

ROLOFF BENY AND THE CANADIAN MALE¹

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Between 1959 and in his death in the mid-1980s, photographer Roloff Beny published sixteen books of carefully documented architectural and landscape studies. Usually devoid of representational figures, the human form is often alluded to only in classical statues.² In contrast, Roloff Beny's personal portrait archive is a veritable index of mid-twentieth century high society. Intimate portraits of artists, socialites and intellectuals reveals another side of Beny, the man and photographer, in how these portraits both describe him and his world.

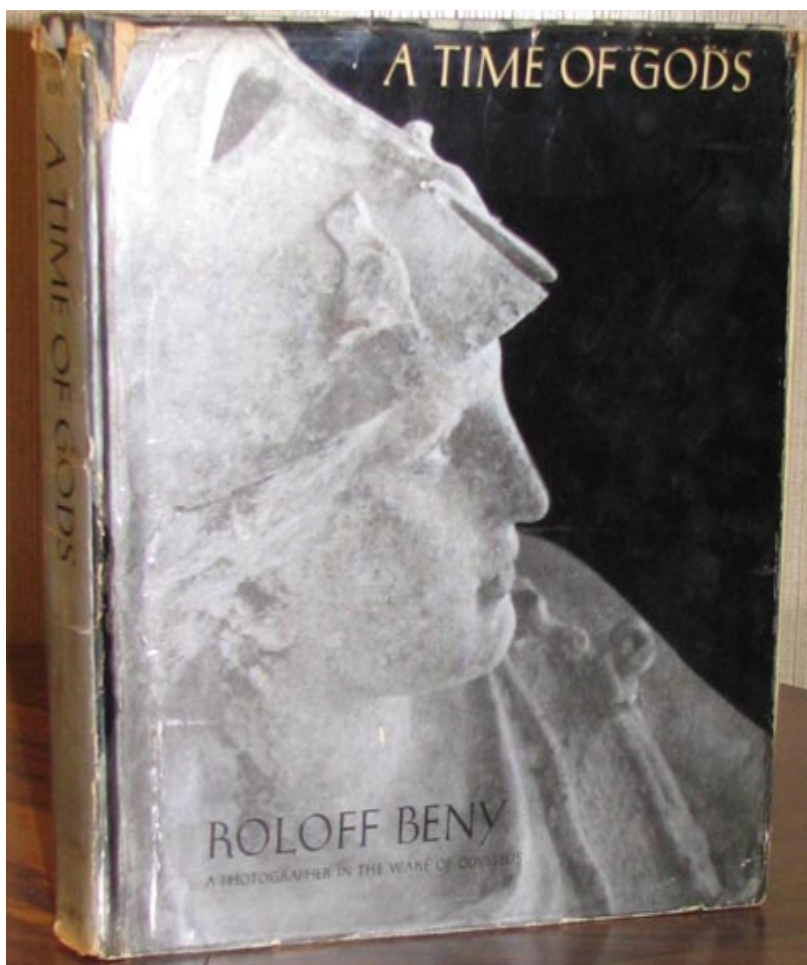
Roloff Beny (born Wilfred Roy, 1924-1984) epitomized the expatriate Canadian artist.³ Born to a small-town Alberta family who frequently made excuses for his meek temperament and artistic inclinations, Beny recognized early in life the necessity of escaping from his environment to become himself.⁴ Infatuated by urban life after studying at the University of Toronto, Beny moved to New York City and, with a stop in Greece, arrived in Rome in 1959 where he lived throughout his life. Still Beny remained close to Canada's heart through his publications that were well received at home, and in his determination to connect with Canadian compatriots whom he admired. His portrait photographs of Glenn Gould (1932-1982), Irving Layton (1912-2006) and Leonard Cohen (b. 1934) demonstrate an affection and empathy for these artists, as well as a personalized, different view of Beny.

Beny's portrait photographs of these male artists, all from a personal archive and published in the posthumous *Roloff Beny's People* along with his personal reflections of the encounters, are natural, responsive and sympathetic. Here, Beny appears to locate himself physically in the spaces he shares with the men he portrays. Unlike his more objective documentary photographs, Beny's physical

presence behind the camera is vital to the process of the portrait photograph, and suggests a sincere interaction with people who are a part of his world. To fully understand these portraits we must identify with Beny as a person, even within the classically-inspired alternate persona he wove for himself, drawing us more fully into the intellectual and sensory experiences evoked by these highly personal images.

