

S I R G A Y

ARTIST GEORGINA STARR CELEBRATES THE LOST INNOCENT WORLD OF RONALD WRIGHT

Portraits by
DAVID EDWARDS

A snowy haired vision with large horn-rimmed spectacles and a silvery beard, Ronald Wright first appeared to me as though he had stepped off the stage at the London Palladium circa 1955. Be-cloaked and brimming with Fifties charm, it was easy to see how he had sweet-talked his way into the theatre dressings rooms of such movie-legends as Marlene Dietrich, Vivien Leigh and Mae West to capture their likeness in pencil and paint. In 2006 I met with Wright with the intention of coaxing him out of retirement and inviting him to draw a portrait of me for a new film project of mine THEDA. In his bungalow in Watton-at-Stone, a sleepy countryside village in Hertfordshire, I listened to the loquacious octogenarian's star-studied reminiscences while flicking through his scrapbooks and memorabilia, but I couldn't help but be distracted by the drawings of naked and scantily clad male figures exhibited alongside the movie star portraits on his living room walls. One particular drawing in his bathroom caught my eye: a sailor and his friend in buttock hugging jeans visiting the aquarium. Swimming around inside one of the tanks are three muscular men with fish's tails, one is cheekily pulling another's 'tail' to reveal his bare buttocks. The sign on the aquarium window reads: 'The Only Genuine Mermen in Captivity'. I suspected there was more to Wright than met the eye and fished for some answers.

It transpired that from 1957-1961 Wright had been a very bright star in his own right, as a celebrated illustrator in the 'Physique' magazine world. He had been an avid reader of these magazines as a young gay man and was quick to notice that all the illustrators were from abroad and cleverly saw a gap in the market. "All the magazines had a strong drawing element but there were hardly any British artist making this sort of work. Of course there was Tom of Finland and some great American artists like George Quintaince, but not many were homegrown. So once I got started my reputation grew fast."

Wright knew that the way into the magazine world was through the photographers. "Seventy percent of the magazines was photographs, so I knew if I could ally myself with a photographer I would be ok. So I first approached 'Scott' who was one of the most renowned photographers in London, and he took a lot of my work and was very keen to use it."

In the 1950's this type of pocket-sized publication were promoted as 'Men's Health & Strength' magazines, but looking through old copies today it's clear that health was certainly not the only thing on the reader's minds.

"At this time it was still illegal to be gay in Britain so there was a huge market for these 'health' magazines and for some men it was their only window into the gay world. Within a year or so I had my artwork in magazines all over the world and had regular contracts with Male Classics, Fizeek, Body Beautiful, Physique Pictorial, Adonis, Modern Man...all the top ones".

But Wright discovered there were strict rules about nudity, even for the illustrators. "This was the day of no frontal nudes, for photographs you had to wear a pouch and even the drawings



couldn't be nude, so you had to have some sort of drapery or obstruction, which is silly really as there are paintings in the Vatican, like the Michelangelo's, and they didn't cover up!"

This meant he needed to be extra creative with his pencil to get around these restrictions and still keep the drawings seductive and sexy. As a consequence his drawings are clever, playful and often very comical. One of my favourite sets of drawings is titled *Come Train with Me*. Wright was asked to illustrate a series of simple and seemingly innocent exercises for a man and his fitness instructor. The men he illustrates are not naked and there is nothing explicit, but he cheekily positions them just right to imply that sex is only one 'step' away. The accompanying instructive text reads: 'With palms resting one on each chair, lower the body between the chairs with your partner resisting by pressing his hands on your upper back. Raise your back by strengthening your arms. Repeat until tired.'

Wright was eventually taken on by Studio Royale owned by media impresario and male-nude photographer Basil Clavering, and later, in 1959, was invited by Josh Joshua, a former Mr.Universe and one of the biggest names in 'Physique' publishing, to edit a new London-based magazine. They called the magazine Sir Gay and Wright created the cover art and all the illustrations inside. The covers for Sir Gay are classic Wright, expressing all of his humour and mischievousness combined with a very 'British' wit.



