



Robinson, Jack (1928-1997)

by Dan Oppenheimer ; Claude J. Summers

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Mississippi-born photographer Jack Robinson came to prominence in the 1960s as a result of the stunning fashion and celebrity photographs he shot for such magazines as *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*. He created striking images of the era's cultural icons, particularly young actors, artists, and musicians as diverse as Peter Allen, Warren Beatty, Richard Chamberlain, Joe Dallesandro, Clint Eastwood, Elton John, Liza Minnelli, Melba Moore, Jack Nicholson, Nina Simone, Sonny and Cher, Michael Tilson Thomas, Lily Tomlin, Tina and Ike Turner, Andy Warhol, and The Who, among many others.



Jack Robinson as a young man. Image provided by The Jack Robinson Archive. Image courtesy Jack Robinson Archive. Image Copyright © Jack Robinson Archive.

Robinson captured the particular feel and spirit of the tumultuous 1960s, but by 1972 he was burned out, himself a victim of the era's excesses. Having reached the pinnacle of his profession, he abruptly retreated from New York to pursue a quieter life in Memphis. After 1972, he took no more photographs, though he found a creative outlet in the design of stained glass windows.

Jack Uther Robinson, Jr. was born in Meridian, Mississippi on September 18, 1928 to Jack Robinson, Sr. and Euline Jones Robinson. He grew up in Clarksdale, Mississippi, the literal heart of the Mississippi Delta, an area famous for racial injustice, the Blues, and social and religious conservatism. His father was a mechanic and auto parts dealer.

Robinson attended Clarksdale High School, from which he graduated in 1945. He then enrolled at Tulane University in New Orleans, where he completed five semesters before dropping out in 1948.

In 1951, he began his professional career in photography, working as a graphic artist for an advertising agency in New Orleans. He took numerous photographs of the city and his friends, many of them artists and photographers. His early work captured the charm of the French Quarter and documented New Orleans night life. It also preserved valuable glimpses into the New Orleans gay subculture of the 1950s.

Among Robinson's most fascinating images are photographs of the Mardi Gras festivities in the years between 1952 and 1955. Some of these document the celebrations in the gay area of Bourbon Street, especially around Dixie's Bar of Music, then one of the most prominent gay bars in the country.

As Robinson's images attest, Mardi Gras celebrations in the 1950s were less elaborate and commercialized than they would become later. Still, they were festive and fun, and almost innocent in their good-natured outrageousness.

It is noteworthy that the gay men who dressed in drag and exotic costumes attracted sizable and diverse crowds, comprised largely of people not in costume. They had come to observe the performances of the denizens of the demimonde.

At a time when drag was illegal except on Mardi Gras and Halloween, many drag queens took advantage of the opportunity to put on a public show. Robinson's images provide evidence of New Orleans's famous live-

and-let-live attitude of tolerance even at the height of the McCarthy era, but they also suggest that homosexuals in the 1950s were regarded with amusement and (perhaps) condescension by those who enjoyed the display.

Prominent among the costumed revelers photographed by Robinson in front of Dixie's is Clay Shaw, the gay businessman who in 1969 would be tried for the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. The victim of an unscrupulous District Attorney, Shaw was perceived to be especially vulnerable because of his homosexuality. Although he was eventually acquitted of all charges, the experience destroyed his life.

In addition to architectural photographs, society portraits, and Mardi Gras pictures, Robinson also took a number of photographs of young gay couples, romantically posed. These photographs are striking because of their rarity, and touching because of their sincerity. At a time when there were few precedents for posing gay couples, Robinson conveyed homoerotic attraction in a number of ways, including having the young men stare deeply into each other's eyes and touch tentatively. The very awkwardness of these embraces conveys a profound sense of commitment.

During the New Orleans period, Robinson fell in love with a young man named Gabriel, whom he photographed incessantly, often in the nude. The Gabriel photographs are especially distinguished by their play of light and shadow and by their sensuality.

In 1954, Robinson and Gabriel traveled to Mexico. There the artist captured Mexican scenes in large and medium format photographs. He also took pictures of his traveling companions, including Gabriel and artist and gallery owner Betty Parsons.

In 1955 Robinson and Gabriel moved to New York where he quickly became noted for his fashion photography. He was sought out by many of the top designers and others in the fashion industry. By 1959, one of his photographs graced the cover of *Life* magazine, signalling his arrival as a top commercial photographer.

Carrie Donovan, then a fashion reporter for the *New York Times*, commissioned Robinson to shoot several fashion layouts in the early 1960s and continued to work with him when she became editor of *Vogue* in 1965. Robinson's work appeared in *Vogue* over 500 times between 1965 and 1972.

Vogue's legendary editor-in-chief Diana Vreeland recognized Robinson's particular gift for portraiture. In addition to commissioning fashion photography from him, she also commissioned portraits of celebrities, especially the rising stars of music, film, television, and literature. Vreeland also chose Robinson to do her own portrait, telling him that his strong point as a photographer was his ability to capture character.

