



## Orphanos, Stathis (b.1940), and Sylvester, Ralph (b.1934)

by Dan Luckenbill

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Ralph Sylvester and Stathis Orphanos, booksellers and publishers operating as Sylvester & Orphanos, are partners in life as well as in business. They are best known for their beautiful, meticulously executed books, which are avidly collected by lovers of fine printing.

Their first book was a sumptuous edition of Christopher Isherwood's *Christopher and His Kind*, issued in 1976. The next twenty-three books were printed letterpress in southern California, and their most recent, printed letterpress in Greece in 2004, is devoted to the work of the gay modern Greek artist Yannis Tsarouchis.

Among the authors and contributors to the books published by Sylvester & Orphanos are many gay writers, artists, and composers.

In addition to being a bookseller and publisher, Stathis Orphanos is a writer and photographer, with distinct accomplishments in each of these four areas, which in his life have been interrelated. His photographs of numerous writers and artists include images of several who are gay. His male nudes and figure studies capture and appeal to gay men's desire.

The bulk of Orphanos's photography is portraits and includes images of his friends and mentors Christopher Isherwood and Don Bachardy, as well as such distinguished figures as Claire Bloom, Paul Cadmus, David Hockney, Horst (Horst P. Horst), Graham Greene, and Julie Harris, among more than a hundred others. His photographs of young males, especially athletes and military men, have been filtered both by his gay sensibility and by his Greek heritage; they reveal the influence of a long tradition of male nudity in Greek statuary and vase painting.

Ralph Sylvester was born January 13, 1934, in Derry, Pennsylvania, of Italian descent. He came to California in 1956 when he was in the army and stationed at Fort Ord.

Stathis Orphanos was born October 12, 1940, in Greensboro, North Carolina, of Greek parents, both from the island of Samos. He was raised in Greece when trapped there by the outbreak of the civil war, which was fought between 1946 and 1949. He then attended Cheshire Academy, Connecticut, where he was exposed to same-sex romantic encounters.

In 1959 he attended Denison University, where he had his first serious affair. He then came to California and in the early 1960s attended California State College (now University), Los Angeles. Among his classes was one taught by Dorothy Parker. She praised both his photographs and his written sketches about Greece, but said, "You'll have to choose, honey, between photography and writing."

Sylvester and Orphanos met in 1960 in Los Angeles, where they continue to live. They now reside below the Hollywood sign in the Beachwood Canyon area of the city and also own a home in San Marcos, California.



**Top:** A self-portrait by Stathis Orphanos.  
**Above:** A portrait of Ralph Sylvester by Stathis Orphanos. Images courtesy of the artist.  
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Orphanos also maintains family properties in Vathy, Samos, and now visits there annually.

The Sylvester & Orphanos bookselling business specializes in modern first editions of writers whose works have particularly interested Orphanos.

The publishing side of the Sylvester & Orphanos enterprise began with the memoir by Isherwood and has continued with works by writers such as John Cheever, James Merrill, and Gore Vidal.

These signed limited editions include work by two writers later to win the Nobel Prize for literature, Nadine Gordimer and V.S. Naipaul. Nobel laureate Odysseus Elytis contributed an essay to the volume on Tsarouchis.

Los Angeles illustrators, printers, and binders were used for all of the books except the Tsarouchis volume. Sylvester and Orphanos collaborate on the design of the bindings, with careful choice of cloth, cover papers, and blind stamping to complement the texts themselves.

There is gay content in the bawdy innuendo in Tennessee Williams's *It Happened the Day the Sun Rose*, set in Tangier, and in an episode in John Cheever's *The Leaves, The Lion-fish, and the Bear*.

Orphanos's photography of famous persons--mostly from the world of literature, art, theater, and film--began with his portrait of Isherwood in 1972, followed by more than a hundred others, starting in 1981. Many examples of these and his other works are found on [www.glbtc.com](http://www.glbtc.com) and on Orphanos's own website, [www.orphanos.com](http://www.orphanos.com).

Orphanos observes that photography has given him the most rewards, both as work itself and as a means of meeting so many noted persons. His celebrity subjects have been primarily in the arts, and include Erskine Caldwell, Norman Mailer, and Sir Stephen Spender, as well as Nobel laureates Elytis and Naguib Mahfouz. He has also photographed many gay icons such as Mamie Van Doren and Lizabeth Scott.

Orphanos bought his first camera, a Rolleiflex, in 1955, and he still considers that he learned everything from his first roll of film: especially to use natural light and to avoid cluttered backgrounds.

Orphanos's photography moves from extreme close-up portraits to elaborate images that rely on darkroom and other techniques that he taught himself: dodging (i. e. shading part of the photographic paper while making a print), using paper negatives, using silk screen printing. Most of his work is in black and white, but he has also combined images and colors in large silk screen prints.

One of his favorite portraits, that of David Hockney, was shot on a bleak day with little light. Orphanos found that he had one negative he could print and created a work to represent the rushed mood of the sitting. In the darkroom at the time of enlarging, he manipulated the image to spill down from the center of a bent sheet of paper. He has noted: "All final judgments are made in the darkroom. To be able to work on your own processing is a great advantage. Most of the celebrated photographers of today do not work on their own prints."

His formal portraits are usually of mature persons with bodies of work in art or literature. Their faces have the features of prescient age, and his presentation of them pays homage to their achievement and personalities. He uses little or no background, at times swaddling the sitters in black cloth, since "before black a face glows."

