



Roberts, Mel (b. 1923)

by Barry Harrison

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Butch Wallace.
Photograph by Mel
Roberts (© Mel Roberts).

Photographer and activist Mel Roberts captured the spirit of the California Dream that lured thousands of gay men to the Golden State in search of freedom and opportunity after World War II. His photographs of hikers, bikers, surfers, and skateboarders from the 1960s and 1970s have been rediscovered by a new generation of fans and collectors.

Born in Toledo, Ohio, on August 26, 1923, Roberts early evinced an interest in photography. As a teenager he shot 16mm movies of his friends.

In 1943 he was drafted into the U. S. Armed Services. He served as an Air Force cameraman in the South Pacific. His personal archives include extensive footage of his squadron in action.

After being honorably discharged from the army at the end of the war, Roberts moved to Los Angeles. He enrolled in the University of Southern California, from which he graduated with a degree in filmmaking in 1950.

Because they were not members of the dominant film union (the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees), Roberts and his classmates were unable to find jobs. They were caught in a double bind: they could not get jobs without being members of the union and they could not join the union without first having a job.

To overcome this obstacle and assist USC and UCLA film school graduates, Roberts helped found the Film Craftsmen's Union and, from 1951 to 1954, served as one of its officers. The union was a success, eventually merging with the National Association of Broadcast Employees and Technicians--Communications Workers of America.

Roberts found work with a number of studios including Columbia, Universal, and United Artists.

In 1953 Roberts worked as the music editor on Herbert Biberman's *Salt of the Earth*, the only motion picture blacklisted in American film history. Appropriately, the film was produced by a number of film artists blacklisted for their membership in the Communist Party or other leftist organizations. The film, which starred Will Geer, the blacklisted bisexual actor who would later play the beloved grandfather on television's *The Waltons*, focused on Mexican-American miners who were striking against a giant corporation.

Not long afterwards, Roberts was fired in the middle of directing a film for a large aircraft manufacturer in San Diego. He was never given any reason, but suspected that he did not pass the security clearance. "I assumed there were two reasons: I had worked on *Salt of the Earth* and I was gay."

Despite being subject to discrimination as the result of the House Un-American Activities Committee's pursuit of Communists and other alleged subversives, including homosexuals, Roberts was comfortable with

his sexuality and lived openly as a gay man at a time when that was risky, both personally and professionally. In an interview in 2006, he stated simply, "I never thought there was anything wrong with being gay."

But in the 1950s, police harassment of homosexuals and raids of gay bars and cruising areas were commonplace. Roberts heard about Harry Hay and the Mattachine Society, which had been organized in the winter of 1950. He hosted meetings at his house once a month. At first only a few men attended, but as word got out, more and more started coming by. "We tried to make sure that guys who got arrested knew their rights: To remain silent, to demand a jury trial, etc. But if your employer found out you were gay, you got fired anyway."

Roberts took his first photographs of men in 1959, toward the end of the classic physique magazine period. They were first published in *Young Physique* magazine in 1963. Over the next 20 years, he used a pair of Rolleiflex cameras to take approximately 50,000 photographs of nearly 200 models.

Unlike other physique photographers, Roberts only took pictures of men he knew personally. Many were lovers. They were not the perfectly proportioned bodybuilders, hustlers, or professional models common in the magazines of the time and typical of Athletic Model Guild and Bruce of Los Angeles. In the 1950s and 1960s, before Arthur Jones invented the "Nautilus" machine, working out at the gym was an unusual activity for a young man, gay or straight. Roberts preferred natural, "everyday" young men, rarely older than 25.

Roberts's work is also distinguished by his interest in fashion styles and trends in pop culture. His models often wear cut-off jeans, flower-power bell-bottoms, and love beads. They pose by the backyard pool on op-art towels and recline in bed on zebra-print sheets.

The vision that distinguished Roberts's work and brought him rapid success in the U.S. and Europe highlighted sexy young men casually posed against the backdrop of Southern California's stunning beaches and mountains. His models start their photo sessions fully clothed, and typically end up naked, or nearly so. This gradual progression is intended to come across to the viewer as a photographic striptease. It implies an erotic narrative and reflects the reality of their making. Sexual adventure was part of the package.

Although the models were paid, they posed less for the money than for the fun of it. Roberts recalled in a recent interview, "I tried to make it as enjoyable as I could. We'd go off to Yosemite or Idlewild or La Jolla on 2 or 3 day trips."

Most importantly, the models were friends. "I could never just come right out and ask them to model. So very often I'd invite them over for dinner. They'd meet my friends and become a part of the 'family' before I'd take my first picture of them. When we did ultimately go out into the field they felt so comfortable with me and so relaxed it was reflected in my work."

