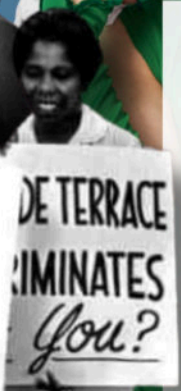


The History of Western Body Ideals

Reflecting on Influences Over Time

By Heather Leblanc, MSW, RSW



Disclaimer

The following content focuses on the Western lens of body ideals. The goal of this article is to explore the breadth, not depth, of the historical context of body ideals and how the body has acted as a canvas for dominant discourse to play out. Specifically, patterns of power and control as well as belonging and othering. The content will look at the various depictions of bodies through pop culture, art, literature, and other forms of media, as well as the stories and ideals they tell from the time-period. As the focus will be on body image in the Western world, this comes with inevitable gaps in knowledge and information. As the dominant culture dictated the narratives that were captured, and omitted, in historical documents and research, it will not be able to capture the entire scope of body image and human diversity. Therefore, please note that the following pages contain overt mentions of classism, ableism, racism, colourism, eugenics, transmisia, cisheterosexism, misogyny, and misogynoir.



As a social worker at BANA, a central part of the psychotherapy I do here revolves around helping clients with their body image and equipping them with tools to challenge what is keeping them stuck in the realm of body shame.

Over the years that I have been doing this work, I have found that while my clients were making powerful changes in their recovery journey, they were still struggling to challenge their deeply embedded anti-fat bias. This was not shocking considering that the society we live in promotes a relentless pursuit of thinness.

While traditional CBT tools were invaluable, they didn't quite get to the core of what was maintaining this fear of fatness. This became a consistent struggle for myself, and I often felt that a core maintaining mechanism was going unaddressed in therapy. Through conversations with clients, I found that the same messages kept coming up, echoing common myths about folks in larger bodies.

I set out on a journey of personal exploration to see where these myths came from and why they were so embedded in our social consciousness.

What I discovered was that our current beliefs were enmeshed in racist, ableist, and classist ideals originating centuries ago that were reinforcing the idea that some bodies are inherently "wrong".

What resulted from this research was the creation of the following timeline.

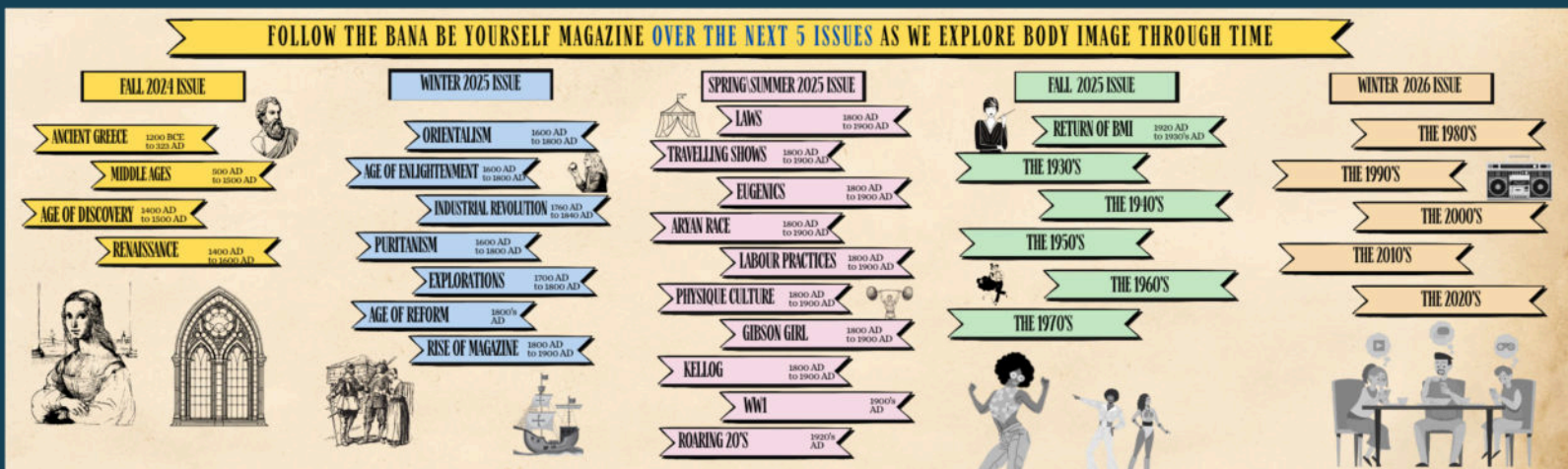
This timeline was constructed in an attempt to present hundreds of years of information in a digestible format that would open up the opportunity for conversations, critical reflection, and learning.

Since having presented some of this information in sessions, what I have heard from my clients is that understanding the origins of anti-fat bias has empowered them to divest from it and its influence on their everyday lives.

Please note, the content you will be reading is an incredibly condensed delivery of what is intended to be explored over months of in-depth conversations in a therapeutic setting.

