

Ménage à Trios  
Science, Sex and Art

by

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As a scientist, Alfred Kinsey (1894-1956) was part of the premier stage of discovery and progress in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After receiving his doctorate from Harvard, he joined the faculty at Indiana University (I.U.) in 1920 at the age of twenty-six to teach in the Department of Biology. He worked for twenty years as an entomologist and was well respected as a researcher specializing in studies on the gall wasp. Kinsey became involved in the emerging field of sex research in 1938 when he began interviewing students who were enrolled in the course on marriage that he was co-teaching. The transition from entomologist to sex researcher is most often attributed to his role as the lead faculty member in charge of coordinating this new course on marriage. In the familiar setting of the classroom, Kinsey showed his co-ed classes slides of sexual intercourse and of male and female genitalia. He could have withdrawn the graphic visual components from his lectures to minimize potential controversy arising from the course. He did not. The purpose of the slides in Kinsey's classroom was to illustrate and clarify his points. Kinsey's use of images at the early stage of this portion of his career reveals his belief in the importance and power of visual images to convey ideas with clarity. This scholar had the unique mindset to study human behavior with a scientific goal that welcomed creative expression, creating a place for science, sex and art to exist within one study and under one roof.

For his studies on sexual behavior, the primary source of information was data from individual histories or interviews. Supplementary sex-related materials that contributed to shaping Kinsey's ideas included an enormous archive of photographs,

films, art, artifacts, manuscripts, diaries, ephemera, books, journals, correspondence, and other materials. Kinsey's publications and their impact on American culture have received much attention. The large collection of supplementary materials, ranging from mass-produced novelty items to exquisite books, has not.<sup>i</sup> The institute's holdings include approximately 75,000 photographs, more than 7,000 original works of art, 86,000 books, journals, and articles, and 6,500 reels of film. How did visual representation operate in the service of science?

Kinsey believed that representations were capable of providing a record and indicating perspectives. "From the dawn of human history, from the drawings left by primitive peoples, on through the developments of all civilizations, ancient, classic, Oriental, medieval, and modern, men have left a record of their sexual activities and their thinking about sex...All of them give evidence of what people think and do sexually, and that is sufficient to make them scientifically significant."<sup>ii</sup> The aim of the erotica collection matched the objective of the research project – to reach a higher level of understanding of what people actually did and thought in sexual practice. In short, the researchers were looking for clues to interests, attitudes, and practices, as well as documentation of anatomy, and techniques from biological, psychological, medical, social and artistic perspectives. Whether visual works were produced internally or obtained from commercial, fine art, or amateur makers, the scientists regarded the supplementary materials, in essence, as documents or "data" because the materials supported, illuminated, and informed their thinking on sexual behavior. Hence, the mere acquisition of sexually explicit items by the Institute for Sex Research made them legitimate sources of information, converting works of little importance to works of definite scholastic value. However, the transformation from image to data depended one final, crucial step. Classification transformed the materials from cultural and commercial commodities to legitimate data. This organizational activity made the conversion concrete, visible, and

complete. It separated them from their original cultural context and placed them in the scientific sphere for examination and analysis. One particular collection of photographic images compels us to look more closely.

The Documentary Collection comprises the largest segment of the photographic archive at the Kinsey Institute.<sup>iii</sup> It contains approximately 50,000 photographs that range in date from the 1880s to 1970 and is identifiable as a cohesive group primarily because of the manner in which the images were processed. This system involved standardizing the size/format by mounting the images and integrating all sorts of photographs into a subject-oriented organizational system. Photographs were mounted on 8x10 sheets of cardstock and labeled with codes borrowed from the system developed to maintain confidentiality for those who contributed their sexual histories. The images were filed according to category. Category is *the* key to the organization of the Documentary Collection since it is the foundation of the organizational system. As an initial stage in the sorting process, photographs were divided into four basic, though incongruous, divisions in the following order of priority: 1) special photographic formats, 2) special interests, 3) sexual behaviors, and 4) male and female figure photography.<sup>iv</sup> Over sixty meticulously defined major categories spring from these, followed by numerous subcategories.

