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The Bodies of Muscle Beach: 1945-1970

In the late 1930s a small group of Santa Monica teenagers began regularly meeting on the beach to practice gymnastics and lift weights. Their numbers quickly grew and by the time World War II came to a close “Muscle Beach” was known throughout America. For the next decade, thousands of Americans gathered just south of the Santa Monica Pier to watch the Muscle Beach gang lift weights, pose their physiques, and toss each other through the air like circus acrobats. Americans around the country watched too, as newsreels, newspapers, and magazines couldn’t get enough of the hard-bodied men and women of Muscle Beach. Nor could the movie and television industry — “Hercules” star Steve Reeves and TV fitness Jack LaLanne were the most well-known personalities to emerge from Muscle Beach, but a number of other men and women also capitalized on their newly-built bodies by acting and doing stunt work. Although the city of Santa Monica closed Muscle Beach in 1958 amidst accusations that a young black woman had been raped by two of America’s best-known weightlifters, Muscle Beach refused to go away. It simply reconstituted itself a couple miles south in Venice where, in the Sixties, it became Mecca to the world’s best bodybuilders — including Arnold Schwarzenegger.

But the story of Muscle Beach is more than simply the history of a place and period of time. It is also the story of what Muscle Beach has symbolized in the collective imaginations of Americans. Alan Trachtenberg once wrote, “A symbol serves a culture by articulating in objective form the important ideas and feelings of that culture.” This paper will argue that the bodies of Muscle Beach were and are symbolically important to America. The people who lifted and performed there — the men and women who became known for their bodies and who lived for their lives through their bodies-had more than just an internal fitness of heart and lung capacity. Theirs was a visible fitness of muscle and symmetry and skin tone that inspired others. It was because of Pudgy Stockton, Steve Reeves, Jack LaLanne, Vic Tanny, and Arnold Schwarzenegger that gyms and health clubs proliferated across the United States, that women began training with weights to improve their figures, that film and television stars began employing trainers to add muscle to their bodies, that Joe Weider moved his multi-million-dollar magazine empire to Southern California, and, that weight training gradually became accepted by the American public.

The importance of the body to Muscle Beach itself can be seen in the fact that after World War II, official “bodybuilding” competitions for both men and women became regular events on the Beach. The Mr. and Miss Muscle Beach contests attracted enormous audiences and received considerable publicity in the national and Californian papers. The story of these contests, as well as the interviews I’ve done over the past two years for a book co-authored with my husband Terry Todd will form the basic framework of this paper. This research has been facilitated by a research grant for the Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles.



The book display.