Beny invented an alterity for himself, an otherness that contrasted with his origins. He wore strange clothes and changed his name, having identified something in himself that required a dramatic distance from his Canadian roots. This alternative identity protected a sexuality that Beny did not fully confront until a crisis, in Greece, at age 25.⁵ Beny's homosexuality is the guarded, invisible subtext of much of his portraiture, apparent in classicized depiction of males that romanticizes the homosexual freedoms of ancient Greek culture. The homoerotic character of these images arises from the focused gaze of one male upon another. This is not a sexualized looking but rather a gaze that is affectionate and admiring.⁶ Beny's photographs of men are sensuous without being sexual, and erotic without being pornographic. The classical aesthetic provided the photographer with a visual vocabulary in which he could safely explore male-to-male sexual attraction within platonic friendship.⁷

Beny's portrait of Glenn Gould ennobles this peculiar pianist whose odd behaviours led to whispers of autism. Leonard Cohen's portrait is playful, stripping the writer and musician of the severity that brands his public image. Irving Layton, a notoriously egotistic philanderer, is portrayed by Beny as a gentle fatherly man. As this virtual exhibition will reveal, Beny had the capacity to see these Canadian men differently because he understood what it meant to redefine oneself.



Cover Image for Roloff Beny's A Time of Gods. 1962.



Glenn Gould, pianist, 1959.

Roloff Beny (1924-1984)

Negative, black and white safety film, 2.25 x 2.25 inches.

Library and Archives Canada / PA-182786

http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3619370.

*Shy, complex and a brilliant pianist, Glenn Gould uses his eccentricities to mask his solitude. He seems the archetype of the performer who struggles to achieve a private revelation in public.*⁸

A brilliant pianist who performed every show in the same decrepit chair and wore winter clothing throughout the year, Glenn Gould is remembered as much for his eccentricities as for his virtuosity. A contrast to this viewpoint is this portrait from 1959. that ennobles the pianist by showing him casting a commanding gaze over a Toronto rehearsal studio. Beny rejects the image of Gould as a timid recluse in favour of a heroic figure. As we look upward into Gould's face, in profile, the fixed stare of Michelangelo's David toward Goliath comes to mind. From a position of intimacy, Beny's camera close to his subject, the photographer conveys a private, powerful, moment and the fact that Gould's public persona did not readily communicate this inner strength.



David. Michelangelo Buonarotti, 1501-1504.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:David_von_Michelangelo.jpg>.



Irving Layton, 1981.

Roloff Beny (1924-1984)

Negative, black and white safety film, 64 x 64mm.

Library and Archives Canada / PA-193716

<http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3194980>.

Canada's most pugnacious poet photographed on a bench in a small piazza while on holiday. Irving posed first beside a vagabond who looked at him rather quizzically, but was pleased by the fuss, then next to two lovely giggling Swedish tourists, and finally by himself. Afterwards we had a long Roman lunch in the local trattoria where he proudly proclaimed that he was about to become a father – 'Maybe I'm the oldest procreating poet!'⁹

Irving Layton was sagely 70 years old in 1981 when Beny captured this image. On the cusp of new fatherhood with his third of five wives, 1981 was also the year Italy, along with South Korea, nominated the poet for the Nobel Prize in Literature. While Layton maintained a home in Montreal throughout his life, travel was a passion he and Beny shared. This is evidenced by the ease of his pose and conversational gestures. The man known for his egotism is shown here dignified, despite the informality of a park bench, more an Apollonian philosopher than the Dionysian poet. At the same time, the downward gesture of Layton's right hand, recalls Raphael's Aristotle in *The School at Athens*, and directs us back to the world of the senses that fascinated both Layton, the poet, and Beny, the artist-photographer.



The School At Athens. Detailing of Plato (left) and Aristotle (right). Raphael Sanzio, 1510-11. < http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Sanzio_01_Plato_Aristotle.jpg



Leonard Cohen, 1976.

Roloff Beny (1924-1984)

Positive paper, Silver.

http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3536189&rec_nbr_list=3623119,3194960,3536189,138642

*Leonard dropped by for a chat in Toronto while I was on a visit to my publishers and later turned up at Tibor Terrace and managed to seduce my female staff. He is perhaps the most masculine yet gentle person I have ever known.*¹⁰

In persona and oeuvre, the picture of Leonard Cohen is one of brooding austerity. The poet, novelist and songwriter was, like Beny, a nomadic artist whose expatriate character expanded the notion of Canadianess. Before the window of a Toronto hotel room in 1976, Beny captures Cohen perched between the viewer and the expanding landscape. This image of Cohen, laughing while mimicking the strumming of a guitar, looks past the public persona and into the man as he was in intimate company. Beny revitalizes the image of Cohen, emphasizing the Dionysian aspect of pleasure and music over Apollonian literature and rationality. Cohen assumes the chaotic image of the god Pan, for whom the nature, the wild and pipes were sacred.



Pan teaching Daphnis to play the pipes. Heliodoros, 100 BCE.

<<http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/aa/PanandDaphnis.jpg>>.



Beny, in his Rome apartment, selects negatives, colour transparencies and prints for Persia:
Bridge of Turquoise, 1974.

Roloff Beny (1924-1984)

Positive paper, Silver.

