

Newfields exhibit shows nude male photos that a famous photographer hid during his life

[Domenica Bongiovanni](#) Updated 11:39 a.m. ET Sept. 27, 2018

Editor's note: Content contains mature themes.

George Platt Lynes is the name of a man you likely don't know who influenced the photographers you do. His portraits of celebrities and nude male pictures laid the groundwork for Annie Leibovitz to cast the light just so as John Lennon curled around Yoko Ono. And he paved the path for Robert Mapplethorpe to [stir lawmakers into a frenzy](#) over photos of sexually explicit acts in a 1989 Washington, D.C., exhibit that used taxpayer dollars.

Lynes was handsome, he ran with the most cutting-edge gay and bisexual artists in the 1930s and '40s, and he died at age 48. As the photographer was suffering from lung cancer, he destroyed many of the commercial fashion pictures that had brought him fame. He didn't want them to be his legacy.

But Lynes left mostly untouched the male nudes he kept secret from the public, along with his portraits and pictures of ballet dancers, which he considered his best work. Before his death in 1955, the photographer sold his cherished nudes to his sexologist friend Alfred Kinsey. The images remained guarded until the late 1970s, when they began to circulate in

books and exhibits, said Allen Ellenzweig, a Lynes scholar and adjunct professor of writing at [Rutgers University](#).

Now, an exhibit of Lynes' work — including his portraits, ballet images and nudes — will open Sunday at the Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields. The museum and Indiana University's [Kinsey Institute](#), which researches human sexuality, are presenting the work that comprises "[Sensual/Sexual/Social: The Photography of George Platt Lynes](#)."

Art installations in office cubicles: [Arcade, music venue, bar, art space combo opens southeast of Fountain Square](#)

Famous fiddle has Indiana connections: [This 'jealous mistress' Stradivarius violin was owned by an Indy 500 driver](#).

Because the show contains mature images, "Sexual/Sensual/Social's" nude gallery is divided into two paths. Visitors can choose whether they want to see the frontal pictures, said Anne Young, manager of rights and reproductions at Newfields.

Lynes paid his bills by shooting commercial fashion layouts in *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*. He posed New York City Ballet dancers in inventive ways that cemented the legends surrounding ballerinas like Maria Tallchief and Tanaquil LeClercq. But in the decades since his death, many critics have found his most interesting work to be his celebrity portraits and nudes.

The nudes are vulnerable and frank, as Ellenzweig described them. They reveal the most intimate areas of the male body in unexpected poses that might still surprise 21st-century eyes. Robin Lawrence, Newfields' manager of curatorial affairs, said a taboo surrounded images of naked men when Lynes worked in an era of hyper-masculinity the early 20th century.



George Platt Lynes (American, 1907–1955), *Maria Tallchief in Firebird, 1949*, gelatin silver print, 10-1/2 × 13-1/4 in. "Sensual / Sexual / Social: The Photography of George Platt Lynes" exhibit will be at Newfields, Sept. 30, 2018 through Feb. 24, 2019. Photo is from the Collections of the Kinsey Institute, Indiana University. © Estate of George Platt Lynes. (Photo: © George Platt Lynes)

"What is a man going to do with a picture of a male nude? He's not going to hang it on his wall as art because then people presume that he's gay, and then that could affect his work, that could affect his family life," Lawrence said.

A 'rudderless 20-something'

Lynes grew up in New Jersey and Massachusetts with a face that his male classmates found attractive, even if they did bully him, according to writer David Leddick in ["Intimate Companions: A Triography of George Platt Lynes, Paul Cadmus, Lincoln Kirstein, and Their Circle."](#) After graduating high school, he traveled to Paris and joined up with a salon of famous expatriates, including writer Gertrude Stein, her partner Alice B. Toklas and Salvador Dalí.

"All these artists were in this total Petri dish of everything — writing, painting, photography — in Paris in the 1920s," Lawrence said. Lynes "came back to New York and was pretty much a rudderless 20-something, and a friend of a friend gave him a studio's worth of photo equipment, and he decided to try his hand at it."

Early on, Lynes photographed those in his inner circle before obtaining work in the fashion and ballet industries. Throughout his life, he continued to document more private moments among his friends, with many of whom he had relationships, according to Leddick.

Lynes' brother said he was never in the closet, and the photographer dated

at least one of his female models, Laurie Douglas, said Ellenzweig, who is writing the biography "[George Platt Lynes, the Daring Eye.](#)"

As Lynes' fame grew, so did the stylish entertainment he offered at his apartment in the city. In a forward to Leddick's book, painter Bernard Perlin writes that the photographer cooked opulent dinners and then kept lists of what he served and who was invited so he didn't repeat the experience.



