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Picturing Greek Love: the Photographic Tradition of the Classical Male Body

Over the course of the 19th century the male body came to the fore as the object of a newly formulated sexual desire and as the object of a new visual medium. The early intersection of homosexuality and photography developed, in part, through a safe haven provided by the Classical past. Just as the precedent of "Greek love" provided a model for the sexual desires of such authors as Oscar Wilde and John Addington Symonds, so too did the imagery of ancient Greece serve photographers exploring new ground through images of the male body.

Subject matter was critical to early photography, whose status as "art" was not yet established. In a medium perceived as directly representing its subject, the "truthful" likeness of a naked figure was troublesome indeed. Allusions to antiquity served to legitimize the male nude as part of the artistic tradition, distinct from the erotic or pornographic. Turn-of-the-century images, such as those by Wilhelm von Gloeden and Frederick Holland Day, thus borrowed a drapery of respectability from the imagery of antiquity. These images, however, with their desirous visions of ephebic male bodies were little tempered by the classicizing sandals, lyres, wreaths, or location. Rather, these visual references contributed to the developing ideals of a homosexual past and present, and established a tradition of homoerotic photography. Covert eroticism flourished in the widely circulating images of the physical culture movement, where classicizing tropes framed the sculpted body of the modern athlete. A turning point came, however, during the prime-era of the muscle magazine with a handful of mid-20th century photographers who engaged more provocatively with ancient and modern bodies.

This paper examines the development of the Classical body within the history of photography, concentrating on a shift from identification to distance demonstrated through a selection of images produced between 1935 and 1955. George Hoynigen-Huene, Herbert List, and George Platt Lynes repositioned the photographic tradition of the male nude by variously combining elements of ethnography, portraiture, fashion photography, and surrealist art. Setting flesh against stone, these images challenge the earlier tradition, and represent the Classical body as a remnant of antiquity. Rather than recreating images of ancient Greek love, these photographers explored the objectified male body in contrast to the idealized recreations of the past. While demonstrating the ability to make marble appear as living flesh, and vice versa, List emphasized incongruities between Classical sculptures and live models. Hoynigen-Huene echoed List's Hellenic focus, but created a decidedly modern setting that emphasizes the separation from antiquity. Lynes introduced an illusionist perspective, through which Classical bodies were depicted as an elusive ideal, lost from the dimension of more real bodies. In all these images, the dissonance between the Classical Greek ideal and the photographer's contemporary reality creates an enlarged space for the exploration of homosexual desire and imagery. The Classical past no longer serves to legitimize the imagery; rather, these images invoke further, more complex, homoerotic desires.