The era of the 1960s and 1970s was by no means innocent; after all it was the time of a burgeoning sexual revolution and the Vietnam war. But it was not nearly so cynical as the current era. The openness and experimentation that characterized the years before AIDS, before sunscreen, before the freeways became permanently choked with cars, are the stuff of fond memories for the gay men who lived through it. Young men could hitch a ride to Los Angeles, go to a party, pass a few joints, take off their clothes, and have sex, just because they felt like it.

"I always had four or five guys living with me at one time. They had no prohibitions, no guilt about having sex with guys, even though most of them had girlfriends who were also frequent visitors," Roberts recalled.

But it was not all fun and games. During most of this period taking a picture of a naked man could

potentially land a photographer in prison, especially if they were sent through the mail. Roberts had to build his own color lab to develop prints because no lab would process his film. The transparencies he sent to Eastman Kodak were returned to him with holes punched through the genitals of the models.

In 1977, after most of the legal prohibitions against so-called "soft core" pornography had fallen, the Los Angeles Police Department went after Roberts. Under the false charge that he was photographing underage models, they showed up at his home with a warrant. They confiscated his cameras, negatives, letters, and mailing list, which effectively put him out of business.

"We stood in the driveway in handcuffs from 10:00 in the morning to 6:00 at night as they loaded everything into a truck. I couldn't even return the money my customers had sent me because I didn't have their addresses," Roberts recalled.

A second raid followed, eighteen months later. For over a year, the LAPD refused to return Roberts's property, even though no charges were ever filed against him.

This harassment took its toll. In addition, times had changed. The California Dream that Roberts's work epitomized had faded to a memory. His photographs were considered "too tame" to be published in the ever more explicit magazines that emerged at the end of the 1970s. Then, in the 1980s, the AIDS pandemic struck. Roberts's friends started dying. He put down his camera for good.

But Roberts's story was far from over. After more than a decade of obscurity, his work was discovered by a new generation of viewers when a film producer approached him with a novel concept: putting his still photographs on video. Although he initially felt that the idea "made no sense," he agreed to give it a try.

The result was stunning. *Mel Roberts' Classic Males* (1994) was an unexpected success and led to three more videos. *Classic Males Volume #4* was nominated for AVN Adult Video of the Year. Marketed as nostalgic valentines to a bygone era, the videos were acclaimed for their celebration of the steamy sensuality of Southern California "boys next door."

When a few of Roberts's photos were included in a group show in San Diego in 1999, they were seen and admired by erotic publisher David Aden Sprigle. His company, Fotofactory Press, went on to publish two books of Roberts's photographs: *California Boys* (2000) and *The Wild Ones* (2001), considered by critic Christopher Birch as "among the defining books of mid-twentieth-century California." Fotofactory also issued a series of cards bearing Roberts's images.

Roberts is appreciative of the newfound interest in his work. No longer considered merely a physique photographer, he is now regarded as a serious artist. His images have achieved a level of critical success he never expected.

In *Frontiers Magazine*, for example, Jack Shamama described Roberts's "lush colorful photos" as creating "a gay fantasia-- a picturesque version of '60s and '70s sunny California, replete with confidently smiling all-American boys diving into and getting out of the same swimming pools David Hockney . . . was painting at the same time."

The New Yorker review of Roberts's 2003 ClampArt show in New York, "The Boys of Summer," commented on his "witty, buoyant Technicolor pictures," which capture "all the giddy delights of being young during summertime."

In a review of a 2005 exhibit of Roberts's images at Los Angeles's Erotic Museum, Lauren Collins observed that the photographs are not merely beautiful and erotic, but also subversive: "Roberts uses his photos to

suggest that the California male was a model of manhood for generations of Americans, yet he deliberately turns this assumption on its head by focusing on forms of gay sexual expression."

A writer in *Hero Magazine* put Roberts's work in perspective: "Before Bruce Weber, Tom Bianchi and Herb Ritts, there was Mel Roberts!"

Roberts's photography is now represented in galleries in New York, Los Angeles, Hollywood, and Palm Springs. Private collectors around the world have paid thousands of dollars for his brilliantly colored, large-format prints. One of the most avid, Sir Elton John, acquired almost sixty images for his personal collection.

Now in his eighties, Roberts is healthy and energetic, but he is not tempted to pick up his camera again. A brief return to do a fashion shoot for *Flaunt* magazine was fun, but ultimately less than satisfying artistically. There was no way to recreate the relationships and *joie de vivre* that lie at the heart of Roberts's photographs from the 1960s and 1970s.

As much as they serve as documents of a bygone era, Roberts's images are also an enduring expression of a life well lived.

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About the Author

Barry Harrison is the founder of *Queer Arts Resource* (www.queer-arts.org) and producer of more than 40 online exhibitions that suggest the range and depth of queer artistic expression. Recently, he launched *Homobilia* (www.homobilia.com), a site for gay art and memorabilia.