



American Landscape (1933), a photomural by George Platt Lynes. Northwestern University Library Art Collection.

Lynes, George Platt (1907-1955)

by Ken Gonzales-Day

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American photographer George Platt Lynes became one of the country's most successful fashion and portrait photographers, but his greatest work may have been his intensely homoerotic dance images and male nudes.

The son of a minister, Lynes was born in Orange, New Jersey in 1907, and raised near Englewood, New Jersey. He was educated in private schools.

He made his first trip to France in 1925. There he met Gertrude Stein, as well as such luminaries as Jean Cocteau and Pavel Tchelitchev, and two young Americans, Monroe Wheeler and Glenway Wescott. The latter were to become his close friends and lovers.

In 1926, after returning to the United States, he matriculated at Yale but failed to complete his freshman year.

Lynes made a second journey to France in 1928, this time traveling with Westcott and Wheeler, both well known in the literary and avant-garde circles of expatriate France. It was at this time that Lynes began to take portraits of the many celebrities he met.

He eventually photographed Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, Colette, Dorothy Parker, E. M. Forster, Tennessee Williams, Christopher Isherwood, Aldous Huxley, W. Somerset Maugham, Marsden Hartley, and Henri Cartier-Bresson, among many others.

Upon returning to New York he began to work as a fashion photographer and lived with Wheeler and Wescott in a *ménage à trois*.

Lynes had the first solo exhibition of his photographs at the Leggett Gallery in 1932, followed by a two-man exhibition at Julien Levy with the well-known photographer Walker Evans.

By 1933, Lynes was a central figure in the New York photography world. He quickly became known for his highly stylized images characterized by expressionistic lighting, surrealistic props, and suggestive settings.

Throughout the 1930s, he produced portrait and fashion photography for venues such as *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*.

In 1941, Lynes had a solo exhibition at the highly respected Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York, but by 1945 his success, and interest, in portrait and fashion work began to fade--along with his relationship with Wescott and Wheeler.

Early in the 1940s, Lynes fell in love with his studio assistant George Tichenor, who was killed during the war. Lynes then had a brief affair with Tichenor's younger brother.

Although Lynes had achieved early fame as a commercial photographer, he also gained a wide reputation for his dance images and a more limited one for his photographs of male nudes.

In 1934, he was invited by Lincoln Kirstein and George Balanchine to photograph the dancers and productions of the American Ballet (later the New York City Ballet). This association, which continued almost to the end of his life, led to some of Lynes' most memorable images.

His photographs of several of the dancers in New York City Ballet's production of Balanchine's *Orpheus* (1950), featuring props designed by the famous sculptor Isamu Noguchi, are especially noteworthy.

In "Nicholas Magallanes and Francisco Moncion in *Orpheus*, New York City Ballet," two nude men clasp hands, the first reclining while the second reaches out to him. Their bodies are perfectly still and yet poised for action. Their taut and defined bodies are set off by the two Noguchi forms, which give the image its surrealist flair.

In addition to photographing dancers in the 1930s and 1940s, Lynes also photographed several series of male nudes. These photographs frequently depict mythological figures, utilize theatrical lighting, feature symbolic tableaux or props, and are nearly always frankly homoerotic in their appeal.

Given the state of censorship at this time, it is not surprising that Lynes never published these photographs. Instead, he restricted their circulation to friends and admirers. Nevertheless, he considered these private photographs his most significant work, a judgment in which some later critics have concurred.

Lynes moved to Los Angeles in 1946 to head *Vogue's* Hollywood office, but by 1948 financial pressure forced him to return to New York. Unfortunately, his earlier success was difficult to reclaim, and by late 1951 his failure to pay taxes led the government to close his studio and auction off his cameras.

Lynes' later photographs, particularly his nudes, are marked by a significant change of style. He abandoned the highly staged tableaux of his earlier nudes in favor of a straightforward, even minimalist, aesthetic. Featuring few if any props, these later images are simple and honest portraits of naked men.

In 1949, Lynes began a personal and professional friendship with Dr. Alfred C. Kinsey, who, having published his controversial book *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* the previous year, was beginning his research on homosexuality and gay male erotica. Although buying and selling nude male photographs was illegal at the time, Kinsey eventually managed to purchase over six hundred of Lynes' prints along with several hundred negatives for his new archive.

Diagnosed with lung cancer in 1954, Lynes spent several months traveling in Europe before his final return to New York, where he was hospitalized and died shortly thereafter.

In his last years, Lynes destroyed many of his negatives and prints, including his fashion photography, as well as his nudes. Although Lynes seemed to fear how his images might be received, surely he would be pleased to know that many of his works have not only survived, but continue to find new audiences.

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About the Author

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