

The Object podcast
Transcript of Unspeakable Love: The Rebel Who Went Too Far
Originally broadcast June 2020

On the night of February 11, 1873, Simeon Solomon is arrested.

He's 32 years old. He's handsome, with dark red curly hair and a short wispy beard – like Bob Dylan in the late 1960s or Pan, the mischievous god. He has the slight, sly smile of someone who's about to say something totally inappropriate.

He is an artist. A former child prodigy who has exhibited his paintings at the highest level for almost half his life, starting when he was just 18.

And now, at 7:10 p.m. on a cold night in the West End of London, Simeon Solomon is arrested in a public restroom. He is arrested along with a 60-year-old stableman named George Roberts – literally a guy who shovels manure. And the two men are taken to the police station, just around the corner.

They are stripped, and examined by a doctor, who probes their rectums and genitals, until he has seen enough. And then, Simeon and George are charged with attempting to commit a crime that until just a decade before, had been punishable by death – an act listed on the books as “the abominable crime of buggery.”

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This is The Object podcast, produced by the Minneapolis Institute of Art. Today, the story of one of the first gay artists to make his orientation obvious, to make art as a man who loves men – come hell or the Victorians. I'm Tim Gihring.

And if you can't tell, I'm not recording this in my usual studio—I'm recording it with my phone, at home, in the basement, late at night, under a blanket that the dog usually sits on in the car. But don't think about that, and I'll try not to as well. As always, on with the show.

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Okay, it's a long time ago – let's say the year 1,000 BCE, a thousand years before Jesus. And David, a shepherd boy in Israel, has just killed the giant Philistine warrior Goliath.

In fact he's holding the giant's severed head, which is like the size of a Volkswagen, before King Saul, the king of Israel. To say look, I just saved the Jewish people with my slingshot. Sorry about all the blood.

And there's King Saul's son, Jonathan, beside his father – checking out this heroic shepherd boy.

And right then and there — according to the book of Samuel, in the Hebrew Bible, or the Old Testament, if you like — “the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as himself.”

They make a “covenant,” the Bible says. They become, a thing -- kissing and crying together at one point -- until Jonathan dies in battle. And David – who eventually becomes King David -- honors Jonathan’s memory by seating Jonathan’s son at his royal table ... instead of honoring *tradition* and killing him, along with the rest of Saul’s family.

Now, the Christian tradition says eh, they were just good pals. While the *Jewish* tradition says no, this was real love.

And so, it’s now 1852, and Simeon Solomon is 11 or 12 years old. The youngest of eight children in a prominent Jewish family, in the East End of London. His father is one of the first Jews to be granted the freedom of the city – after centuries of oppression. And Simeon is already starting art school. His sister Rebecca is an artist, and so is his brother Abraham. And now, here’s Simeon—incredibly precocious and hitting puberty.

And he’s well aware of the story of Jonathan and David.

So, when he eventually goes on to study at the Royal Academy, at age 15, he latches onto this story – as a way to explore this kind of love – within the very acceptable bounds of the Bible. He draws Jonathan and David, over and over.

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Now, to understand the world that Simeon is coming of age in, let’s go all the way back to 1533 – when the Parliament of England passes the Buggery Act. Which makes gay sex punishable by death.

It stays on the books, with some fits and starts, until 1828 – when it’s replaced by a law that...still makes gay sex a death sentence.

The last two men to be sentenced to death for sodomy in England are brought to the gallows in 1835, just five years before Simeon Solomon is born. They’re in their early thirties – James Pratt and John Smith. And yet they are so weak and heartbroken by the day of their execution that the executioners have to carry them from their cell. As John’s hands are being bound together, the easier to pray to god, James cries out: “Oh god, this is horrible, this is indeed horrible.”

When Simeon finishes his art education, at the ripe old age of 18, this is the reality. There is no place in Victorian society for a man like him. Except in his art.

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By the time Simeon is finished at the Royal Academy, he has befriended his heroes, a very small, very influential group of older artists who called themselves the pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.

These guys loathe the Impressionists, and almost all other popular art going back to the late Renaissance, when Raphael launched a thousand fleshy cupids into the clouds. They find it vapid. What they really love is the medieval era, or at least the idea of it. When painting was painting—you paint what you see, right, with clean lines and strong colors. When men were men, and...so were the women.

In fact some of the defining elements of the pre-Raphaelite painters were:

- 1) some good old moral Bible-thumpin context. Never mind that you'd be hard-pressed to find a bunch of artists who did so much thumping, in the biblical sense, in so short a time. They slept with their models, they slept with each other's wives. Anyway...
- 2) medieval themes – like literally, damsels in distress and Sir Galahad to the rescue.
- 3) Women who looked...kind of like men.

