

PHYSIQUE PICTORIAL 52

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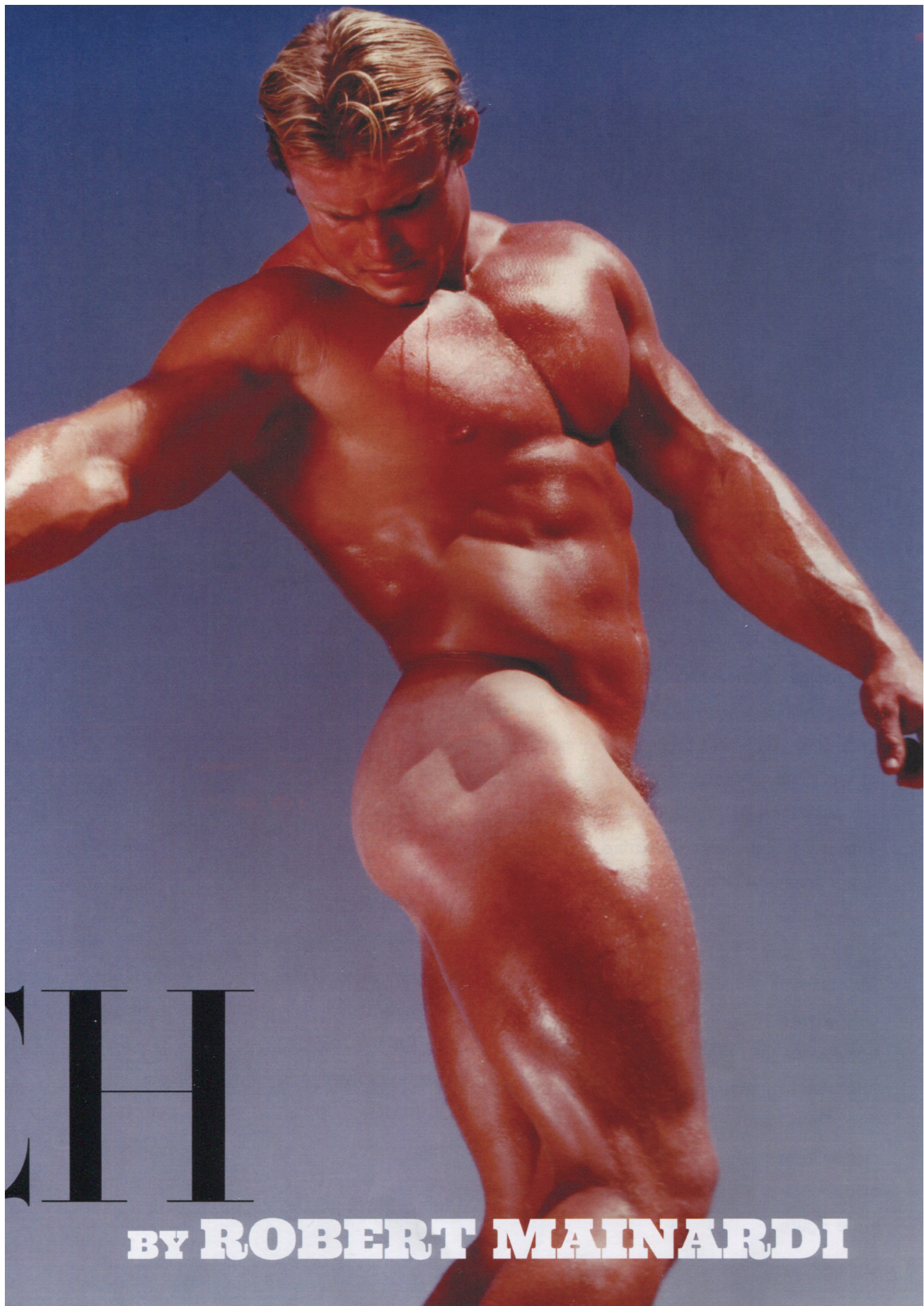