The timeline has been dissected and presented in a way to serve as a starting point of various historical events that have laid the foundation for our modern society and views.

Please browse the linked list of reading recommendations at the end of the article to continue your learning.



This timeline would not have been possible without the work of Black and Brown authors and researchers as well as the work of fat activists and fat liberationists.

The information that I am sharing with you, the reader, has come directly from those with lived experience, such as Aubrey Gordon, Sonya Renee Taylor, Da'Shaun L. Harrison, Esther Rothblum, and Sondra Solovay.

I would like to especially highlight the work of Sabrina Strings and her book "Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia," which proved to be a seminal piece of literature which transformed my understanding of anti-fat bias and anti-Black bias and is what started this entire research journey.

Soon after reading it, I began weaving her knowledge into my sessions and I found that clients were taken by it, just as I was when I was first introduced to her research.

Strings' work is foundational and served as the launching point for the remainder of the research that was woven into the timeline. I highly encourage anyone who is committed to anti-oppressive practice and dismantling anti-fat and anti-Black bias to purchase the authors' books, and I have linked them for your ease in the recommended reading list.

"If we are struggling to reject the lies we've been told about our devalued identities, we will not be able to build healing relationships with others. The devastating truth is until we are able to heal our internalized stigma, we will not allow ourselves the opportunity to be seen and loved for who we are" (Kinsey, 2022).

When reading the following article, I encourage you to first reflect on intersectionality and your unique identity (please use the Wheel of Privilege).

Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality refers to a way of understanding the various identities people may hold and the effect on how they experience the world.

"The concept of intersectionality describes the ways in which systems of inequality based on gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, class and other forms of discrimination "intersect" to create unique dynamics and effects" (Center for Intersectional Justice, n.d.).

We do not exist within a vacuum, exempt from society at large. It is crucial to understand social identities within a broader framework as they interact on multiple levels and cannot be analyzed in isolation from one another.

Inevitably, the ideals we have internalized throughout our lifetime are not only influenced by what we experience in the present day, but also by the historical dominant power structures that have directly led to the structure of today's society.

Despite the degree of privilege some identities and positionalities are afforded, we are all negatively impacted by issues such as racism, misogyny, ageism, and anti-fat bias. These forms of oppression serve to subjugate those deemed as "other" and "inferior" while also controlling those who are not "othered".

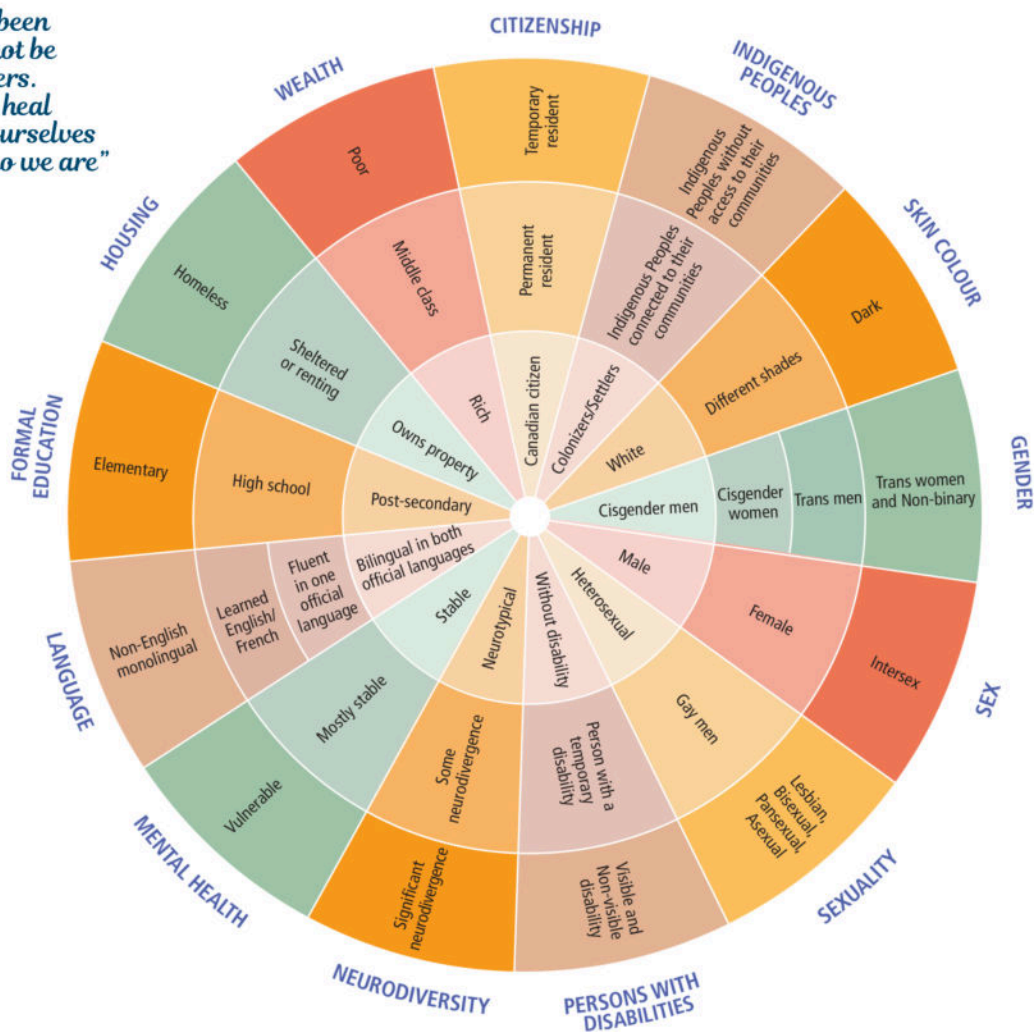
Therefore, the aim of exploring the sociocultural and political impacts of Western body ideals through the timeline is to create dialogue and empower people to divest from these narratives.