Orphanos has also photographed athletes, military men, and even young men of the street, as portraits and as nudes and figure studies. His models for these photographs are most often straight men, and his work

follows in a tradition extending from ancient Greek painting and sculpture to the paintings of Tsarouchis. Orphanos's images of Greek and American soldiers and sailors in uniform explore homosocial and homosexual intersections in depicting the male figure.

One work from Orphanos's "Nude Athletes: Locker Room Series" shows from the rear the body of a mature athlete reminiscent of the famous sculpture of Agias in Delphi. The image is close up, framed as many a statue has come down to us, as a fragment, to stress not personality but the detail of the composition.

The series taken of athletes in the locker room illustrates Orphanos's ability to isolate from the mundane chaos the chance pose and to engage subjects for quick figure studies. Imaginative framing presents the images like film, catching moments when strict playing field relations are exchanged for horseplay and banter, when uniforms are exchanged for the expressiveness of the body. Reynolds Price has observed that these pictures "go well beyond the usual hurly-burly to the core of male bonding that's so mysterious, so threatening to women, yet so necessary to men's continuance as whole upright and unconsumed creatures."

In an interview Orphanos has spoken of his sexual awakenings and attempted seduction at boarding school. With candor and humor he has discussed the different constructions of homosexuality as he has experienced them in Greece and the U.S. He has also noted the different practices in circumcision in the two countries and expressed his relief that Greek art depicts young men uncircumcised, as was he: "I have always sought intact males as my models. This is definitely an influence garnered from Greek art, particularly the vase paintings."

In his figure studies and male nudes, Orphanos prefers to photograph young straight men, who get less attention than gay men. He has observed, "Young men love to be photographed. Young men crave attention. When it is finally bestowed on them through the intensity of a photo shoot, they are almost mesmerized by it. This results in vulnerable, uninhibited moments where I am able to capture their rare male grace. This is true of the young man, the 'Greek Soldier.'"

This work might be called a nude portrait rather than a figure study. A young soldier is posed *contre jour* (i. e., against the light). He sits in a chair against the available natural light always used by Orphanos. The penis is awesome in its size, edged in a light that gives it volume and weight like sculpture. The face is kept from the light and is without contour in a shadow that flattens the features as in a Minoan profile. In the tension of this composition, the face could be about to appear or disappear, to signify life or death.

Orphanos summarized his relations with straight men after he photographed over one thousand U.S. Marines in one day at Camp Pendleton Marine Corps Base. He posed each individual young man like an archaic Greek *kouros* (male youth; or, statue of a male youth): "There was a definite bond, and it was captured in the photographs. Kouroi are the same the world over."

Orphanos's Greek heritage is also reflected in the grouping of photographs he has made to allude to works by the modern Greek poet, C.P. Cavafy. The photographs were not taken with Cavafy in mind and represent several decades of Orphanos's work, but in retrospect they fit the inspiration of both the Greek poet of earlier decades and the present-day Greek-American photographer.

Orphanos has shown his works in Cavafy groupings at the ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, Los Angeles, in 2003, as well as on his website. An enlarged group with the title, *My Cavafy: Chance Encounters*, is to be published in the fall of 2006.

In these groupings, the photographer's subjects--nude male figures, young Greek sailors in uniform, even his self portrait--gain meaning when juxtaposed with Cavafy poems of similar content and theme. Cavafy's work, in essence a poetry of history and memory, is extended through photography, a medium that largely

expresses time. For Cavafy's recall of young men's physical forms, as in "Remember, Oh Body," Orphanos pairs a frontal nude torso. For Cavafy's recall of the emotion of young men's loves, as in "That They Come," the photographer sets a scene. He uses the full form of a recumbent male nude looking at the flat figure of another male through a scrim at the window to depict the memory of "shades of love."

The most recent product of Sylvester & Orphanos as publishers, the tribute to Tsarouchis, is fittingly complex. It reproduces a portfolio of thirty-six color plates and a portfolio of text from and signed by twenty-five contributors. The portfolios and box feature two original silk screens designed by Tsarouchis. Tributes to the painter are offered by friends and colleagues ranging from Greek Renaissance figures such as Melina Mercouri, Manos Hadjidakis, and Mikis Theodorakis to the French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson. Notable glbtq admirers of Tsarouchis, such as Paul Cadmus, David Hockney, Horst, and Sir Stephen Spender, also wrote essays.

Surely one of the most beautiful modern books ever printed, it is at once a tribute to a great artist and itself a masterpiece of the printer's art.

The project is a stunning accomplishment of two men who have lived and worked together for over forty-five years, a prime example of gay partners' collaboration, reminiscent of that of Charles Ricketts and Charles Shannon.

Orphanos's photography is an art of mature accomplishment, but it celebrates beginnings, like an Easter season of spring that is more important in Greece than elsewhere. It celebrates the homosocial bonding of straight and gay men working together. It celebrates the challenge of different stages of work, and the difficulty of each day's new work: finding the sitter, arranging the sitting, composing and taking the shot, and, most of all, doing work alone in the darkroom where the images emerge from the vision and control of the photographer himself.

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[www.orphanos.com](http://www.orphanos.com)

## **About the Author**

Dan Luckenbill was a senior manuscripts processor in the Department of Special Collections, UCLA Library. He curated numerous exhibits and wrote catalogs on lesbian and gay studies at UCLA and on the work of Stathis Orphanos and Ralph Sylvester. He also published essays and gay fiction, as well as a memoir entitled "Isherwood in Los Angeles." He died on March 25, 2012.