From the mid 1940s and spanning across five decades, Tom’s sole mission was to provide his homosexual brothers with strong positive images of themselves. Role models. Throughout the Western Hemisphere, gay men were staking claim to their own identity as Men – a critical step, as homosexuals had long been classified as anything but men. Not since the Greco-Roman Empire had one single movement effected such change in the manner to which society viewed gay men and our impact on broader culture.

In the Summer of 1939, 19 year-old Touko Laaksonen left his Finnish village of Kaarina to attend art school in Helsinki. However, war was beginning to rage across Europe and soon Laaksonen was pulled into battle. As a child, he had found a strange fascination in the robust appearance of Russian and Finnish soldiers marching across the countryside. Now, he had joined their ranks and his admiration only grew. Upon his release from the army at the end of World War II, Tom found work in advertising while drawing these iconic men in his spare time. In 1957, encouraged by friends close to him, Laaksonen sent samples to Physique Pictorial, a popular American bodybuilding magazine. They loved them. Having longed signed his work under the English equivalent, the publishing company added his country of origin and thus, “Tom of Finland” was born.

Seven years prior, upon seeing photo prints from the film The Wild One with Marlon Brando, Tom immediately transformed his uniforms from the Nordic flannel and brown leather to the mysterious sensual black leather donned by bikers and inspiring a whole new subculture of black leather-clad queer boys. Tom’s drawings spoke to young, gay men – fostering the beginnings of bike clubs and leather bars. These leather-clad boys would be seen throughout the western countries of Europe and North America, all the way down to Australia and South Africa.

In those early years, little separation existed between heterosexual and homosexual biker gear, much of which Tom presented first in his drawings. His designs then found their way to the leather makers who commenced manufacturing the military style uniform gone motor biker. Tom soon expanded his iconic Men to include sailors, surfers, cops & cowboys in addition to punks, thugs, lumberjacks & country boys – all with healthy libidos, ripped muscles and bulging baskets. These were the Men that Tom was devoted to, holding them up as heroic Nordic Gods. And young, butch homosexual men throughout the western world ate it up – celebrating their newfound male identities with fervor.

These works continue to cross generational boundaries instilling a sense of pride and strength even today. Tom’s eternal message to his audience: Be happy and enjoy sex – free of the guilt and shame that has long been associated with being queer. It pleased him immensely to see this freedom being expressed in so many who felt oppressed sexually for so much of their lives.

Tom never expected that his vision would be so widely accepted. Over the years, Tom triggered creative expressions in such photographers as Bruce Weber and Robert Mapplethorpe in New York to painters like Juan Davila in Australia; in men’s fashion from Tom Ford of Gucci to Gary Robinson and David Johnson, who spear-headed the Tom of Finland Clothing Co. in New York to Jean Paul Gauthier in Paris. He had a profound impact on British musicians like Freddy Mercury, Judas Priest, Bronsky Beat, Adam Ant and others who flourished in the edgy English culture. Pop culture in the States was not so accepting. That is until the creation of the Village People in New York, whose own sheer influence on both gay and pop cultures was nothing short of remarkable at
Every one of these artists drew inspiration from Tom's works and his message. And they sought him out to express their gratitude.

Yet, not everyone was so appreciative of the artist's influence. After his death, Tom's work was targeted by Queer Nation who began decrying his role in fostering the 'body culture' at a time when the gay community was attempting to regain its footing after a decade of devastation due to AIDS. Ironically, it was Tom's work that had inspired legions of gay men to join gyms in hopes of bulking-up to avoid the stigma of the 'skinny AIDS victim' – thus creating the modern gay stereotype of the 'buff gymboy' that is found throughout so much of our society today.

Few people outside the art world truly appreciate the magnitude of Tom of Finland's contributions to the global community. For it was Tom, himself, who was responsible for bringing the exquisite male form back to a highly developed level – unseen for centuries. Not since Michelangelo & Da Vinci (themselves, influenced by the Greco-Roman concept of striving for god-like perfection) had the world gazed upon such masculine role models in works of art.

Once again, the male form was being displayed in all its grandeur – beautiful in stature, strong in physical and emotional presence, friendly and approachable in spirit. Tom helped us to see that all of these attributes could come together, and that a man is all...
As Harvey Shipley Miller, the much respected Trustee of the Judith Rothschild Foundation explains, “Tom of Finland was one of the five most influential artists of the 20th Century. He drew in values, as an artist – superb, but as a influence – transcendent. What he did was open the doorway, the path for so many to follow by not being afraid of homoerotic subject matter and also the way it was treated.” In other words, his work not only permeated across our nation’s culture, but became a significant part of it - the ripple effects of which will continue to be felt for generations to come.

Today, five of Tom’s works are part of the permanent collection at MoMA (The Museum of Modern Art in New York). Initially, MoMA had turned down previous offers from various collectors wishing to donate original pieces by Tom of Finland. Then the Rothschild Foundation stepped in. In 2005, the RF (in collecting works of art from the 20th century), came across Tom’s works in Miami. Soon their collection was offered up to MoMA. This time around his work was accepted.

Another piece [seen in the lower right hand corner on page 39] was purchased with the intention of donating it to MoMA as well. They realized that the Museum was not yet ready to accept such a controversial work of art due to its overtly sexual subject matter. Miller explained in referencing this masterpiece, “This drawing is a master work and there are very few.” Indeed, few artists ever produce works that are thought of as actual ‘masterpieces’ – Tom of Finland is recognized as having achieved several during his lifetime. Miller said that they simply would “wait til the time is right, for timing is everything...” and with a gleeful glint in his eye, stated, “until then, it [will] hang above my bed.”

As a messenger, Tom provided precisely that which was desperately desired by a society too long in fear of the danger and ridicule associated with freedom of sexual expression. He was a defender of all men – especially those whose suppressed nature had been hidden away because of a cruel family and an unfriendly society.

Tom wasn’t concerned if the men in his drawings were too exaggerated in their über-masculine style. These specific traits had long been denied to homosexuals. Likewise, he didn’t particularly care if gay men donned the “Tom” dress code that he found sexy, he simply wanted to make sure that we all knew who we were and carried ourselves as Men.