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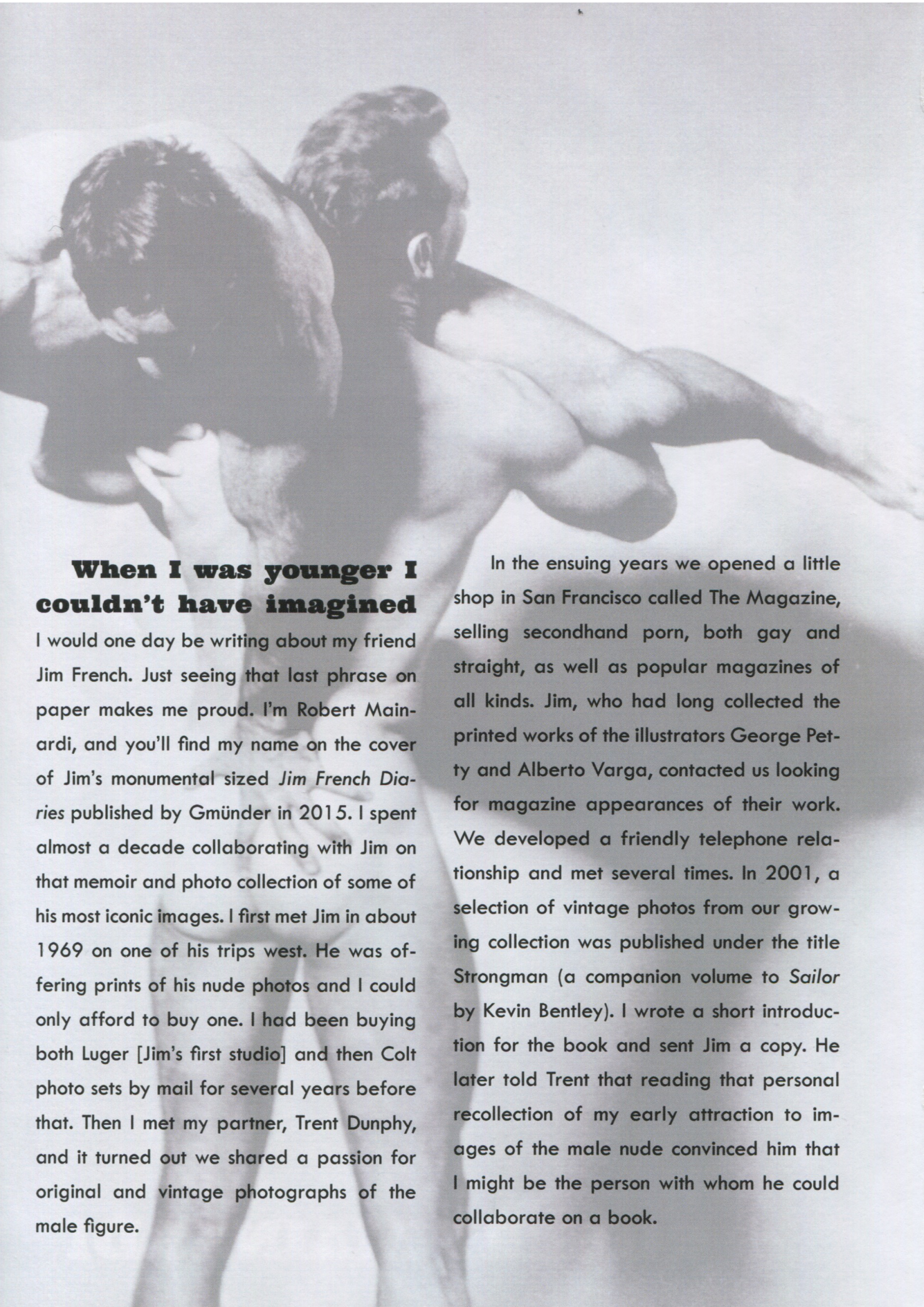


