

Perfection in Chicago:

Lanza Photographs Steve Reeves

By David Chapman

Sky, sun, water, and a superbly muscular young man: these are the ingredients that comprised one of bodybuilding's most famous series of photos when in 1947 the great physique photographer Tony Lanza captured Steve Reeves on the shores of Lake Michigan. These are "pure" physique photos since there was no attempt to turn the subject into a Greek statue or a ballet dancer. All superfluous elements had been removed, and only the essential remained, but this Zen-like understatement was enough.

Certain photographs have the ability to convey more than just their subjects—almost always they are greater than either creator or model understand at the time. It is only with time that their sublimity becomes apparent to all. Few contemporaries could probably have guessed that these pictures would become honored as masterpieces of physique photography, but such they became. The story of how these photos were taken and of their subsequent appreciation is one that indicates the delicate way that the silken threads of history, accident, and art all came together at precisely the right time.

The Mr. America contest for 1947 was to be held in

Chicago, and fresh upon the heels of his victory in the Mr. Pacific Coast competition, Steve Reeves arrived at the Windy City's airport, Midway Field. Steve's fame had gone before him, and Dick Trusdale, a PR man who had managed the career of another Mr. America victor Alan Stephan, met the young athlete at the airport. Trusdale's head was bursting with ideas, and he tried to tell Steve all about them as the two drove back to his house where the bodybuilder was to spend the night.

The promoter had arranged for Reeves to be photographed by several well-known camera men, most notably Tony Lanza from Montreal. The resulting portfolio of pictures would then be sold through the mail. They would call their enterprise simply, "The Steve Reeves Company." Trusdale informed Reeves that he had already made arrangements with Lanza to shoot a series before the contest and that he would also be staying at his house.

Tony Lanza had been the best of a number of talented photographers who had worked for Joe Weider and his fledgling magazine *Your Physique*. Almost by accident Lanza was approached by Weider around 1941 to become the staff pho-