By 1970, Robinson had established himself as one of the leading commercial photographers in the world. He traveled to Europe to record the fashion innovations of the great design houses. His work was regularly featured in the most prestigious fashion and celebrity magazines of the day.

Some of his images, such as that of Melba Moore, nude and in silhouette but shy and vulnerable, or Helmut Berger, brooding and shadowed with a hint of dissipation, or Joe Dallesandro gazing raptly into a mirror, are striking for their psychological insight. Others transcend the individuality of their subjects to comment on the nature of celebrity itself. Taken together, his photographs capture the feel and look of an era through portraits of iconic figures.

Robinson's art documents the social changes that occurred in the 1960s and early 1970s as reflected by the new stars of the worlds of fashion, art, literature, film, the stage, and, especially, music. He photographed virtually every musician that we think of when we think Woodstock and the Summer of Love.

Robinson documented the Nixon White House, the unbridled decadence of New York's club scene, and the unequalled elegance of Jacquelyn Kennedy in full formal regalia. In addition, he captured both the era's haute couture, as epitomized in the fashion of designers such as Emilio Pucci, Pierre Cardin, Yves St. Laurent, and Bill Blass, and also the casual look that is perhaps even more representative of the time.

He also made particularly sensitive family portraits, as evidenced by the numerous photographs he shot of Gloria Vanderbilt, her husband Wyatt Cooper (a fellow Mississippian), and their sons Carter and Anderson Cooper. His photographs of the wedding of Peter Allen and Liza Minnelli, with mother-of-the-bride Judy Garland, also reveal a particular gift for family portraiture.

But even as Robinson succeeded professionally, his personal life became increasingly problematic. His relationship with Gabriel failed. He suffered from the stigma associated with homosexuality. He increasingly turned to drugs and alcohol for solace. Frequently in the company of Andy Warhol and his entourage, he became part of New York's frenetic club scene.

Such fast living soon affected Robinson's work. His daybooks and list of commissions reflect the deterioration of his life. As jobs dwindled, he was forced to move from his fashionable studio at 11 East 10th Street and sell his beloved Steinway. Finally, in December of 1972, he retreated to Memphis, where his parents and older brother lived.

Broken and addicted to alcohol, Robinson sought help from a long-time friend, Audrey Taylor Gonzales, who sponsored his membership in Alcoholics Anonymous and helped him recover his emotional health.

In Memphis, Robinson abandoned his career as a commercial photographer. He began painting and soon took a job as assistant to noted artist Dorothy Sturm, who designed stained glass windows for churches at Laukauff Studio, one of the largest stained glass studios in the country. Although he was undoubtedly lonely, and in the words of a friend "full of anger and angst," he seemed to enjoy his anonymity and seldom revealed that he had once been a leading photographer in New York City.

In 1976, Robinson left Laukauff Studio to work at another glass studio, Rainbow Studio, where he was to remain for the rest of his career.

Robinson's work in stained glass reveals some of the same qualities that distinguish his photographic art, especially the importance of composition and contrast.

He spent the last two years of his life doing water color and pen and pencil designs for the stained glass windows of the chapel at St. Jude's Children's Research Hospital where Danny Thomas is buried. Unfortunately, the artist did not live to see the windows installed.

Robinson fell ill in November 1997 and was soon diagnosed with cancer. He died on December 15, 1997.

Robinson left his estate to his employer, Dan Oppenheimer, owner of Rainbow Studio. Oppenheimer was surprised to discover in Robinson's small and spartan apartment over 140,000 negatives. In 2002, Oppenheimer opened the Jack Robinson Gallery and Archive in Memphis. It is dedicated to preserving and promoting Robinson's legacy.

Although Robinson soon slipped into obscurity, his work has recently been rediscovered, thanks to the efforts of the Robinson Gallery and Archive and to several recent exhibitions in Memphis, London, and New Orleans.

While most of the renewed interest in Robinson's work may be due to the celebrity photographs of the 1960s, his early work is also receiving new attention. More than 80 of Robinson's 1950s photographs were

exhibited at the Sophie Newcomb Art Gallery in New Orleans in February of 2006. The curator of the exhibit, Sarah Wilkerson-Freeman, has remarked that the "visual impact of the [early] photographs and their revelations about the community of southern artists and bohemians in New Orleans [are] astounding."

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About the Author

Dan Oppenheimer, a Memphis businessman, employed Jack Robinson at his Rainbow Stained Glass Studio. The inventor of a photographic sand blast etching process, Oppenheimer shared an interest with Robinson in alternative darkroom processes. Upon Robinson's death in 1997, he inherited more than 140,000 of the photographer's images. In 2002, he established the Jack Robinson Gallery and Archive to promote the artist's legacy. Oppenheimer has been active in the revitalization of downtown Memphis and led a drive to return historic streetcars to the city. He is married and has 2 children and a Manx cat.