JIMI *My Friend*
FRIEND



PH

BY ROBERT MAINARDI



When I was younger I couldn't have imagined

I would one day be writing about my friend Jim French. Just seeing that last phrase on paper makes me proud. I'm Robert Mainardi, and you'll find my name on the cover of Jim's monumental sized *Jim French Diaries* published by Gmünder in 2015. I spent almost a decade collaborating with Jim on that memoir and photo collection of some of his most iconic images. I first met Jim in about 1969 on one of his trips west. He was offering prints of his nude photos and I could only afford to buy one. I had been buying both Luger [Jim's first studio] and then Colt photo sets by mail for several years before that. Then I met my partner, Trent Dunphy, and it turned out we shared a passion for original and vintage photographs of the male figure.

In the ensuing years we opened a little shop in San Francisco called The Magazine, selling secondhand porn, both gay and straight, as well as popular magazines of all kinds. Jim, who had long collected the printed works of the illustrators George Petty and Alberto Varga, contacted us looking for magazine appearances of their work. We developed a friendly telephone relationship and met several times. In 2001, a selection of vintage photos from our growing collection was published under the title *Strongman* (a companion volume to *Sailor* by Kevin Bentley). I wrote a short introduction for the book and sent Jim a copy. He later told Trent that reading that personal recollection of my early attraction to images of the male nude convinced him that I might be the person with whom he could collaborate on a book.



The Jim French I knew was funny and sweet, frustrating and obstinate, capable of great kindness and generosity, and of course, the greatest artist I've ever known.

Having read Gavin Lambert's book about the movie director George Cukor (*On Cukor*, 1972) whom he had known, he thought that he would like its interview format for a book about his experiences running Colt Studio. His initial idea was that this would simply be a book of text without photos, but his partner Jeff Turner (the former Colt model "Andreas Stock") and I convinced him this was not feasible. I volunteered to do the interviewing, write the text, choose the photos (a task I think he found too daunting), and lay out the book. It took a decade of work, with stops and starts, before this book was finally published. I think Jim was pleased with it, if perhaps overwhelmed by its size. But his spectacular photographs certainly deserved to be seen in a large format.

Jim was a great artist, not just in the sense that he drew great pictures or took extraordinary photographs, but in that he brought an innate sense of artistry to every aspect of his life. I got to know him later in his life when he was well established, successful, and beset by the difficulties of changing tastes and modern media. For forty years he had run what was arguably the most successful business of its kind, creating a body of work which changed society and certainly changed me. So to get to know Jim and work with him on his "magnum opus" was a wonderful experience. Jim was always smart, generous, funny, and opinion-

ated, but he could also be stubborn, dogmatic, and above all, uncompromising. Yet in working with him he gave me great leeway to help create a small (well, a seven-pound) work of art about him and his art.

Once I got to know Jim better and began working with him on the book, he began inviting me to join him and his partner (and, when the time came, husband) Jeff Turner on their annual December trips to Hawaii. They would rent a small beach house in the one street town of Puako on the north shore of the Big Island. Over the years Jim had most often visited the islands to photograph his models in spectacular settings, but Puako was a place for Jim to escape and relax. I never saw him happier than on our trips there. He had rented various houses in Puako over the years, but he was happiest in the unpretentious beachfront cottage that I stayed in with them and, often, other friends. He had also made many friends who lived there and who would come to visit, sit, and talk, cook wonderful meals, and most of all, join us for wonderful meals at his favorite restaurants. Jim liked to eat. He was always full of stories and had a wonderful sense of humor. He liked to entertain and be entertained. But most of all he was content to sit on the lanai and watch the ocean, the sky, Maui appearing and vanishing in the mist, the many exotic birds he fed generously, and the ever-changing sky which at night dazzled with thousands of stars.

My future husband, Trent, and I met at a party in 1969, introduced by a mutual friend who said, "I think you two should meet." Little did he know we would still be together and married fifty years later. Near where we first lived on California Street in San Francisco there was a little shop called The Ditto that carried Colt Studio photos and publications. Both of us were regular customers. Once we established our own shop in 1973, Jim allowed us to carry his Colt photo sets and publications. As the years went by Trent and I worked on or contributed to a number of books on physique photographers and their work, all of which led to my working with Jim on his book. I was amazed and flattered to be asked.