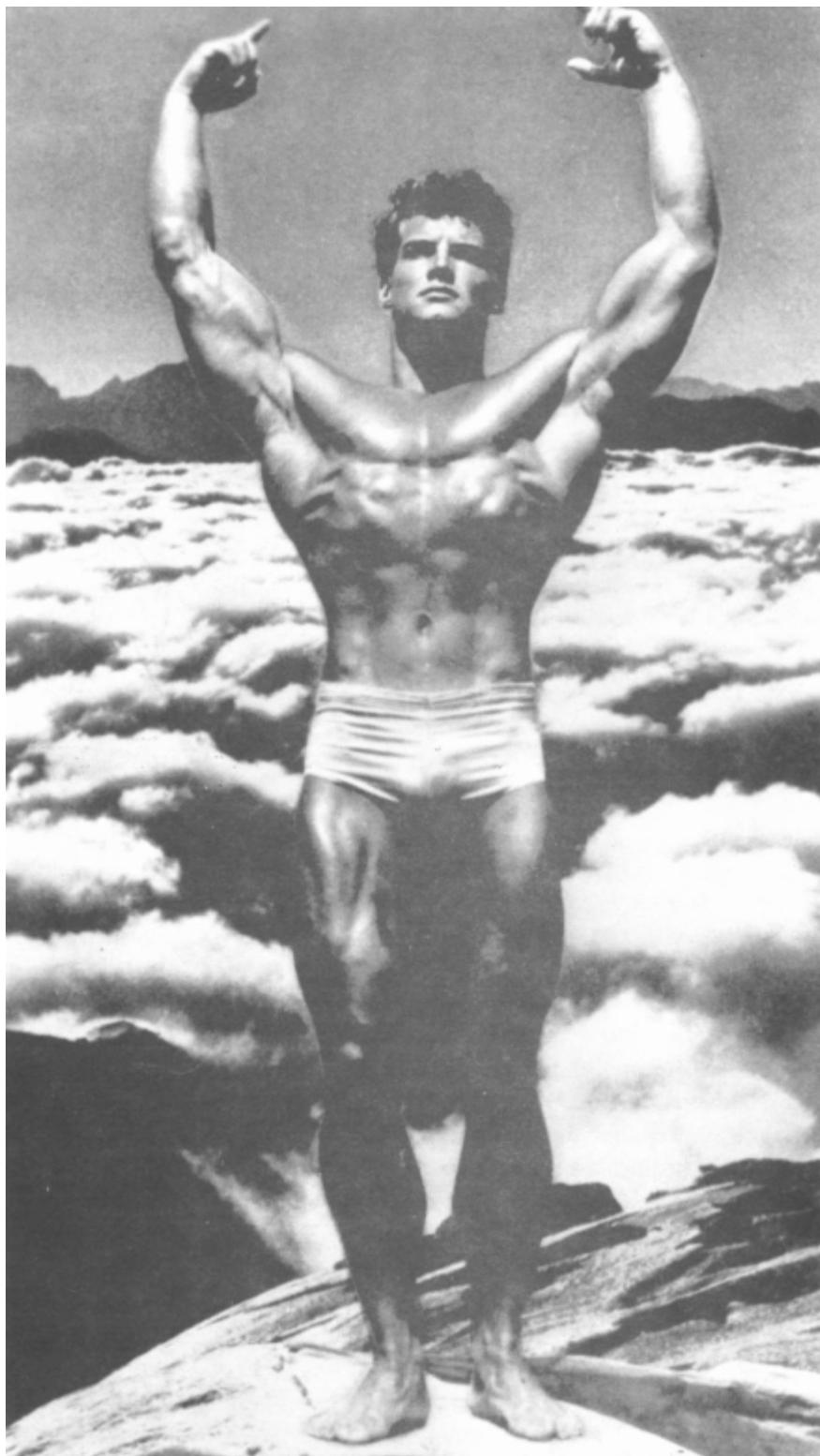


The original photo from which Tony Lanza created one of the most famous images in iron game history.

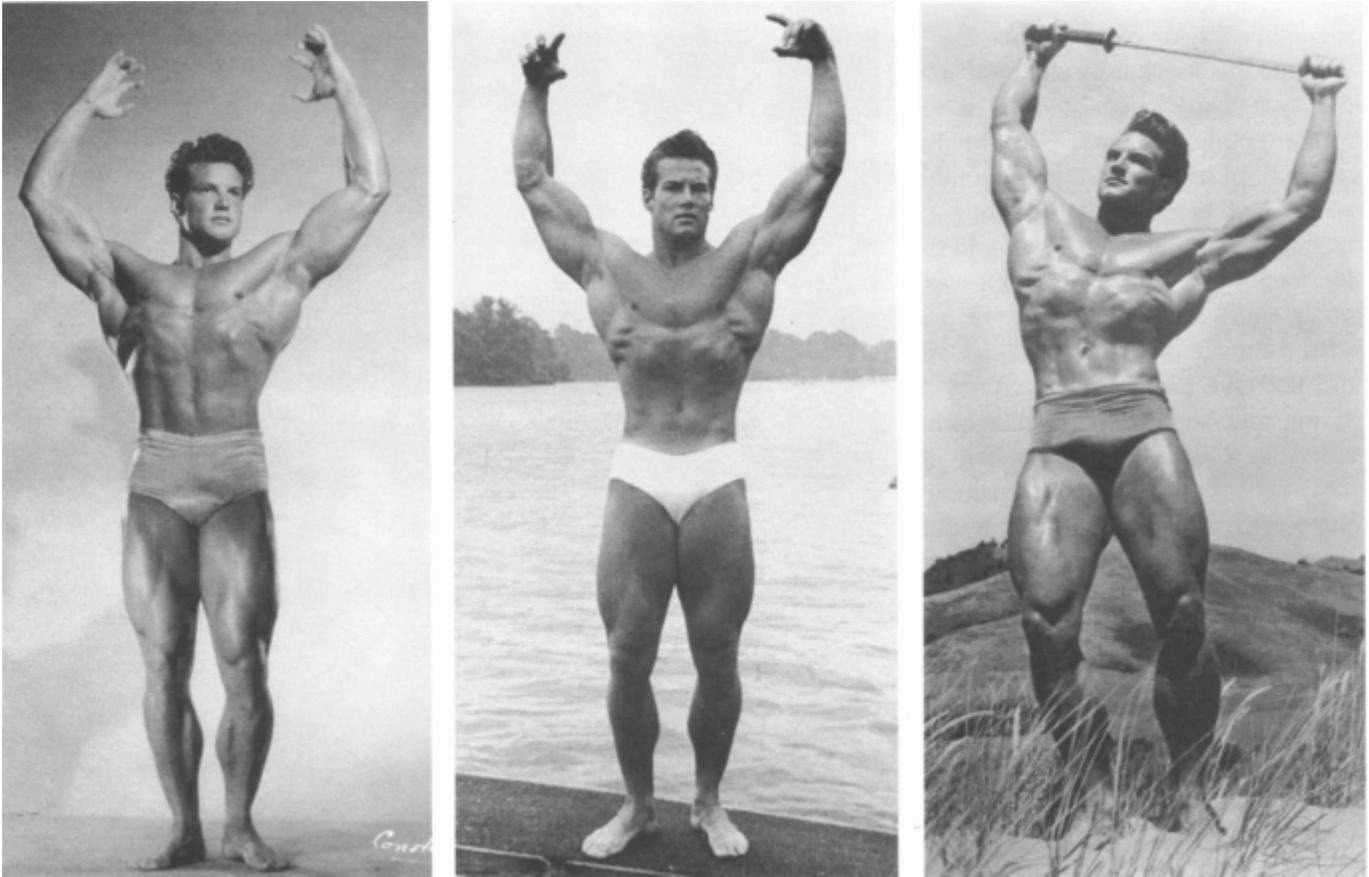
tographer for his early publication; at the time this was hardly an honor since the “magazine” consisted of a few mimeographed pages. Lanza had never been trained as a photographer, so he had to learn by imitating the techniques of others until he could find his own style. Fortunately, he was a quick study and, as it turned out, possessed considerable natural talent, so it did not take him long to acquire the vision and sophistication that turned him into a master photographer. By 1947 he was one of the best lensmen in the world when it came to physique photography, and his work had been published in magazines throughout the world.

