

George Platt Lynes

Artist Biography

Among the greatest photographers of the twentieth century, George Platt Lynes (1907–1955) developed a uniquely elegant and distinctive style of portraiture alongside innovative investigations of the erotic and formal qualities of the male nude body. Born and raised in New Jersey with his brother Russell, who would go on to become a managing editor at *Harper's Magazine*, Lynes entertained literary ambitions in his youth. While at prep school in Massachusetts, where he studied beside future collaborator and New York City Ballet founder Lincoln Kirstein, he began a correspondence with the American writer Gertrude Stein, then living in Paris. Over a series of successive visits to Paris, he met Stein and her partner, Alice B. Toklas, who integrated him into their creative milieu. At their salons, he met such figures as the painter Pavel Tchelitchew, French writer André Gide, and the dancer Isadora Duncan. Accompanying him on many of these transatlantic journeys was a romantically involved couple consisting of writer Glenway Wescott and the publisher and future director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Monroe Wheeler, the latter of whom became Lynes's lover.

During a failed attempt to write a novel and a successful stint as the owner of a bookshop in New Jersey, Lynes began experimenting with a camera in 1929, photographing friends in his creative social circles in New York and Paris. Those early casual experiments would become a serious commitment to the medium. In 1931, he settled in New York, where his ménage à trois continued with Wheeler and Wescott, with all three sharing an apartment, an arrangement that lasted until 1943. Lynes's technical dexterity and his truly modern aesthetic earned him early success. In 1931, his work appeared in the exhibition *Newer Super-Realism* at the Wadsworth Atheneum of Art, the first museum exhibition dedicated to Surrealism. The following year, Kirstein included him in his exhibition *Murals by American Painters and Photographers* at the Museum of Modern Art, and the Julien Levy Gallery hosted Lynes's first significant gallery show, a two-man exhibition with Walker Evans. At the time, Levy represented some of the most important photographers of the century, including Berenice Abbott, Manuel Álvarez Bravo, and Man Ray. Lynes's reputation continued to grow, as his works repeatedly appeared at MoMA, including in *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism (1936–1937)* and *Photography 1839–1937 (1937)*, its first photography exhibition.

Having found success in the art world with his portraits, Lynes opened his first professional studio in New York in 1932. By 1937, it had become one of the most sought-after in Manhattan. His photographs of leading artists and celebrities appeared in *Town and Country*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *Vogue*, among other publications, and commercial accounts included Henri Bendel, Bergdorf Goodman, and Saks Fifth Avenue. His artistic and commercial practices merged when, after photographing choreographer Frederick Ashton and performers from the operetta *Four Saints in Three Acts* (a collaboration between Virgil Thompson and Gertrude Stein) in 1935, he entered into an agreement with Kirstein and the choreographer George Balanchine to photograph the principal dancers of the New York City Ballet. From this collaboration emerged some of Lynes's most celebrated work.

Depicting the male nude preoccupied Lynes throughout his career and he began to pursue the form in earnest from the 1940s until his death, of lung cancer at the age of 48 in 1955. Intimate and erotic, the works could not be publicly shown or circulated due to obscenity laws and to protect his commercial business, which served as his primary source of income. As his passion shifted toward the making of this unsaleable work and as the fashion industry supplanted Lynes with newer photographers such as Richard Avedon and Irving Penn, he entered a financially difficult period from which he would never fully recover. Following a brief stint as chief photographer for *Vogue* in Hollywood from 1946 to 1948, Lynes was introduced to the noted sociologist Dr. Alfred Kinsey,