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## ***Photographing the Developed Body:* Physiques in the “Age of the Chest”**

When photographers were first faced with the possibility of recording the physiques of athletic men, they drew on traditions that had been used for centuries. With only a few exceptions, these photographers posed their muscular subjects in imitation of classical sculptures. This remained the norm until the 1930s when the traditional formulas began to break down. More meaningful and appropriate ways to portray these muscle men began to appear. Certain physique photographers borrowed from such disparate sources as theatrical and dance photography; eventually, techniques from the world of fashion and moves found their way into male physique photography. Ironically, the lensmen who specialized in male muscularity tended to take their inspiration from other art forms rather than sport.

Although the subject of these pictures was the naked human body, early photos displayed a remarkable lack of overt sensuality, and the number of collectors of such pictures remained relatively small. There was something of a revolution in the late 1940s however. The visibility and accessibility of physique photography increased as never before, and this can be attributed largely to the effects of global conflict. Clearly, World War II liberated thousand of Americans just as surely as it freed those who had been enslaved by Hitler and his legions. This process of psychological liberation began during the Second World War when men were thrown together in combat units and for virtually the first time in their lives were able to compare physiques.

As was common during and after most major conflicts, there was a tremendous emphasis on men and maleness in the popular media. The war inured men to the idea of physique display, and this soon translated into increased interest in bodybuilding contests and physique photography. Because of this “masculinization” of society a whole array of muscular male images appeared in books, magazines and movies. This allowed bodybuilding, which as a sport had been marginalized before the war, to take off in a big way.

This explosion of muscle had both philosophical and a practical repercussions. The effects of postwar moral defrosting allowed for the increasing acceptability of body display - both male and female. The general public had been conditioned to accept male physique display. At the same time, muscular men were growing more and more

comfortable being objects of admiration and icons of masculinity. The huge crowds that assembled at Muscle Beach continued to keep muscular, scantily clad men and women in the public eye as well as offering an outlet for beefy strongmen and lissome acrobats to display their muscles and their skills.

In a 1958 article in *Playboy*, writer Richard Armour acknowledged the prevalence of male physique display in popular culture, and he went so far as to call the decade of the fifties “The Age of the Chest”. Armour was noting a conscious and deliberate display of masculine flesh in the movies of the day. When Marlon Brando, clad in his skin-tight T-shirt yelled at Stella in *Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), or William Holden strutted around shirtless in *Picnic* (1954) they illustrated a trend that meant the muscular male body was no longer invisible on movie screens or in daily life. Physique photographers were soon riding the crest of this wave as they became more adept at capturing the look of muscle, and the subject acquired the techniques to increase their muscular bulk. They began to experiment with poses and settings; some forsook the studio entirely and photographed outside as often as possible.

Today’s bodybuilding photography is rather monotonous in comparison to earlier times. There was a real sense of exploration and adventure in the first half of the twentieth century. The 1950s and early 60s were times of great experimentation in the realm of physique photography, and this reflected in the work of photographers such as Lon, Bruce, Warner, and other well known lensmen of the day.

In order to demonstrate my points, I use pictorial resources from my private collection as well as pictures from popular magazines such as *Life* and *Look* and brief video clips from representative films such as *Picnic* and a few selected Hercules movies of the early 1960s. I also refer to such works as Kenneth R. Dutton’s *The Perfectible Body: The Western Ideal of Physical Development*, Steven Cohan’s *Masked Men: Masculinity and the Movies in the Fifties*, and Michael A. Budd’s *The Sculpture Machine: Physical Culture and Body Politics in the Age of Empire*.