

## Through Knowledge to Justice: The Queer World of Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld (1868–1935)

An Exhibition at the GLBT History Museum

This year marks the 85th anniversary of Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld's visit to San Francisco. Hirschfeld was a pioneering advocate for homosexual and transgender people, a physician and a prolific author renowned for his work on sexual and gender diversity. During his 1930–1931 tour of the United States, the Hearst newspaper chain dubbed him “the Einstein of Sex.”

1897 in Berlin, Hirschfeld cofounded the Scientific-Humanitarian Committee, the world's first homosexual emancipation organization. For over 35 years, Hirschfeld and the committee promoted public understanding of homosexuals and lobbied for the repeal of Paragraph 175, Germany's law forbidding sexual relations between men. The campaign attracted numerous prominent supporters.

In 1919, Hirschfeld created a home for his medical, scientific and advocacy efforts by founding the Institute for Sexual Science in Berlin. The Institute offered clinical and counseling services, hosted public talks, issued publications and sponsored a museum of sexual diversity. An extensive library and archives supported the work of researchers.



Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld in the library of the Institute for Sexual Science in Berlin (circa 1932)

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As a Jew, a homosexual, a social democrat, a feminist and a famed sex reformer, Hirschfeld was a prime target when the Nazis came to power in February 1933. He escaped arrest solely because he was in Switzerland at the end of a two-year-long lecture tour of the United States, Asia, India and the Middle East.

On May 6, 1933, student members of the SA, the paramilitary brownshirts of the Nazi Party, sacked Hirschfeld's Institute for Sexual Science in Berlin. The archives and library that Hirschfeld had gathered over the course of four decades were carted off to fuel the regime's first public bonfire of “un-German” books on May 10.

Hirschfeld went into exile in France just four days later. In a movie theater in Paris, he viewed a newsreel depicting the book-burning in Berlin—an experience that he later compared to watching his own funeral. Although deeply depressed, he attempted to carry on his work.

In *L'Ame et l'amour* (1935), the last of his books published during his lifetime, Hirschfeld offered these words: “I believe that science—and in particular the natural sciences—will bring to mankind not only truth, but also justice, liberty and peace. May their arrival be near, that is my hope and my wish.”

His health failing, Hirschfeld retired to the French Riviera. On May 14, 1935, his 67th birthday, he died in Nice, where his ashes are interred in the cemetery of La Caucade. Carved on his headstone are the words of his personal motto: *Per scientiam ad justitiam* (“Through Knowledge to Justice”).

### GLBT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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## Exhibition Contents

Curated by historian Gerard Koskovich, the exhibition will feature scarce historical materials including inscribed first editions by Hirschfeld and his colleagues, illustrated magazines from the period, anti-Hirschfeld propaganda produced by the Nazis, and materials documenting Hirschfeld's legacy in the years since his death.

High points will include an 1898 booklet by Hirschfeld calling for repeal of Germany's anti-sodomy law and one of an estimated 35 volumes known to have survived the Nazi's book-burning that destroyed the library of the Institute for Sexual Science. Many of the items come from the curator's private collection gathered over the past 30 years; others come from the archives of the GLBT Historical Society.

## Associated Program

In association with the exhibition, the museum will sponsor at least one public program: a panel discussion bringing together historians who will discuss Hirschfeld's contributions and highlight their ongoing significance. Among the speakers who have tentatively agreed to participate is Prof. Gayle Rubin of the University of Michigan (Ann Arbor), an internationally recognized scholar of queer theory and sexuality theory.

## Why This Exhibition? Why Now?

The collections at Hirschfeld's Institute for Sexual Science were the forebears of today's LGBTQ archives and museums. From the time of our founding, The GLBT Historical Society has been part of an international movement to repair the devastating loss represented by the destruction of the Institute's collections.

Hirschfeld's life and work merit attention not only because we are celebrating the 85th anniversary of his stay in San Francisco, but also because his importance as a forerunner of more recent struggles for LGBTQ rights has yet to earn the widespread public recognition it clearly merits.

With his emphasis on "sexual intermediacy"—the notion that sexuality and gender are not fixed in binary categories of heterosexual-homosexual and male-female—Hirschfeld's work also appears increasingly as an ancestor of contemporary concepts of genderqueer identities, the continuum of sexual orientation and sexual fluidity.

Finally, Hirschfeld just this year has reclaimed a moment in the celebrity spotlight, with a subplot in season two of the hit Amazon TV series *Transparent* devoted to flashbacks featuring the Institute for Sexual Science.

## Budget

The total budget for the exhibition is \$7,500. This amount includes costs for curatorial tasks, graphics, media production, mounting and installation, an eight-page catalog, and promotions and communications.

## About the GLBT History Museum



A portion of the Main Gallery at the GLBT History Museum.

Open since January 2011, the GLBT History Museum is the first stand-alone museum of its kind in the United States. The Main Gallery features a long-term exhibition on San Francisco LGBTQ history, "Queer Past Becomes Present." The Front and Community galleries host changing exhibitions. The institution also sponsors panel discussions, author events and other programs.

The museum is a project of the GLBT Historical Society, an archives and research center that collects, preserves and interprets

the history of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people and the communities that support them. Founded in 1985, the society maintains one of the world's largest collections of LGBTQ historical materials.