Trusdale had met Lanza the previous year when the promoter visited Montreal where the two men had hit it off famously. Because of this friendship and the photographer’s unquestioned talent, Trusdale had sent for the Canadian camera man, and Tony awaited the arrival of the “new prospect” that Trusdale had attempted to describe. The weather was hot and humid, but all that was forgotten as soon as the two men returned from the airport and confronted the photographer. “Tony,” announced the PR man, “I’d like you to meet Steve Reeves from California.”

Lanza later reported his startled reactions to his first view of the athlete. “I remember Steve was wearing his short-sleeved shirt that gave him this Lil’ Abner look, and he had this incredible deep bronze tan and styled hair. He looked fabulous! And the shoulders, Wow! He was everything I’d heard about and then some.” Understandably, Lanza was anxious to record Reeves on film, and after some consideration, he decided that the shores of Lake Michigan at Foster



The photographer Lanza superimposed mountain clouds behind the image on the opposite page to produce the masterpiece, “Perfection in the Skies.”



In the accompanying article, David Chapman explains how Tony Lanza posed Steve Reeves with his arms held over his head in a “U” shape, and how this pose seemed to fit Reeves’ body shape so well that it became one of his signature poses. Indeed, in our photo collection we counted more than a dozen shots that were variations on the same theme.

Avenue Beach would be a good location.

Most experts agree that although Steve Reeves was a very talented physique athlete who possessed considerable natural grace, he was not a particularly inspired poser. He therefore relied heavily on the men who photographed him to direct his movements. Fortunately, Lanza was prepared to give him all the direction he needed; and besides the photographer insists that Reeves had what he describes as “magnetism” which drew people to him.

Lanza recalls walking with Steve along the Chicago waterfront looking for an appropriate place to begin taking pictures. As they did so, a small but growing crowd of curious onlookers began to follow them on their quest. Chicago’s lakeside is remarkable because a heavily traveled road winds along fairly close to the water, so everything that Reeves did would be plainly visible from the roadway. Finally, Lanza chose a place that possessed just the right background, and he shoed

the crowds away and began taking pictures.

Reeves started to go through a series of poses for the camera as Lanza clicked away. Because of the extreme heat, Tony took off his shirt. Even though the bodybuilder and former pro-wrestler described himself as being “in fairly good shape,” the sight of Steve’s muscles caused him to realize that he did not compare well with his subject. “I had to put my shirt back on because he made me look like shit.”