And so, here comes Simeon Solomon, who can really use this convention of androgyny to his benefit. And he can also really use the Biblical setting.

The Near East, or the Orient as it was sometimes called, had long been a place where relatively respectable artists – like Mozart – could play with eroticism, because it was the other.

Noam Sienna, a historian and Jewish educator in Minnesota who has studied and written about Simeon Solomon, says that for Simeon – and others like him – the Orient becomes an escape into a time and place -- mostly imagined -- where homosexuality is okay, where the love that dare not speak its name is spoken.

Of course, Simeon, being Jewish, is already considered the other. In one of the few photographs that exist of him, he's wearing a large white turban and a dark, heavily brocaded robe of some kind, really leaning into the theme.

And in the late 1800s, as it happens, there's a huge demand in England for images of Jewish life, of families and rabbis at their rituals, as the Jewish religion becomes slightly more normalized in English life. Like see, this is fine. These are a pious people. Look how long their beards are.

In 1862, Simeon creates a series of drawings of Jewish life for an English magazine. And one of these drawings is of a Jewish wedding, the bride and groom under a chuppah, a kind of canopy, right, with the rabbi. And everything looks very sedate.

Except at the edges of the picture are two men, holding the poles of the chuppah and paying very little attention to the action under the tent. Two handsome, top-hatted men about town--staring at each other across the ceremony, which will never be for them.

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In 1866, Simeon does go somewhere fairly exotic. He goes to Italy. To Florence, to study the Old Masters.

For some time now, he had already been traveling in his art to the classical world, ancient Greece in particular. Like the Orient, another kind of imagined homeland for gay and lesbian identity, as Noam Sienna puts it. Greece in fact was still part of the Ottoman Empire in the 1800s, overlapping with the Orient.

He has painted the female poets Sappho and Erinna embracing. And he's drawn a homoerotic portrait of an old Socrates with a young, very happily nude spirit.

And now, here in Italy, he paints "Love in Autumn," one of his masterworks. A portrait of a beautiful boy angel, naked except for the robe being blown off him by the wind. And of course his wings.

The angel is out in the wilderness, far from the dirty, dangerous city. He looks like a lonely, vulnerable teenager.

For many reviewers, this subtext is apparently going over their heads. They praise his work for its classic feel, quote "warmed by colour and softened by romance." But others are starting to describe it as abnormal. Lacking in moral intention.

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In 1869 and 1870, Simeon goes back to Italy.

In Rome, in 1870, Simeon writes a long prose poem, called "A Vision of Love Revealed Through Sleep." Which is kind of an allegorical journey of his soul, from fear to revelation, and hints at a community of like-minded people, ready to step out of the shadows.

It uses all these tender phrases from the Song of Solomon, the poetic book of the Old Testament. Phrases like, "I sleep, but my heart waketh" and "Many waters cannot quench love."

And this phrase, which is both the first and last line of Simeon's poem: "Until the day break and the shadows flee away."

As No-am Sienna, the historian, sees it, Simeon has been forced to live in fear, under cover – a kind of dark night of the soul, if you will. But now, as Simeon's soul says to him at the very end: "Love is the crown over us and the light about us. Through the thick veil of the darkness of the world, this is not seen or known of men, but only through the spirit may it be made clear unto us."

Now, perhaps, a new dawn is coming. When *his* vision of love can shine, openly.

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In 1870, 71, after the poem comes out, some reviewers start seeing in Simeon's art what was always there, right under their heteronormative noses.

One critic warns Simeon against "insufficient manliness" in his choice of subjects and detects a "sentiment bordering on the crapulous," whatever that means.

The following year a Scottish poet writing under a pseudonym goes after the pre-Raphaelites. He calls them "public offenders" and charges them with "sickliness and effeminacy." He says they're threatening the very foundations of "true English life."

He singles out Simeon as one of those artists who "lend actual genius to worthless subjects and thereby produce monsters." He says he despises the sort of person who, quote, "goes into ecstasy over Mr. Solomon's pictures."

In 1871, Simeon attends a trial in London of two men, Earnest Boulton and Frederick Park, known to their friends as Stella and Fanny. They had been arrested the year before for transgressing against "public decency," in which they did, quote "publicly pretend and hold themselves out ... to be women."

They are transvestites, well known in the theatre district. And Simeon writes letters to his friends about seeing them at the trial, describing Boulton as "not quite beautiful but supremely pretty, a perfect figure, manner and voice."

