Roman frieze the figures of Dionysus and his ecstatic contingent are linked by wreaths of green ivy (I), here the participants’ binding attribute is a green IV running from penis to penis. This homophonic substitution is doubly determined if one reads the figure behind Dionysus as Venus: sprawled across her lap, Dionysus is “intra Venus.” The exchange of bodily fluids enabled by the IV, or cathetic catheter—literal transference and counter-transference—reifies the communion offered by the cult experience. For members of the cult body the act of identifying oneself with others or as an Other becomes a fluid process, becomes easier, even if castration accompanies this identification (Dr. Freud, let’s call him, has his pocketknife out).

The revelation of the mystery follows. In the Pompeian frieze the woman is unveiling the mystic phallus of Dionysus contained in the liknon, or mystica uannus (winnowing fan).35 In Dashiell’s frieze the mystery is contained in a barrel or, as the Edwardians would have put it, a butt, with prominent bunghole, full of dicks (Kj). The mystica uannus has become a mystic anus fantastically lodging hundreds of penises. Severed penises, that is. The leading-edge technology of the female initiation is replaced here with bleeding-edge technology; the hacking going on is purely physical. Symbolic castration is shown to be the price and mark of acceptance into a group, like circumcision for Judaism or the threat of castration for entry into adulthood in the post-Freudian world. The initiate’s penis, which stood out and up so prominently at his last appearance, has disappeared, and his new growth of pubic hair (absent in the previous scene, perhaps shaved for surgery) resembles Barbarella’s, feminizing him. He has temporarily, it seems, lost his footing (Jz).

Next comes the whipping scene or test of hardship (Mz). It is apparent, from his large erection, that the initiate has recovered himself and is hardened by the experience of being clubbed with phallus-tipped thyroi. Jocelyn Toynbee describes the objective of the flagellation by whips made of sacred plants as “the transmission, via the ivy, of the power of Dionysos,”36 which the initiate here, through encountering the IV, does seem to have acquired. As he is being flagellated, Dashiell’s initiate is simultaneously fellating his fellow cult member’s member: a double blow. He is next shown standing, raising a leatherman’s eyemask he has not worn before (Nz). Its significance becomes clear in his dressing scene (Pz): he is sartorially erecting a new facade, an I-mask. In recognition, a small man in place of the mirror-holding Pompeian cupid holds up a sheet of paper that reads “one of us” (Oz). Lastly we see him seated, in formal dress, with a top hat in his hand (Qz). His attire resembles that of the Freudian doctor figure; his indoctrination is complete.

Shifting between bodily, linguistic, and psychoanalytical understandings and confusions, always operating on several levels at once, Dashiell’s work, like the Pompeian Mysteries frieze, defies interpretive closure. Rebuslike motifs proffer to the viewer a game of clues, the “solving” of any one of which may demand or effect a reorientation (perhaps it wasn’t Dr. Freud in the consulting room with the penknife after all?). Where, then, does this investigation of Pompeii’s putative perversity leave us?

Both initiations highlight the dangers of gay sex. As mentioned earlier, Dashiell painted this frieze while he was suffering from and receiving treatment for AIDS. His first partner had died of the syndrome in 1990; his last was to die.
shortly after him. The gay, gray, corpse-like men sewn together like Frankenstein’s monster function as morbid reminders of the death that infects life, as do the doctors, the operating table, and the IV garland that can spread or treat HIV. An explicit connection between Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome, acquired identifications (IDs), and libidinal drives (ids) is invoked. The feminine future narrative of Sapphic sex seems safer initially because it emphasizes prosthetic rather than potentially infectious physical experience; yet the ambiguity of certain elements, like the respirators and strange diagnostic instruments, undermines any sense of security on this count. Computers and their drives are susceptible to viruses too.

By invoking the parallel between Pompeii and Sodom and Gomorrah, Dashiell’s deviation on the Villa of the Mysteries frieze declares the AIDS crisis a disaster of apocalyptic proportions. The language of his paintings, however, which graphically deploy the cruelest of popular homophobic stereotypes—“images that could have been culled from the worst nightmares/fantasies of Jesse Helms”—attempts to foil any imperative to moralize the parallel as divine punishment for perversity. Dashiell described his project as an attempt to force viewers “to confront their preconceptions” by picturing “gut fears about gays and pushing them to the ultimate level of absurdity.” Whether his monumental rendering of the process of queer identity formation as the popular cultural imaginary would have it succeeds in this depends on the individual viewer. By raising the issue of viewers’ complicity in maintaining the currency of such caricatural vilification, though, the work ascribes an originary violence done to homosexual communities to human, not divine, forces, and raises the questions of the responsibility for and the inevitability of the AIDS “plague.”

If sexuality is thus made political in this most unsecret statement of queer identity, politics are also made sexual. The past, masculine narrative is violent: colonial, sado-masochistic, and deathly. Its tale, which follows a pith-helmeted figure through a strange scene of cannibalism, can be read as the story of the West’s colonial past. Even as cannibalism is strategically employed here as a stereotype of gay sexuality, it functions as an apt emblem of the greed and savagery underlying the supposedly civilizing logic of colonial expansion. By emphasizing the colon in colonial history, then, Dashiell draws our attention to the violence of acts of incorporating other cultures and how that violence is registered in and on actual bodies, including Western ones. The logic of colonialism is quickly confused both in reality and here, where we see that the gray figures populating the frieze are neither black nor white, and in this sado-masochistic world, neither master nor slave.

Psychoanalysis defines subjectivity as “the history of one’s identifications,” which are at root violent and subject to inversion. Thus although both of the psychosexual initiations Dashiell depicts are ostensibly queer, the frieze invites all viewers to situate themselves at the intersection of the two narratives: at the intersection of our recent past and near future, of our primal and cultured identifications, and of our masculine and feminine sides. A visual vocabulary drawn from television, film, and comics as well as classical art facilitates the viewer’s making of identifications, and the highly reflective medium Dashiell chose has the effect of interpolating viewers wherever they stand, literally and figuratively.
Taking its place within a genealogy of artistic interpretations mobilizing Pompeii’s polymorphous perversity, Dashiell’s painting orchestrates the return of multiple repressed readings. *Queer Mysteries* is a brilliant, grisly, wryly humorous farewell performance that is simultaneously revisionary history, social critique, funerary monument, an instance of alternative archaeology, and a choose-your-own-adventure story of psychosexual subject formation.

Alison Mairi Syme completed her PhD at Harvard University in November 2004 and currently teaches at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio.