



Photography: Gay Male, Pre-Stonewall

by Ken Gonzales-Day

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In *Hard to Imagine: Gay Male Eroticism in Photography and Film from Their Beginnings to Stonewall*, Thomas Waugh provides an extensive history of early erotic photography. He identifies four central categories of photographic imagery: fine art (avant-garde, fashion or Art Academy); physical culture (mail-order or athletic alibi); illicit (legally or culturally pornographic), and instrumental (scholarly or social agendas produced under legal, sexological or political auspices).

The Blurring of Categories

While such categories are extremely useful, it should be remembered that any given photograph may ultimately fall within several categories simultaneously.

For example, the photographs of George Platt Lynes that Alfred Kinsey collected for the Kinsey Institute are at once illicit, instrumental, and fine art. That is, they were originally produced at least in part with pornographic intent and were therefore illegal; but they served the instrumental purpose of illustrating homosexual desire for Dr. Kinsey, while also achieving the luminosity of fine art.

Pre-Stonewall gay male photography comprises a surprisingly large and varied body of work, ranging from simple documentation of gay male lives and social circles, to artistic studies of the eroticized male form, to images whose homoeroticism is conveyed subtly and indirectly, to works whose intent is primarily pornographic.

Early Photography

The first examples of photographs that may be labeled as gay male photography are to be found in scrapbooks, archives, and exhibitions. Several of these are discussed in David Deitcher's *Dear Friends: American Photographs of Men Together, 1840-1918*, a recent publication and exhibition at the International Center of Photography in New York.

Deitcher's book presents an extensive collection of photographs depicting male couples and small groups. The sexuality of these couples and groups is clearly open to speculation, but even if one can not be absolutely certain that the images are of men self-consciously attracted to other men, they nevertheless tell a marvelous story of intimate friendships between men.

These photographs indicate that at the very beginning of the medium it was used to document homosocial relations and possibly homosexuality.

A genre of early European photographs, the Academic Nude, provides the first examples of clearly homoerotic photography. Ostensibly intended to assist artists in their studios, these studies of nude men



Top: An academic male nude photographed by Gaudenzio Marconi (ca 1865).

Center: A male nude photographed by F. Holland Day.

Above: A photograph of two male nudes by Wilhelm von Gloeden.

and boys were also used to illustrate human anatomy and movement; but the images of hard-bodied men undoubtedly spawned other forms of creativity.

The most celebrated photographer of the academic nude was Gaudenzio Marconi, who was active in France in the 1860s and 1870s.

Early Fine Art Photography

The first major gay fine art photographer was F. Holland Day (1864-1933). He began his career as a publisher in New England, but his photographs brought him into contact with Oscar Wilde's homophile circle.

Day mastered pictorialist techniques, creating dream-like soft focus images that blended homoerotic images of young men with Christian themes of martyrdom and suffering. His self-portrait as the crucified Christ shocked Victorian audiences as much as his practice of selecting young male models from the streets of London.

Baron Wilhelm von Gloeden

Also known by Wilde was the work of Wilhelm von Gloeden (1856-1931). A German nobleman, von Gloeden worked primarily in Italy and made his living by producing a wide range of tourist cards spanning everything from the conventional to the pornographic.

Employing classical themes, von Gloeden favored the dark skinned Sicilian, who sparked for him not only exoticism but also a renewed interest in the classical age, where love between a man and a boy was often more than platonic.

Thematically similar to von Gloeden's photography is the work of Vincenzo Galdi (1856-1931) and Wilhelm von Plüschow (1852-1930), both of whom also worked in Italy.

Two minor photographers also working in Taormina at the turn of the twentieth century were Arthur Schulz, a German sculptor by training who published a book of nudes in Leipzig around the turn of the century, and Gaetano d'Agata, a follower of von Gloeden.

European Innovators

In 1930s Germany, Herbert List (1903-1975) helped bring a new sophistication to homoerotic photography. Best known in his lifetime as a fashion and celebrity photographer for *Harper's Bazaar* and *Vogue*, today List is most acclaimed for his idyllic images of young men and boys lying in the sun, swimming, wrestling, or innocently staring into the camera.

Evocative of the popular nature-oriented, anti-bourgeois German youth movement that would later be tragically transformed by the Nazis, List's images convey both innocence and an avant-garde sensibility.

Avant-garde Photographers

List was part of a new breed of photographers in both Europe and America who depicted the male nude with an avant-garde sense of composition. Many of these artists were fashion photographers associated with such magazines as *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*. They attempted to make a clear break with the pictorialist aspirations to painterly imagery of photographers such as Day and von Gloeden.

Of these new photographers, George Hoyningen-Huene (1900-1968) may have been the most influential. A Baltic baron whose family had fled from the Russian Revolution, Hoyningen-Huene brought a sense of

modernity to his photographic work, skillfully fusing bold compositions into his fashion work. He was the presiding fashion photographer at *Vogue* from 1926 to 1935. His colleague and lover, the German photographer Horst P. Horst (1906-1999), also found a place in the annals of *Vogue*.