Famous portraits and secret models (except Yul Brynner)

Lynes' meticulous nature is evident in his images, and especially the portraits, which many critics have considered some of his best work. The names of his sitters read like a who's who of early 20th-century celebrities: playwright Tennessee Williams, Eloise creator Kay Thompson, composer Igor Stravinsky, novelist E.M. Forster, actor Lena Horne and satirist Dorothy Parker, among many others.

George Platt Lynes (American, 1907–1955), *Name Withheld*, 1934, gelatin silver print, 7-1/2 × 9 in. "Sensual / Sexual / Social: The Photography of George Platt Lynes" exhibit will be at Newfields, Sept. 30, 2018 through Feb. 24, 2019. Photo is from the Collections of the Kinsey Institute, Indiana University. © Estate of George Platt Lynes. (Photo: © George Platt Lynes)

In a 1994 Art Journal article, writer Melody Davis points out that Lynes pulled a psychological presence from his subjects that included exacting attention to detail. Her research shows that Lynes flattered his models to help them settle in.

In one portrait, Spanish Surrealist painter Joan Miró peers out between a wooden frame and one of his own works, which depicts dreamlike, abstract creatures that mix with recognizable objects. The

objects in Miró's work aren't readily identifiable, just as Miro himself is

partially hidden.

Lynes set himself apart through his innovative use of light. Ellenzweig said he lit subjects from several different directions, which gave his works a three-dimensional presence. For example, in a portrait of museum curator Monroe Wheeler, Lynes' friend and former lover, the viewer can have a difficult time determining where, exactly, the light is coming from.

"The sitter seemed to exist in an infinite theatrical space," Ellenzweig said.

Lynes often manipulated his photos by using props and foil as a reflector. He used multiple exposures and layering to add a Surrealist feel to much of his work, Young said, though he did not consider himself a Surrealist.

Painting over or masking out parts of the photos contributed to their psychological appeal. In a photo of Jean Cocteau, for example, the French poet's hand seems to float behind the rungs of a ladder he's holding because his arm is invisible.



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This is a photo of Yves Tanguy taken in 1945, by George Platt Lynes, seen at the George Platt Lynes exhibit at Newfields, Wednesday, Sept. 26, 2018. This gelatin silver print is from the Collections of the Kinsey Institute, Indiana University. Lynes gained fame as a commercial and ballet photographer in the 1930s and 1940s, but he wanted to be known for the male nudes he captured of the male ballet dancers and others. The exhibit runs Sept. 30, 2018 through Feb. 24, 2019. *(Photo: Kelly Wilkinson/IndyStar)*

Lynes transferred his innovative use of light and posing to the photographs he took of nude men, Young said. In a full-frontal portrait, for example, a model closes his eyes and tilts his head back against a graffiti-filled wall. It gives off a distant feel that spotlights his body.

Ellenzweig said Lynes wanted to prove that the male bodies were serious art and not pornography, so he stayed away from the old tropes of including Classical columns or togas.

"He didn't use any of those old excuses to certify the male nude as a decent subject. He certified his male nude by simply making them beautiful," Ellenzweig said.

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The models who posed for Lynes were studio assistants, friends and dancers, said Rebecca Fasman, the manager of traveling exhibitions for the Kinsey Institute. According to a 2011 Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide article by David Boyce, the photographer admitted in a letter that he preferred to work for no pay "'when I've had a completely free hand, when I've had a model who excited me in one way or another.'"

In the early 20th century, Lynes' sexuality earned him a blue ticket that discharged him from the military, and his nudes could be considered "obscene" under U.S. laws, Young said. So he kept the models' identities a secret. Per an agreement Lynes made with Kinsey, Newfields doesn't

disclose their names in the exhibition except for the recognizable [Yul Brynner](#), who later starred in Rodgers and Hammerstein's "The King and I."

While Lynes was alive, Lawrence said the public never knew he took the nude pictures of men, and sometimes women. Under his own name and then pseudonyms, the photographer did publish some of the images in the Swiss homophile magazine *Der Kreis*.