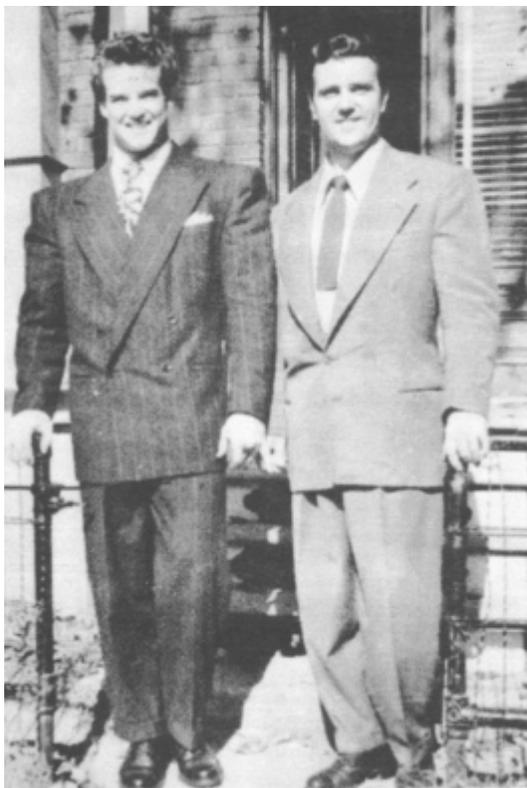
Despite the many photos that had been taken, something was not quite right, and the photographer was not pleased with the results he was getting from Reeves’ own poses. Finally, Tony said, “Steve, let me pose you and take pictures that I like so that you can be seen in better, more classical poses.” It was then that things started to click in the session. Under Lanza’s expert direction, the poses became more graceful and fluid. The lines formed by Reeves’ muscular limbs arced and folded into graceful lines and the model’s muscularity

combined with his startling good looks began to yield excellent results.

Finally, Lanza had an inspiration. He asked Steve to stand erect and while flexing his biceps to raise his arms in roughly a “U” shape over his head. It was the perfect pose to accentuate the athlete’s ample chest, thick arms, and narrow waist. The sheen of perspiration caused by the hot Midwestern sun, the earnest expression on the bodybuilder’s face, and the beautifully sculpted muscles, all combined to create one of the most sublime moments in the history of the human body. The resulting picture was destined to be an unqualified masterpiece of physique art.

Unfortunately, the artistic impact of the photo was matched by an impact of a more physical nature. Lanza and Reeves were busily at work, when all of a sudden they heard the squeal of brakes and the crash of an auto accident. A few minutes later the driver involved in the collision came up and announced to Reeves, “Sir, I just caused an accident over there, and had to come over and shake your hand because you were the cause of it. I just couldn’t believe my eyes!”

After the shoot, Lanza would take the photo, and carefully superimpose it over a shot of misty mountain tops. He titled the resulting collage “Perfection in the Skies.” Steve’s upraised arms and the pointing index fingers act like the vaults of a Gothic cathedral, drawing the eye upwards toward the heights of glory. It becomes an allegory of the human aspiration for physical perfection and earthly limitations. “That pose made Steve Reeves a star,” maintains Lanza, “and it has been imitated many times afterward, but never with such success.” He is right, of course. Like all great works of art, this one captures its subject at precisely the right moment, and it could never be duplicated—not even by Reeves himself. It is the document of a fleeting instant in time and space when all the right forces were in conjunction, and it is that very temporality that makes



Reeves with one of the photographers who helped make him famous, Tony Lanza. The photo was taken in Montreal in 1947.

it so precious as both art and history.

Ironically, the picture would come back to haunt Reeves in an unexpected way. When he was attempting to build a movie career, Reeves entered the offices of Cecil B. DeMille hoping for a role in *Samson and Delilah*. There on the wall was the famous picture of Reeves amongst the clouds. Earlier, the director had pointed his finger at the photograph and announced, “There is my man for *Samson and Delilah*!” But when Reeves stood before C.B., the director insisted that Reeves lose twenty pounds before filming. According to Tony Lanza’s version of this famous exchange, DeMille complained to Reeves, “You’re not like the picture at all. We want you to look like the Lanza photograph.” No matter what was said, the result was the same: Reeves did not get the role. He would have to wait until 1959 for his big break when he starred in the Italian epic, *Hercules*.

Reeves did win the Mr. America contest in 1947, however. He swept aside the competition in a final climactic posedown. Considering his discomfort with posing, it is a wonder he was able to emerge victorious, but

then perhaps his personal charisma was dazzling enough so that the judges saw past his indifferently executed poses. Whatever the reason, Reeves won, and the victory allowed him to shoot into the firmament like a Roman candle. It was many years before that glowing ember of fire and light fell back to earth.

Steve Reeves is no more, but the photos that he posed for half a century earlier are still vivid reminders of what he looked like in his prime. Thanks to Tony Lanza, we still have a beautiful record of male physical perfection

Sources: Interview with Tony Lanza, Montreal, 31 July 2000; Chris LeClaire, *Worlds to Conquer: Steve Reeves* (author: South Chatham, Mass., 1999); and Milton Moore, Jr., *Steve Reeves: One of a Kind* (author, 1983).