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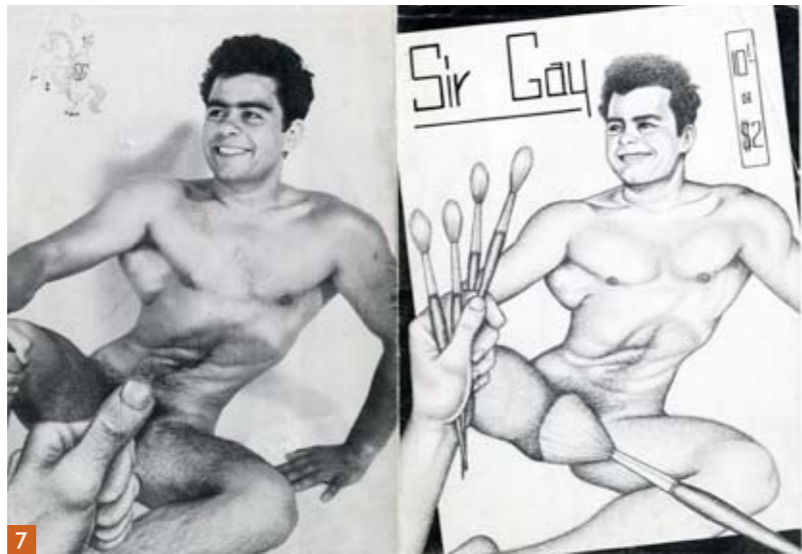
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"Sir Gay was my creation, it was my baby, and it was a hit in Britain, but when the first one arrived in New York it was banned. The American's wouldn't let it in because of the word 'gay'. So it had to come back here and the cover re-done."

By edition number 3 the 'A' and 'Y' had disappeared and it was now called 'Sir G-', in later editions it was renamed 'Sir Gee'. In one edition the publishers had a problem with Wright's drawings that showed a few strands of pubic hair. "All the copies of the magazine's were returned and we had to erase every strand on every copy by hand!". He learned his lesson and on a later cover depicting a naked man with his legs spread wide open he naughtily uses the bristles of his paintbrush to conceal the restricted zones, while the back cover uses the artist's large 'thumb' to hide them. Both drawings are perfectly within the 'rules', but at the same time seem more explicit than if the penis or pubic hair had actually been shown. "I was always trying to find new and different ways to get around the censorship. One thing I started doing was to draw the men naked and then add seams and folds to make it look like they were wearing clothes. These were very popular, men loved them, you could see everything you needed with the illusion that they were clothed." It's easy to see why Wright's work was popular.

Many of the magazines Wright worked for didn't pay directly for his services but would allow him to advertise his artwork for sale inside. Wright made a good living by selling pocket-sized images of his work that readers could order from catalogues he sent them from 'Berkley Studios', the home he shared with his mum in Hertford. One of his most popular was his *Man About the House* set that depicts a group of men living together. Again to counter the censors the drawings are filled with Wright's cheeky charm, but at the same time quite clearly show provocatively posed groups of semi-naked men, their genitals covered by soap-suds or by a conveniently positioned steam-iron.

By 1960 his career was going from strength to strength, but his private-life was less successful. Wright had fallen in love with a married man, and what started out as an exciting and passionate liaison turned sour when he was talked into posing for pornographic photographs. The photographs were discovered by a nosy postman and handed to the police, which eventually led to Wright being tried and sentenced to a year in prison. His boyfriend, being a married man, was seen as not being 'properly gay' and served only half the time. "I was only really expecting a caution so you can imagine the shock when the judge said, "There's too much of this

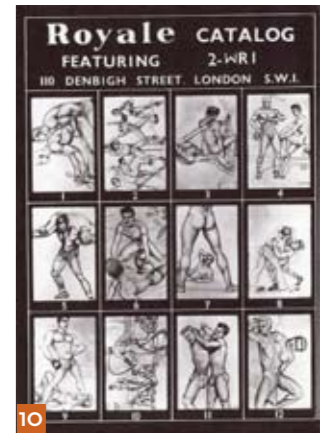


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Previous pages: 1. Ron in his living room in xxxxxxxx. 2. The cover of the second edition of Sir Gay 195X. Oposite page: 3-6. A selection of Ron's artwork from the 'fitness' magazine s of the 1950s. 7. Ron employs some humorous inventiveness to get around the censors on the Cover of the X edition of Sir Gay. 8. An example of Ron's popular 'Man About The House' series. 9&11 Sailors. 10. Cover of 'Royale' catalogue which Ron's work was sold through during the height of his popularity. 12. Collection of 'Body Beautiful' - studies in Mauseuline Art in which Ron was a regular contributor between 195x and 19xx.