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Rebecca Fasman, from left, Anne Young, and Robin Lawrence, curators of the "Sensual / Sexual / Social: The Photography of George Platt Lynes" exhibit at Newfields, pose in front of a Lynes self-portrait, Wednesday, Sept. 26, 2018. The 1952 gelatin silver print is from the Collections of the Kinsey Institute, Indiana University. Lynes gained fame as a commercial and ballet photographer in the 1930s and 1940s, but he wanted to be known for the male nudes he captured of the male ballet dancers and others. The exhibit runs Sept. 30, 2018 through Feb. 24, 2019. *(Photo: Kelly Wilkinson/IndyStar)*

How the nudes ended up in Indiana

Lynes and Kinsey became friends in 1949, shortly after the researcher had published "Sexual Behavior in the Human Male." Kinsey wanted to collect more material related to gay men, Fasman said. Afraid the nude photos would be destroyed after his death, Lynes made a deal with Kinsey to have the institute house his collection.

"At the time, it was hard to find male nudes that were not created for exploitative reasons," Lawrence said. "If (Alfred Kinsey is) researching the male body, he wants it presented in a respectful and natural way, and he was able to find that in George's work."

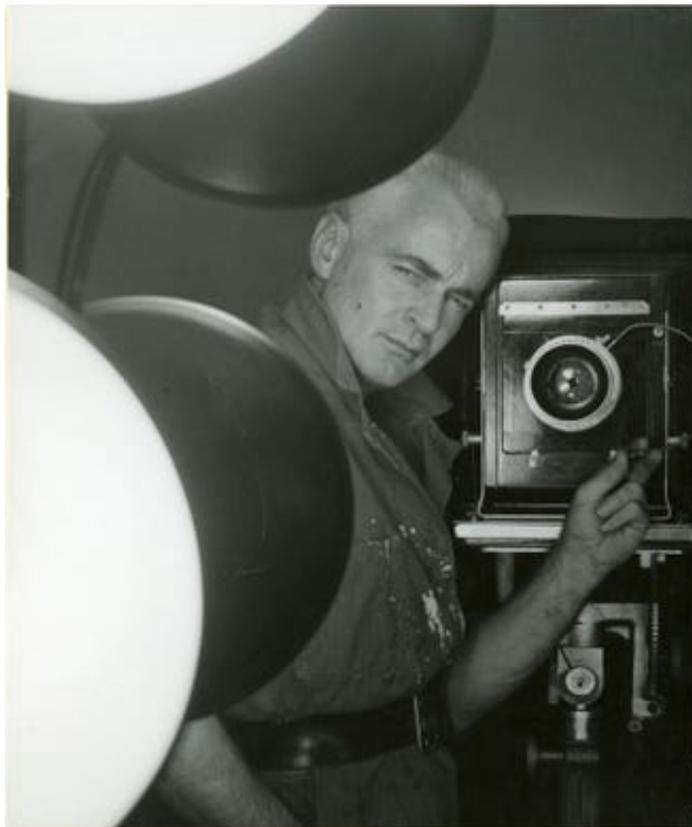
The Comstock Laws then prevented materials considered "obscene" to be sent through the mail. So the duo planned cross-country trips from New York to Indiana to deliver them.

As it stands, the Kinsey Institute possesses 600 original prints, 2,300 negatives from Lynes. Some are of a sexually explicit nature, but Young said those aren't part of the exhibit.

How Lynes influenced popular culture

Lynes' work is well-known among historians of photography and gay men who are interested in visual art, Ellenzweig said. But he hasn't reached mass appeal the way Mapplethorpe and others have.

[Jack Woody's retrospective book of Lynes' photography](#) in 1981 brought him to the attention of a new generation. Among the influenced are Bruce Weber, known for his Calvin Klein ad photos; Duane Michals, who photographed Andy Warhol; Leibovitz; and Mapplethorpe. They paid attention to Lynes' lighting and poses.



39 Photos

From nudes to ballerinas, George Platt Lynes photography at Newfields

The Newfields exhibit includes side-by-side images by both Mapplethorpe and Lynes. In one of Lynes' photos, a black man and white man sit, nude, with their heads touching. In Mapplethorpe's, a black man and a white man, wearing jeans, embrace.

"He redefined homoeroticism, too, and that legacy is certainly one that makes someone like Mapplethorpe sort of understood in a more robust context," Fasman said.

If you go

What: "Sensual/Sexual/Social: The Photography of George Platt Lynes." Along with the images, the exhibit will contain a re-creation of a

photo studio that shows the massive equipment Lynes and other photographers of the time worked with, among other interactive activities.

When: Sunday-Feb. 24, 2019

Where: Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields, 4000 Michigan Road

Cost: \$18 adults, \$10 ages 6-17, free ages 5 and under. Free for members.

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