Jim flew me to Los Angeles many times to conduct recorded interviews with him, read what I had written and consult on the editing, and have me to choose images for the book from his vast archives. I was like that proverbial kid in a candy store. But I did learn something surprising; I had imagined finding many wonderful unpublished images in Jim's files, but I quickly discovered that the vast majority of images had been published. Jim was so meticulous in composing his photographs, carefully lighting them and posing the models, that there were few unusable images. He often said, "Those models don't really look like that. I make them look like that!" But of course,

I still had to look through everything. His assistants Nat and Armand were a great help and it was a pleasure to see how much they liked Jim and enjoyed working with him, even at his grumpiest. Jim was just as human as the rest of us.

Jim studied music as a child and might well have continued in that field but he decided to go to art school instead and finding work as an illustrator in the great tradition of Joseph Leyendecker, Norman Rockwell, and Al Parker (one of his favorites), after whom he named one of his models. However, as Jim often said, "The day I graduated from art school illustration died." The era of photography's dominance had begun, so perhaps it is only fitting that Jim found his greatest success creating a unique body of photographic work. And that work, Jim always insisted, was not merely homoerotic but a celebration of masculinity which could, and should, be appreciated by everyone. Jim did not consider himself a "gay artist" and disliked being categorized. Every time I urged him to allow his work to appear in a gay collection he resisted. He truly thought his work would appeal to everyone. But can everyone appreciate a gorgeous man bending over and unapologetically displaying his rear end? That was a puzzle Jim never solved.

Jim French was a man of taste and sophistication. He read widely, was a fan of

film and theater, and appreciated great music. He had known and socialized with theatrical people, from George Cukor to Elvira. He once told me of going to Judy Garland's legendary 1961 Carnegie Hall concert with Kay Medford, who played the mother of Fanny Brice in both the stage and screen versions of the musical *Funny Girl*. One of Jim's great loves was opera and he had seen many all over the world. He became good friends with the singer Marilyn Horne and greatly admired her talent and teaching ability.

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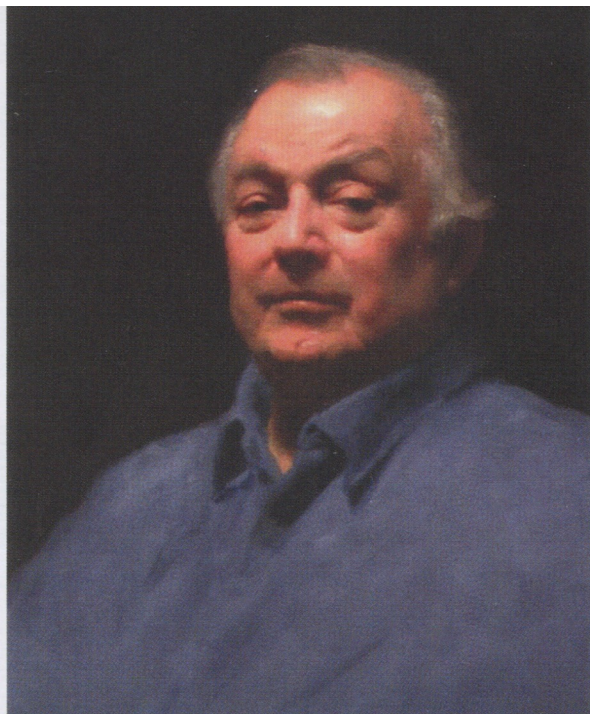


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p.83: © Estate of Jim French (1932-2017), "Untitled (Man in Chair)," c. 1967-9, Vintage Polaroid print (Unique), 4.25 x 3.25 inches, Courtesy of ClampArt, New York City

p.84: © Estate of Jim French (1932-2017), "Untitled (Sailor)," c. 1967-9, Vintage Polaroid print (Unique), 4.25 x 3.25 inches, Courtesy of ClampArt, New York City

p. 89: © Estate of Jim French (1932-2017), "Untitled (Wrestlers)," c. 1967-9, Vintage Polaroid print (Unique), 4.25 x 3.25 inches, Courtesy of ClampArt, New York City

p. 89: Portrait of Jim French by Adrian Gottlieb.

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