

important body part, while the idea of the body as an integrated whole in which proportion and symmetry matter appears to be lost.

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Idealism or Racism? Color Consciousness and the AAU MR. America Contest, 1939-1982

This paper will show the extent to which race was a factor in the selection of Mr. America physique contest winners from this event's inception in 1939 to its demise in the early 1980s. Black activists, citing the fact that minorities with superior physiques were always relegated to second place or consoled with "most muscular man" awards, frequently charged racial discrimination, while the sport's predominantly white officials claimed that such criteria as symmetry, hygiene, athleticism, character, posing ability, and proper speech were also important in choosing a Mr. America. Hence no African-American won this prestigious title until 1970. Obviously the civil rights movement, changing societal norms, and a new set of rules stressing physical appearance had much to do with the fact that five more Blacks would win the title by 1982. The nagging question, however, remained about how much color consciousness weighed on decisions of the governing bodies of the Amateur Athletic Union throughout this period and whether idealistic views of American manhood were sacrificed in the process, particularly when the corresponding Miss America pageant in the 1970s increasingly placed more emphasis on talent and intelligence and less on physical appearance.

Only one scholar, Kenneth R. Dutton, in The Perfectible Body, The Western Ideal of Male Physical Development, has studied race within the broader context of the physical culture movement, but only partially and with scant reference to the Mr. America contest. But racial differences in physique and the way American culture reacts to diversity in appearance continues to attract much attention and debate, both within and outside the Academy. By drawing upon original sources from numerous physical culture magazines of the period, interviews, and manuscripts from the Todd-McLean Collection at the University of Texas, this study forthrightly addresses this sensitive and potentially controversial issue.
