

The Slade School of Fine Art

The Slade has been a site of artistic learning and experimentation since it was established in 1871. The school's alumni comprise queer people whose lives and artistic practice are entangled within Bloomsbury and London's queer past and present.

Dora Carrington (1893–1932) was an English painter and decorative artist. In 1910, she won a scholarship to The Slade where she garnered praise and awards for her work. She was well liked and considered a trendsetter by her peers, becoming known as one of the 'Slade Cropheads' after cutting her hair into a short bob. Carrington attracted romantic attention from numerous male students, but she struggled with physical intimacy due to her uneasiness with her own femininity and rejected many of their advances.

Graduating in 1914, Carrington became acquainted with the Bloomsbury Group and met Lytton Strachey while staying with Virginia Woolf. Though they never married and had numerous affairs with others, Carrington and Strachey remained together for the rest of their lives. In 1921 Carrington married Ralph Partridge, and the three Bloomsbury Group members conducted an (often complex) ménage à trois for many years.

Carrington also had several relationships with women, including a passionate affair with an American student, Henrietta Bingham. She wrote to her friend and Strachey's sister-in-law, Alix Strachey: 'I am very much more taken with Henrietta than I have been with anyone for a long time. I feel now regrets at being such a blasted fool in the past, to stifle so many lusts I had in my youth, for various females. But perhaps one would have only been embittered, or battered by blows on the head from enraged virgins'.

Derek Jarman (1942–94) studied painting and stage design at The Slade between 1963 and 1967. After taking a course in world cinema, he began experimenting with making his own films in the low budget 'Super 8' format. Jarman's first full-length feature, *Sebastiane* (1976), is based on the martyrdom of St Sebastian, and was one of the earliest British films to include positive images of sex and intimacy between men. Later features included *Caravaggio*, his biopic about the eponymous painter whose unorthodox sexuality has been presented as a key to his art and violent life.

In 2017, Jarman's 1978 punk film *Jubilee* was reimagined as a theatre production. The play featured Toyah Willcox (who starred in Jarman's original), alongside queer, black actors and writers Temi Wilkey, as Mad, and Travis Alabanza, as Amyl Nitrate. Like Jarman's film, the stage adaptation astutely probes at questions of power and status from the start: 'Welcome to Jubilee', announces Amyl Nitrate, 'an iconic film most of you have never heard of, adapted ... for a dying medium, spoiled by millennials, ruined by diversity, and constantly threatening to go interactive.'

Open about his HIV status, Jarman campaigned tirelessly against representations of AIDS in the British media. Several of his later films were informed by his activist politics, including *Edward II* (1991), a radical reworking of Christopher Marlowe's play about a monarch who in Middle Ages acquired a reputation as a sodomite.

In the late 1980s Jarman was a leading campaigner against Section 28. Between 1988 and 2003, Section 28 prohibited state schools from teaching the 'acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship' and 'promoting homosexuality... by publishing materials'. Jarman also played a central role in reclaiming the term 'queer' as an alternative to rigid categories of sexuality and gender. As he put it in one of his published diaries, 'For me to use the word 'queer' is a liberation; it was a word that frightened me, but no longer.'

One of Jarman's contemporaries, Maggi Hambling (b. 1945), came to The Slade in 1967 to study for a PG Diploma in Fine Art. Although Hambling didn't get involved with the identity politics of the era, she's always lived what she calls an openly 'lesbionic' life. While studying at Camberwell School of Art, notorious parties were thrown at her shared house in Greenwich, nicknamed 'Queer's Castle'. She also claims to have been kicked out of renowned lesbian bar, The Gateways Club, for suggestive dancing. In 2015 the *Independent on Sunday* recognised Hambling as a national treasure and long-time LGBT champion in their Rainbow List.

Often characterised as controversial and unafraid of confrontation, Hambling's art is renowned for its poignancy and depth of feeling. Among her best-known work is the sculpture, *A conversation with Oscar Wilde*. Depicted holding cigarette (a gesture also associated with Hambling, an unapologetic smoker), Wilde's head emerges from a green granite sarcophagus, inscribed with a quotation from his play *Lady Windermere's Fan*, 'We are all in the gutter but some of us are looking at the stars.' The memorial to Wilde is located behind the church of St Martin-in-the-Fields, and was campaigned for by Derek Jarman and others in 1980s and 90s. Three weeks after his death from AIDS in 1994, Hambling painted a portrait of Jarman, depicting him against the backdrop of Yves Klein Blue, a reference to his final film *Blue*. Sales of silkscreen prints of the Hambling portrait continue to raise funds for the Terence Higgins Trust.

Continuing The Slade's queer legacy, recent graduates like Jenkin van Zyl have attracted acclaim. Van Zyl's innovative political art practice combines film, sculpture, installation and costume, and draws influence from horror and fantasy genres, as well London's queer nightlife. His work has featured in solo and group exhibitions, including The Hayward Gallery's *Kiss My Genders* exhibition in 2019. Speaking on his 2023 solo show *Surrender*, van Zyl commented:

There is also obviously a long connection between horror and the othering that happens to the queer body... In a backdrop of an increased moral panic on queer sexuality, on trans people's right to basic human dignity, I try

to make spaces in which deviating bodies are centred and might not only live but survive and even flourish.

