
Archives Review

Leather Archives and Museum: Chicago, Illinois

Occupying a storefront amidst a small cluster of gay bars and establishments on Chicago's north side, the Leather Archives and Museum (LA&M) was founded in 1993 to present and preserve artifacts and documents of leather subculture. Organized as both a cultural and historical museum, the LA&M, open to the public since November 1995, sees itself as primarily a research archive focused on the collection and safeguarding of personal memorabilia related to the history of this community in America.

The LA&M was founded with a large donation from Chuck Renslow, Chicago leather guru and co-founder of Kris Studios (prominent 1960s producer of physique publications and movies), out of a pressing need to foster a subcultural identity and sense of community history. He feared that an awareness of the intricate evolution of leather subculture would disappear with the first generation of leather people from the 1950s without being passed on. "Leather people," a term for those who identify with a community generally centered on sexualization of leather and domination, do not, a LA&M informational pamphlet urges, generally have a sense of the long-term development of the leather subculture:

The items of significance in our sexual lifestyle are not relegated to the biological family's collection of treasured remembrances. Instead they are consigned to dumpsters and trash cans either by our own anxieties, or by our survivor's disinterest or outright revulsion.

In the four years since its founding, the LA&M has amassed a sizable research archive with a particular strength in documents that record the formation of gay and leather organizations in 20th-century America. Though still very much immersed in the process of organization and cataloguing, the archive has been able to accumulate quickly a collection that places it among the top resources in the U.S. for the study of sexual minorities. A main reason for its rapid growth has been the LA&M's encouragement and solicitation of personal donations. Journals, personal artifacts,



and memorabilia are often the only things that survive from a marginalized, underground subculture, and the LA&M's vast collection is due, in part, to its acknowledgment of the importance of those aspects of leather culture that would be overlooked with a focus solely on institutions and organizations. The archives, therefore, while extensively documenting organizational formations, also have an intensely personal character and content appropriate to the privacy that is central to leather communities.

Like the museum, this subculture's image, however, is dominated by gay, white men. This bias is partly understandable given the central place gay men have had in defining and promoting leather culture to the point where, in mass media, the two sexual identities and communities (i.e., gay and leather) are often conflated. To its credit, the LA&M has encouraged lesbian and heterosexual leather organizations and individuals to donate to the museum, but it is questionable whether a more equal representation will ever be possible. While the LA&M proudly emphasizes the few lesbian leather culture objects in its collection, it remains to be seen whether the less-visible heterosexual, bisexual, pansexual, or lesbian leather communities will truly see an establishment such as the LA&M as a place of their own as well. Even if these new donations do come in, the LA&M will not, in its present tiny space, ever be able fully to do justice to the diversity of leather people, as it can only display a small amount at a time. This space problem forces the LA&M to use select individuals as representatives of the life of the subculture.

In this regard, one of the more interesting of the LA&M's present holdings is the estate of Dennis Walsh, a prominent model and sexworker. In addition to his meticulous journals and collections of his published model work, the museum has on display a selection of his leather garb and his artwork with leather themes. Walsh's collages combine, much like the LA&M itself, artifacts from his personal life and activities with social themes or affiliations. The LA&M has a number of large individual collections like Walsh's that it uses not just as documentation of a prominent leather individual, but also as an affirmation of what it is to live as a leather person.

The dual focus of subcultural edification and validation of personal experience is apparent in the organization of the display space itself. Amongst the representative individuals' personal artifacts, the LA&M presents gay liberation paraphernalia and a number of documents of early forms of leather culture, which chart its emergence and development. In addition to such pieces as the first issue of *The Advocate*, the museum usually displays one of its many leather vests that the original owner had adorned with a large number of leather club pins. While the actual identity of the owner may be obscure to the museum viewer (unlike the Walsh collection, which is grouped together), the impact of seeing such a record of personal activity and affiliation is not. The vests themselves are unique records of the owner's experience and connections in leather communities, their surfaces encrusted with scores of pins, which, as a group, function like prose-less diaries.

The LA&M does not aim to present a total history of leather itself. It is neither a fashion nor fetish museum. The community-building focus of the museum is apparent from the choice of display pieces. While a variety of sexual activities are represented in some of the documents and artworks or alluded to in the presentation of objects such as paddles and boots, the admittedly important sexual and erotic aspects of leather culture are incorporated into its larger educational goal. The central display case, made of chain link, houses some of the museum's most treasured objects, including the first International Ms. Leather competition sash and one of the original dungeon master vests from Chicago's important Hellfire Club. While objects such as these doubtless had erotic or sexual uses and meanings, their inclusion is as significant historical objects.

The sexual and the educational, however, exist in a tense harmony. Since leather subculture is founded on certain preferred sexual activities and erotic scripts, the sexual activity must necessarily be foregrounded and displayed in representing the community. However, the museum's emphasis on education and its presentation of documents attempt to focus on per-

sonal and social activities, organizations, and formations of leather subculture. For the museum to be faithful to its community, it needs to both give a history of the complex development of social networks and affirm the personal sexual activities and attitudes that tie them together. These two sides of leather culture are successfully integrated by the museum with a significant number of artworks mediating between the two. In addition to pieces by erotic artists such as Tom of Finland, the LA&M is the main repository for the estate of Etienne, co-founder of Kris Studios and long-time *Drummer* illustrator. Paintings, drawings, and prints depicting domination, sexual, and leather activity line the walls from floor to ceiling. While potentially visually and erotically engaging to the museum viewers, these art objects also serve as documents of the dissemination of leather subculture through the leather magazines that have arisen since the 1950s. Etienne's drawings of military and police bondage provide a much-needed affirmation of the sexual foundations of leather subculture while functioning as its documents in their own right.

Because of the unique goals and situation of the LA&M compared to other museums and institutions, it cannot simply be a historical or cultural museum. With community self-awareness and validation of marginalized sexual and social activities as its aims, the LA&M, to be functional and accessible, needed to be integrated into the leather lifestyle. Connected to one of Chicago's most prominent leather bars, the Eagle, and open only from 4:00 PM to midnight on Saturdays, the LA&M actively encourages bar-goers to visit the museum. This, too, is a reason to make its contents sexually engaging. It is, in fact, an excellent example of a museum that attempts to serve and entice its constituency. It does not, nor could it, shy away from the sexual denominator of its community and uses this, integrated with a documentary and subculturally-edifying focus, to maintain its strong community support base.

This support is very local and comes from the gay male leather people who frequent the leather bars, and the LA&M has yet to make its presence felt in the wider arena of Chicago culture (gay or otherwise). The LA&M is young, however, and this situation has, with time, already begun to change as the word gets out. Its problems with staffing, space, and diversity are not unknown to fledgling institutions. The LA&M is just beginning its expansion, and at least the stated intentions of the archives and museum indicate an awareness of the problems. In that small storefront sandwiched amongst the Eagle, a bathhouse, and a leather store, the LA&M admirably addresses and reflects aspects of its community in an attempt to write the history of a group that has remained unwritten. Despite its shoestring operation, it seems as if many larger identity-based institutions and museums

could benefit from studying the LA&M's unique blend of focus on the community and the personal.

Note: The inaugural exhibition at the Leather Archives and Museum, which this review addresses, has closed and the space has been reinstalled.

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