Both men are acquitted, because the police have no evidence that they actually had sex with each other or that wearing women's clothes is actually a crime. But the law is tightened as a result, so guys like Stella and Fanny don't slip through.

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In 1873, when Simeon and the stableman are arrested in the public bathroom, the stableman is sentenced to 18 months hard labor in prison. Simeon is luckier – he's released to the care of his cousin with a 100 pound fine and a promise to behave himself.

But Simeon does not behave himself. He's arrested again the following year – this time in a public bathroom in Paris, with a male prostitute named Henri. And this time he serves three months in a Paris jail.

Most of his friends and patrons desert him. Including a close friend, a notorious poet who writes that it's impossible for anyone to keep up his acquaintance and not be seen as an accomplice." This from a guy who loved writing poems about birching, which, well, you can look it up.

In a self portrait that Simeon creates in 1873, the year of his first arrest, a painting now at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, he depicts a symbolic version of himself. As an angel. There's a slight halo over his hair. A belt, as though for a robe, is tossed in the bushes. The angel is staring

into a crystal ball, which were popular in the Victorian era, as though he's wondering what the future holds.

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About 20 years ago, several researchers began piecing together Simeon's life after his arrests. Scholars like Carolyn Conroy and Roberto Ferrari. And they discovered he wasn't quite the humiliated failure that early critics made him out to be.

On the one hand, his life is certainly not great. He moves out of the fashionable Chelsea and West End areas of London. He's poor and drinking more. And in 1884, Simeon enters the workhouse.

But he also claims to like the workhouse, because of its "quote" central location.

And he's still making art, he's still exhibiting it, if not at the top galleries. His art is reproduced as photographic copies, and it makes the rounds of likeminded young men, like at Oxford's student halls, where Oscar Wilde, in 1877, describes Solomon as "that strange genius."

Less than 20 years later, in 1895, Oscar Wilde famously goes on trial himself, right. Because after the transvestites were acquitted and the law was tightened, no one actually has to be caught in the act of buggery anymore, just suspected. And now, on trial for gross indecency, Wilde makes a mockery of Victorian prudishness.

- Have you ever adored a young man madly, Wilde is asked.
- No, not madly, Wilde responds. I prefer love, that is a higher form.
- Did you ever have the feeling, Wilde is asked, that you wanted a young man all to yourself.
- No, he responds. I should consider it an intense nuisance, an intense bore.

And finally he's asked, "What is the Love that dare not speak its name?"

And Wilde replies that it's like the love between David and Jonathan. ...

It's the "noblest form of affection," he says. "There is nothing unnatural about it."

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Simeon lives until August 1905. He dies in the dining room of the workhouse he's been in and out of for 20 years. He's outlasted the Victorians. But he hasn't outlasted the oppressive laws or the society that passed them. In the obituaries written about him, he's described as one of the "most miserably tragic stories in the whole chronicles of art." He could have been great, it's said, he could have been somebody, had he been -- quote -- of "normal temperament and reasonable habits."

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Simeon Solomon is forgotten. For decades. And then, at the height of the AIDS crisis in England, he starts to resurface. In 1987, a British theater artist named Neil Bartlett creates a one-man show about Simeon, with the same name as his poem “A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep.”

Bartlett likes the early work – the moody, androgynous boys. But he really likes the later work, the images Simeon made after he’d become bald and stooped and drunk, after his supposed fall from grace.

Simeon couldn’t always afford canvas and oil paints anymore, so he drew on cardboard with chalk and charcoal. As Bartlett notes, the lines were less sharp than they used to be, the elaborate backdrops were mostly gone. He often just drew faces: two faces gazing at each other or a single visage gazing at himself. Over and over again. As though he were summoning their dreams.

When Bartlett gets onstage, he’s naked except for a robe and his mustache. “I had this dream,” he says. And he describes seeing these young men -- former lovers, perhaps --beaten down in the street. Bleeding on the pavement.

He cries out to the spirit showing him these visions: “I don’t think you can ask us to wait to be happy. ...

Oh, that the day would break and the shadows flee away.”

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This has been The Object podcast, produced by the Minneapolis Institute of Art. I’m Tim Gihring, coming to you from the basement of my home, in the cover of night. A big thank you to Noam Sienna -- Dr. Noam Sienna now, who talked to me about Simeon Solomon and wrote about him in his book, *A Rainbow Thread: An Anthology of Queer Jewish Texts from the First Century to 1969*.

If you enjoyed the show, please leave us feedback on iTunes or Stitcher or wherever you listen to podcasts. And I hope you’re well -- thank you for listening.