

# GEORGE PLATT LYNES

*July 15-August 28, 1960 • PORTRAITS (1931-52)*

*The Art Institute of Chicago Gallery of Photography*

Two of the most useless questions that continually plague critics are these: "Is Photography an Art?" with its inevitable corollary; "Is Greater Art greater or more Minor than Minor Art?" Both questions get themselves asked in front of these portraits by George Lynes, as they have been for thirty years. Greatness aside, Lynes fixed the face of nearly every artist and writer and musician of importance in his epoch, in a unique attitude. He has seen their faces as a symbol of the particular quality of their essential talent, not as a melodramatic mask which reflects the corroboration of a public icon. There is a big market for such journalism, because it makes every famous face a close-up of nervous eccentricity or muscular mastery. Lynes's faces remained private faces. Sometimes he used accessories in the manner of symbolic badges; sometimes an object found around the studio suggested itself as a good positive or negative complementary shape, but his décor never got into gadgetry, and although he took some of the best fashion pictures of his time, the portraits are never fashion plates. They are dandiacal and elegant, but they do not date. Christopher Isherwood may age (very slowly) in real life, but here he is the very Herr Issyvoo of eternally pre-Hitler Berlin, by which he will always remain young. Stravinsky is the fierce gimlet that he increasingly sharpens to be, but it is seen first and best in Lynes's lens.

George Lynes was the friend of painters and writers all his life; he saw through the eyes of their observings and this schooling was a permanent academy. His real education started in the south of France when Cocteau first went to the Azure Coast which he made known through the initial contemporary works of the international Russian Ballet. Cocteau has spent a lifetime as a dandy devoted to the program that every dandy since Beau Brummel has slavishly pursued: the rehabilitation of the commonplace, the elevation of contemporary behavior into myth. Contrary to present notions, the dandy as repository of true elegance has always impressed by stern discretion rather than outrage. Beau Brummel made our permanent revolution in male dress by sticking to a black and white uniform, fresh linen and an immaculate person. Lynes was by way of being a dandy. His prematurely white hair capped a face with the open quizzicality of a Bronzino prince-ling; with it, at the same time, a hint of insolence, which was not a personal but an aesthetic judgment. He wore American work clothes as a working costume and diplomatic uniform almost earlier than anyone else. He was a physical, not a social snob. He preferred the looks of fascinating or beautiful faces. Just before his death he destroyed the negatives of his years of fashion photography. This was a pity, but he grew to dislike the automatic and factitious shiftings of the mode by which he made his living. His portraits are his great work.

Elegance is a moral virtue which distills the aris-

tocracy of personal grace and individual gift. Diluted, it becomes negotiable fashion, but the clothes in these portraits of talented men and women do not date the portraits as pictures. He chose characteristic silhouettes, stance, the cant of heads on necks, the placement of fingers, which somehow stamped the sitter. One tool he used supremely was flattery, not in his final focus, but as the slow or staccato approach to it. He wanted you to look your best — that is: most yourself. He had no strong opinions but only affections and clear eyes. That is why these photographs are great reminders of exceptional gifts, and why photography is a great historian and he a great photographer.

*Lincoln Kirstein*

*George Platt Lynes was born in East Orange, New Jersey, in 1907 and died in New York City in 1954.*

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CATALOGUE (Dates are given after titles, if known)

1. George Platt Lynes by George Hoyningen-Huene
2. Edith Sitwell. 1937
3. Samuel Barber
4. Katherine Anne Porter. 1946
5. Henri Cartier-Bresson. 1935
6. Virgil Thomson. 1938
7. W. H. Auden. 1935
8. Igor Stravinsky. 1946
9. André Dunoyer de Segonzac. 1934
10. Colette. 1935
11. Gaston Lachaise. 1934
12. Aldous Huxley. 1946
13. William Somerset Maugham. 1941
14. T. S. Eliot. 1947
15. Kay Boyle. 1941
16. Alexander Calder. 1936
17. Bernard Perlin. 1940
18. Aaron Copland. 1939
19. E. E. Cummings. 1947
20. George Balanchine. 1941
21. Mina Loy. 1931
22. Gian Carlo Menotti. 1938
23. Rory Calhoun
24. Burt Lancaster
25. Farley Granger
26. Edna Ferber
27. George Tooker. 1945
28. Janet Flanner. 1936
29. Mrs. Joseph Russell Lynes
30. Dorothy Parker. 1943
31. Arnold Schönberg. 1946
32. Jenson Yow
33. Marsden Hartley. 1943
34. Marianne Moore. 1950
35. Edward Hopper. 1950
36. Jared French. 1938
37. Oskar Kokoschka. 1949
38. Marianne Moore. 1935
39. André Gide. 1932
40. Osbert Sitwell. 1950
41. Edith Sitwell
42. Guy Pène Du Bois. 1934
43. Marc Chagall
44. Thomas Mann. 1946
45. Frederick Prokosch. 1937
46. William Goyen. 1950
47. Max Eastman
48. Paul Cadmus. 1945
49. Mabel Dodge Luhan. 1945
50. Julien Green. 1933
51. Jean Cocteau. 1936
52. William Inge. 1952
53. George Platt Lynes (Self Portrait)
54. Christopher Isherwood
55. Christopher Isherwood. 1939
56. Pavel Tchelitchew. 1950
57. Lincoln Kirstein
58. Bertrand Russell. 1942
59. E. M. Forster. 1937
60. Gertrude Stein. 1931