Sexual behavior seems like it would be the most important area of photographic representation, given that the images were collected to augment and expand upon the information gathered for a comprehensive study of human sexual behavior. Nevertheless, in the priority system for the classification schedule of visual images, it ranks unexpectedly low on the list, coming in third out of a total of four. Despite its location in the hierarchy, this group comprises a very large component of the total photographs in the Documentary Collection. This division covers a wide range of activities that are easily identifiable as sexual, ranging from analinctus to zoophilia. Not

only would such images be of use to the sex researchers, but before entering the institute's collection these are presumably the types of images that would have been met with an enthusiastic commercial audience.

Focusing on the collections at the Kinsey Institute, particularly the Documentary Collection, provides insight to the question "how did visual representation operate in the service of science?" For Kinsey, a large collection meant a vast resource of information that would enable him to make reliable statements and well-supported conclusions. In his examination of cultural diversity and efforts to gain authority and support, the collection contributed greatly to his research project. The supplementary material would have confirmed or shed light on findings in the histories. The researchers relied on the collection of supplementary material to provide insights into interests, attitudes and practices from various perspectives. Because the material contributed to their thinking, it was referred to as data. The physical processing of the Documentary Collection, for example, physically converted images made for cultural consumption into data.

Alfred Kinsey's fame soared beyond the world of science and academia, much to the surprise of the medical press that published his studies. In the many books, articles, and films released since his premature death in 1956, Kinsey is presented as a pioneering scientist, and an American hero. The endurance of this reputation, relating to Kinsey's own concept of scientists as courageous explorers, attests to the cultural importance of his investigations. At a time when biology was not at the forefront of scientific investigation and taxonomy was considered even less progressive, Kinsey's research had an explosive effect placing the study of human sexuality firmly on the frontier of science and indelibly on popular culture. Both made lasting impressions on history. We are fortunate that Kinsey came to Indiana University, where he received administrative support to develop a research program and collect materials that would

contribute to in quarters housed on campus. The continued existence of the Kinsey Institute as a research center and permanent collection, with the original organizational schemes in tact, attests to the sustained vision and leadership of Indiana University.

#### Further Reading

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Yamashiro, Jennifer. 2008. "Conjoined Twins: Science and Art." *Forum on Public Policy* 4.4 (2008): 63-72.

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Zhou, Liana and Wen Huang. *Dr. Alfred C. Kinsey, the American Sex Scientist* with an introduction by Jennifer Yamashiro, (Guilin, China: Guangxi Normal University Press, China, 2007).

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<sup>i</sup> This is according to statistics compiled in 1997 for the publication of an informational brochure about the Kinsey Institute. The brochure, developed and published by the Department of Marketing and Communications at Indiana University, is available from the Kinsey Institute.

<sup>ii</sup> *SBHM*, 21-22.

<sup>iii</sup> On February 3, 1997, the institute's current director John Bancroft, former director Paul Gebhard, and I met to discuss naming the vast majority of the Kinsey Institute's photography collection. We agreed upon the name "Documentary Collection" with the understanding the term documentary did not preclude the possibility of aesthetic merit in individual photographs, but rather referred to the original, scientific motive for collecting the material. Furthermore, documentary was chosen with the knowledge and appreciation of recent scholarship devoted to the subject that recognizes the complexity, the subjectivity, and the goals of documentary photography.

<sup>iv</sup> A Kinsey Institute document titled "The Priority System" sets forth these four main divisions for classifying images in this order of priority (binder, Kinsey Institute Curatorial files). The author of

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the document and the date that it was written are not identified. Even without this important information, it provides crucial details about the general rules for classifying images. For the sake of clarity, the four main groups outlined above will be referred to as divisions while any of the groups that fall under these branches will be called categories. Further distinctions within categories will be referred to as subcategories