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## ***Picturing Amazons: Journalism and Muscular Womanhood***

Throughout the twentieth century, the media have displayed a love/hate relationship with the image of the muscular woman. This paper examines this issue in both the popular press and in sport specific publications such as *Physical Culture, Strength & Health*, and *Iron Man* magazine. At the turn of the century, for instance, when Bernarr Macfadden sponsored the first physique contest of any sort for women, responses to the event were divided between positive comparisons to classical statuary and those which saw the women contestants as objects of derision.

With the advent of World War II and the new status of women in America's industrial workforce, female muscularity and strength again came to the forefront. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the coverage surrounding the women who worked out and gave exhibitions at Muscle Beach. Pudgy Stockton and Relna McRae became nationally famous for their muscular figures and feats of strength. Both were favorites of the wire services and one photograph of McRae, in which she is shown supporting three other women, appeared in at least fifty major American newspapers. Stockton was used as a Kodak model, was the subject of several positive Movietone reels, and appeared in nearly every American magazine.

The passage of Title IX in 1972 marked the next watershed in women's muscularity. In the next decade, women athletes in a variety of sports began strength training and the sports of powerlifting, bodybuilding, and Olympic weightlifting opened their competitions to women. The popular media did not welcome these new Amazons. *Sports Illustrated's* first bodybuilding article, in fact, was entitled, "Here she is...Miss What?" Over the past twenty years, too, some of the strength and bodybuilding magazines – once universally positive in their support of female muscularity – have begun to suggest that things have gone "too far." In fact, coverage of women's bodybuilding in many of the "muscle" magazines, has largely given way to reports featuring Ms. Fitness competitors.

This paper began as an exhibition entitled *Picturing the Modern Amazon* which will be mounted at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in August of 1999 in New York City, and, later, in Los Angeles. The exhibition will contain historical images, paintings, sculpture, and other media chronicling the evolution of muscular womanhood in the twentieth century. Sources for this exhibition and paper are the Todd-McLean Collection; the scrapbooks of Pudgy Stockton, Katie Sandwina, and Relna McRae; and the private collections of Orrin Heller of Los Angeles and David Webster of Scotland. Travel to these latter collections is being financed by the New Museum.