Another young *Vogue* photographer who achieved commercial success and name recognition was Cecil Beaton (1904-1980). A theatrical designer as well as a photographer, he is best known for his celebrity portraits, often of gay friends. Beaton also worked for *Vanity Fair*. He covered World War II as a photojournalist, later became the official photographer for the British royal family, and was eventually knighted.

Referred to as the "Dandy Photographer," he rarely addressed gay themes overtly, but several historians and scholars have noted subtle homoerotic elements in his work.

American Fine Art Photography

In 1937, three artist friends--Paul Cadmus (1904-1999), Jared French (1905-1988), and Margaret French (d. 1998)--began to experiment with photography during their trips to Fire Island and Provincetown. Known as the PAJAMA (Paul-Jared-Margaret) Group they photographed their intimate, largely gay and bisexual, circle over two decades, but especially from 1937 to 1945.

Their images document a substratum of gay life during a crucial decade, while also providing insight into a period of great creativity and freedom for the artists. Cadmus and Jared French, who were probably lovers before French's 1937 marriage to Margaret Hoening, are best known for their paintings, and their photographs probably influenced their paintings in various ways.

George Platt Lynes

In an era when erotic photography of the male nude was not only taboo but also illegal, George Platt Lynes (1907-1955) was a true pioneer, creating well-crafted images whose originality reached beyond their sexually charged themes.

Today, Lynes' photographs for George Balanchine's ballet *Orpheus* are his most widely recognized works. They anticipate the later erotic male nudes, which are startlingly beautiful in their honesty and simplicity. Dr. Alfred C. Kinsey, the pioneering sexologist who published *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* in 1948, began collecting Lynes' homoerotic work in the 1950s, and today the Kinsey Institute has the largest collection of his work.

Minor White

More cerebral than the work of Lynes are the images of Minor White (1908-1976). Attempting to use the camera to explore spiritual depths, or to transform the carnal into the spiritual, White avoids overt eroticism, even in his highly suggestive images of male nudes. Still, his photographs achieve a subtle homoeroticism that is often more powerful because of the artist's oblique approach.

Physical Culture

As early as 1930, Henry Annas Studio in Texas was producing beefcake images of muscle-bound men in desert settings. By the 1940s, a wide variety of homoerotic imagery began to be available to a wide public through male fitness or physique magazines such as *Strength and Health*, *Muscle Power*, *Pictorial*, *Fizeek Art Quarterly*, and *Tomorrow's Man*. Produced for a growing but largely underground gay subculture these magazines used fitness as a pretext for depicting buffed-out and oiled-up athletes.

As the gay subculture grew, so did the variety of magazines available. In the 1950s, a Chicago photographer

working under the name "Kris" began creating images of Midwestern men in seedy rooms sporting g-strings. The connection between these photographs and physical fitness was remote indeed.

Similarly, on the West Coast the photographic image was already moving from strict representations of weight-lifters and barbells to pictures of naked young men in campy interior shots or wrestling in the great outdoors. Not surprisingly, given the legal and moral climate of the times, many of the photographers of these pictures published their work anonymously or under pseudonyms.

At the end of the 1950s, photo studios such as Bob Mizer's Athletic Model Guild (AMG), the Western Photography Guild, and Spartan of Hollywood began to emerge. These enterprises marketed their photographs somewhat more openly to gay consumers than had the earlier magazines. Although they gradually dropped the pretense to physical culture or bodybuilding interest, they generally communicated with their audience in coded terms rather than directly.

Bruce of Los Angeles

By the end of the 1950s, Bruce Harry Bellas (1909-1974), better known as Bruce of Los Angeles, had emerged as one of the leading photographers of the eroticized male body.

Born in Alliance, Nebraska, Bellas began careers in chemistry and teaching, before moving to California in the early 1940s, where he first worked as a free-lance photographer, documenting bodybuilding competitions.

By the late 1940s Bellas had become a staff photographer for Joe Weider's bodybuilding publications and spent much of his time traveling to bodybuilding contests in several states. His photographs appeared in such magazines as *Strength and Health*, *Muscle Power*, and *Tomorrow's Man*.

By the 1960s Bellas was able to publish his own magazine, *The Male Figure*. Postal regulations forbade the posting of frontal male nudity until 1968, and as a result many of his nudes were sold out of the hotel rooms he occupied on his travels across the country.

Bruce utilized a wide range of motifs and props, so it was not unusual to see a model dressed as a cowboy, a construction worker, a buccaneer, a Spartan wrestler, or simply relaxing *al fresco*.

Conclusion

Pre-Stonewall gay male photography is sparse in images documenting gay community, but rich in images of same-sex desire. The contemporary interest in queer cultural imagery raises questions about the interrelationship of high and low cultural forms. Perhaps that complex relationship is most clearly illustrated by reference to pre-Stonewall gay male photography, which ranges from the high art aspirations of F. Holland Day and Minor White to the soft porn of Bruce of Los Angeles.

While some scholars have dismissed the artistic importance of subcultural work, others argue that distinctions between high and low art simply mask class privilege and academic elitism. No matter the verdict, pre-Stonewall gay male photography offers an abundance of images that blur the boundaries between art, erotica, and social history.

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