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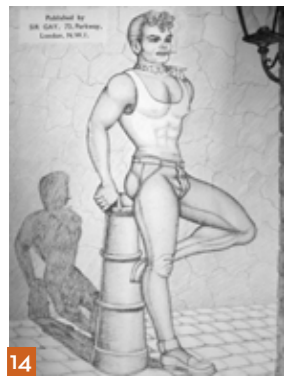
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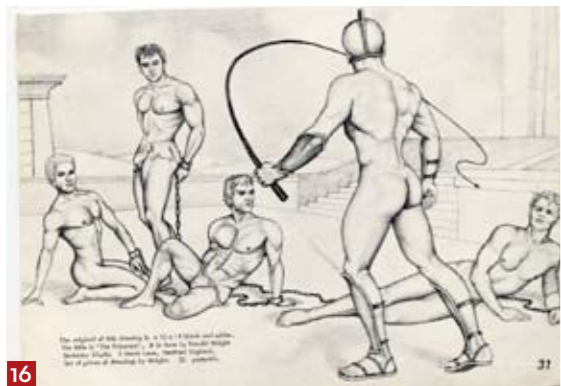
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13. Cover of Sir Gay No5 with the masthead doctored to avoid being seized by the US Customs and Excise department. 14-19. Examples of Ron's published drawings. 20-24. Ron's career as a life model in London's Art Schools led to his popularity as an erotic model/performer in 1960s Soho. 25. Ron in 2011 with the poster from Georgina Starr and Paul Noble's 2010 exhibition about the man, his life and his work.

sort of thing going on in London today and you need to be made an example of, we are sentencing you to 18 months.” These were difficult times for gay men in Britain and clearly very dark times for Wright, talking about them now nearly 50 years later can still induce a tear.

After his released from prison the magazine publishers were hesitant to re-employ Wright and this tragically brought an end to his ‘Physique’ artist career.

“It was too risky for the publishers to take me back, which was very sad. It was already a precarious business and having a criminal record was just too much of a threat for them. Before going to prison I was one of the best known British gay artists, if I hadn't have gone to prison I'm sure I would have had another 10 years at the top.”

Luckily Wright was a strong-willed and resourceful young man and within a year he had reinvented himself as a model for artists and a performer on the swinging Sixties party scene. This allowed him to combine his love of performing with the poses he loved to draw and he quickly became a favourite of many British sculptors with his diary filled up to 3 years in advance.

“I'd never had the chance to go to art school myself, but here I was working in all the top art schools of London. I did 10 years

of modeling and built up a reputation for doing very inventive poses.” For Wright art and life had now become one as he painstakingly recreated the powerful physical poses he had once illustrated for the magazines.

After retiring in the 1980's Wright self-published his autobiography, aptly titled, *Flesh: The Great Illusion*. It's a rip-roaring romp of a book that covers, amongst many things, his adventures and struggles as a gay man in a pre-Wolfenden Report era Britain. The book is now out of print but he is currently working on an updated version that he is hoping to get republished sometime soon.

It is hard to believe that Wright will be 84 years old this year. At the after party of an exhibition I presented of his work in London last year he chatted and danced until 2am. Noticing the time I asked if he was tired and might want escorting to his hotel, “Oh no dear, young Robbie wants to hear about the time I met Mae West...” I watched as he trotted off to sit down with a young man wearing a sailor's hat and thought to myself, “Oh to live a life like Ronald Wright!” ☺

Georgina Starr is an internationally acclaimed artist who's work has Magna am, core velisit lorpercip eumsandre dolobor alit dolent iustie