Library and Archives Canada / PA-192131

http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=000003616678

Seated at a table at home in the Tibor Terrace, we see Roloff Beny at work. The selection of prints for his books was a critical aspect of his production, where the casual, randomness and near-vernacular of creating images were subjected to incisive secondary considerations. We see here what the other photographs cannot visually establish: the place of the photographer in the world he documents, his flamboyant attire speaking both to his sexuality and artistic nature. Our gaze directed at the photographer reminds us that photography contributes to self-imaging and identity creation, a process that was vital in the life of an artist who left his home and changed his name.



Roloff Beny, 1972.

John Evans.

Positive paper, Chromogenic print.

Library and Archives Canada / e002505723

http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayEcopie&lang=nnn&rec_nbr=000003608284&title=Roloff+Beny.+&ecopy=e002505723-v6&back_url=%28%29

Roloff Beny was admitted to the Order of Canada in 1972. This portrait by is John Evans (dates unknown), the chief photographer of Government House. We witness the moment when Beny, now in conventional formal attire, steps back from Governor General Roland Michener who has yet to release the medal he has placed around the recipient's neck. While the image recalls Beny's attraction to the pompous and grandiose, we also see a look of solemn pride on his face. No matter how he redefined himself, Beny remained a Canadian throughout his life and enjoyed his greatest popularity at home throughout his career.

LESSON PLAN

Target age: 15-17 years.

Part one: Students will be asked to select two photographs taken of themselves by others: one that they believe represents them as they see themselves and one that represents them as others see them, or does not represent them at all.

Part two: Students will be asked to write a paragraph about each photograph, describing how it came about and three ways in which it succeeds in representing them, either as they are, as they desire to be, or as they are not. These will be mounted on poster board to be viewed by the other students.

Part three: The students will review each other's photographs and observations. The group will collectively look at Beny's personal images of famous artists and the photographs that are seen to be more in line with the persona of these artists. Using supporting images from Library and Archives Canada, the students will make observations about the different ways a person can be viewed. A group discussion will pose the following questions:

Is a photograph of a person really that person? Why or why not?

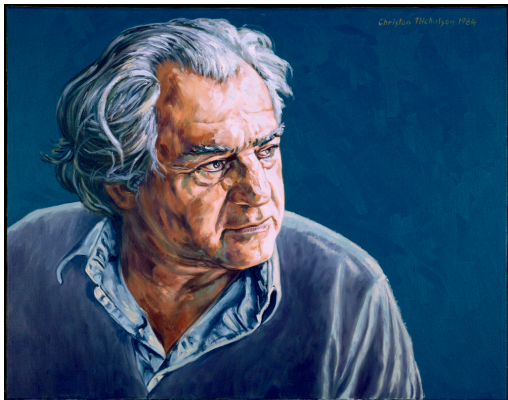
How does a photograph change the way a person sees themselves or how others see them?

In the age of social networking and the internet, people have access to photographs of others. What decisions do people make when they choose photographs to represent them?

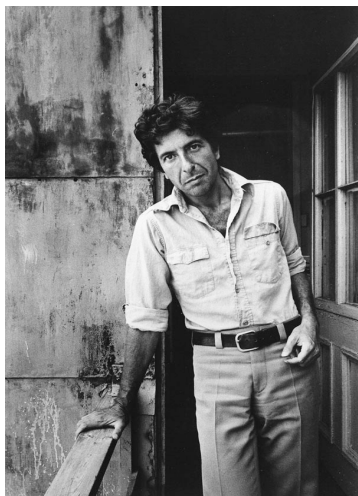
How do photographs change the way we see people, whether they are public figures or people we know?



Glenn Gould. Photographer unknown, undated. Library and Archives Canada, archival reference number R13915-1



Irving Layton. Christan Nicholson, 1984. Library and Archives Canada, Acc. No. R1442-1.
Copyright: Christan Nicholson



Leonard Cohen. Sam Tata, 1973. Library and Archives Canada / RD-001290. Copyright: the estate of Sam Tata

NOTES

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- 1 Crites, Mitchell, ed., *Roloff Beny: People - Legends in Life and Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1995).
 - 2 Roloff Beny, *Roloff Beny in Italy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974) 17.
 - 3 Louise Abbott, Roloff Beny, The Canadian Encyclopedia, 28 Nov. 2011
<<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE>>.
 - 4 Jack James King, *A Life with Writers* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 1999) 274.
 - 5 Mary V. Dearborn, *Peggy Guggenheim: Mistress of Modernism* (London: Virago, 2007) 274.
 - 6 Allen Ellenzweig, *The Homoerotic Photograph: Male Images from Durieu/Delacroix to Mapplethorpe* (New York: Columbia UP, 1992).
 - 7 "The History of Male Friendships | The Art of Manliness," *The Art of Manliness | Men's Interests and Lifestyle*, 19 Dec. 2011 <<http://artofmanliness.com/2008/08/24/the-history-and-nature-of-man-friendships/>>.
 - ⁸ Roloff Beny and Mitchell Crites, *People: Legends in Life and Art* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1995) 125.
 - ⁹ Beny and Crites, 124.
 - ¹⁰ Beny and Crites, 124.

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