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How Big is too Big? Reflections on Sculpture and the Aesthetics of Men's Bodybuilding

For at least 2500 years, there has been a reasonably consistent idea as to the “look” of a perfect male body. In the sixth century BC and before, Greek and Egyptian sculptors often accurately captured ideal male proportions, but their statues tended to be stiff and somewhat lifeless. In the fifth century BC this changed and the change is best exemplified in the Doryphoros – the Spear Carrier. The Doryphoros is two meters (6’7”) tall and, according to the calculations of the anthropometrist David P. Willoughby, would have weighed approximately 275 pounds. The figure is not only well proportioned but it is graceful and lifelike. Each part seems to fit every other part. It represents coherence – the sort of unity Aristotle had in mind when he spoke of the “Middle Way” or Golden Mean, the ideal state between excess and deficiency.

This concern with harmony is at the heart of aesthetics, and the Doryphoros reveals such harmony regardless of the angle from which it is viewed. An often overlooked aspect of these considerations is that even though many Greek statues of male figures after the fifth century have this same balance, they don’t all look the same. Often, in fact, they look quite different. The Farnese Hercules, for example, is positively Herculean in its majestic muscle size. Yet the huge muscular girths are made aesthetically possible by the unusually heavy bone structure to which the muscles attach.

The most gifted sculptors during the Renaissance maintained this artistic insight and this insight causes the viewer to sense the aesthetic correctness – the beauty – of their marble or bronze bodies. Some of those bodies are slender, some are massive, and some – like the famous Discus Thrower – are in between. Michelangelo was able to render these differences better than anyone of his time, as can be seen by a comparison of three of his most famous creations – David, Hercules, and The Risen Christ. In the modern era, some sculptors have continued to be guided by an understanding that the key to masculine beauty is

balance between the parts as well as a balance between muscle-size and bone structure.

This aesthetic formula can be better understood by looking at photographs of strength athletes prior to 1960, which is more or less when the steroid era began. These early strongmen and physique athletes were blessed by nature, but they gave nature a helping hand by using progressive resistance to fully realize their genetic potential. As these photos are studied, it can be seen that the men are not carbon copies of each other. It can be seen that they vary widely in appearance, just as the ancient statues vary. It can also be seen that a heavier bone structure accounts for and permits greater muscular girths.

Finally, by examining photos of a representative group of post-steroid bodybuilders we can see that these powerful hormones have allowed men with average bone structures to produce muscles so large and thick that the aesthetic informing the idea of male beauty for over 2500 years has been cast aside. Perhaps this is why so many people outside the subculture of bodybuilding feel a sense of unease or even disgust when they look at modern bodybuilders whose muscle girths are packed onto bodies that were not designed to support them. Perhaps this response is nothing more complicated than a reaction against a standard that Aristotle and Michelangelo would have dismissed as being unnatural and therefore lacking in beauty.

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Embodying Normalcy: Narratives around Somatotyping

Until recently disability has been the missing term in the race, class and gender triad – the bodily state that dare not speak its name in professional circles. This paper looks at the construction of particular notions of disability through the development of categories of normalcy around body form and function related to exercise and physicality. In particular, I will investigate how the development of norms around body size, shape and physical capacity have led to the stigma of disability which has affected modes of self discipline, social regulation and institutional approaches to the management of health and fitness. My discussion will focus upon an elaboration of W.K. Sheldon's