With this in mind, my unique positionality has given me opportunities to both benefit from and be disadvantaged by our socio-cultural systems of power and oppression.

The way I interact with and share this information will be colored by these factors and may be similar or different to the experiences of those reading this. Please critically reflect on these systems of oppression for yourself.

WHEEL OF PRIVILEGE AND POWER

(the closer you are to the centre, the more privilege you have)



Note: the categories within this wheel are only examples in the Canadian context, and we should not limit ourselves to them. Intersectionality is a broad concept, and this tool is only a beginning point.

ANCIENT GREECE

1200 BCE
to 323 AD

Ancient Greece is the foundation of Western society with an enduring impact on modern civilization. Reflect on the following points and the implications that are still present today.

Think of the law, democracy, mathematics, the medical system, and so on.

→During this time, we saw the introduction of an early classification system based on climate and geography. An importance was placed on the body and studying it and then used as a way to justify regional peoples' superiority.

→Ancient Greece was misogynistic and ableist, with philosophers like Aristotle and Plato positioning men at the top of society's hierarchy, viewing women and disabled individuals as inferior.

→Greek society relied on citizen-soldiers, making physical strength crucial for their ability to conquer surrounding areas. Physical prowess was a way to achieve honor. Strength was associated with masculinity and being the ideal virtuous citizen, making the male form the focal point of society.

→Philosophers associated physical ability with moral and intellectual superiority, diminishing citizens who did not fit this ideal (i.e. ageing and disabled bodies). Early ideas around eugenics appeared in Plato's works; euthanasia practices, discouraging procreation within the lower classes, and mating guidelines for an ideal society.

→The nude male figure was the focal point in this war-based society; depictions were influenced by mythology (ex: Hercules, Achilles & Odysseus) and the Homeric hero (encouraging toxic masculinity through stoicism, courage, strength, and fearlessness). Consider how, today, we still see the Greek influence in male body ideals (ex: enhancing the Apollo/Adonis belt—something that was commonly seen on statues with mythological reference points. Although this is largely influenced by genetics, it is presented as an achievable ideal for all).

→Sculptures and paintings of men were abundant. These pieces of art of the "prototypical" man were not necessarily accurate, but instead depicted idealized conceptualizations with lean bodies, defined muscles, large chests, and small penises.



The Farnese Hercules
Glycon of Athens, Lysippos



Panathenaic
amphora
depicting athletes

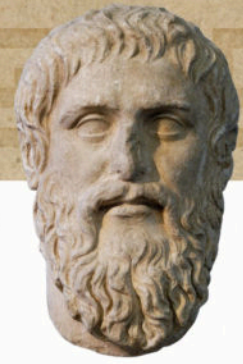


Greek bronze
bust of Aristotle
Lysippos



ANCIENT GREECE

1200 BCE
to 323 AD



Plato
Stanion

→Polykleitos used mathematical measurements to map out a "perfectly balanced" body, creating a narrow definition of beauty and leading to scrutiny of those in larger bodies. These measurements were based on what he believed to be symbolic of the Greek ideals of balance, harmony, and proportions.

→The introduction of gym culture and the Olympics normalized assessing and comparing each other's bodies in public, reinforcing the idea that a muscular physique was essential for male identity. Showing your body off in the nude was the ultimate way to present yourself as a man in society and receiving criticism in public was common, making the body an opportunity for public discourse. Gymnasiums became a fundamental part of a man's life and frequenting them was a part of your civic duty, including for famous scholars like Socrates and Plato who were known to spend time teaching at gymnasiums. Women were not welcomed at gymnasiums.

→Softness and curvature were associated with femininity and demonized in men. In some art, curvy women were depicted as this was indicative of fertility and health. Generally, femininity was seen as having very little to offer in a war-based society. Men trained and worked tirelessly at gymnasiums to avoid association with femininity and to uphold their societal role.

→Socrates has written on how it is not only your involvement in war and society that is integral to your civic duty, but also how your body looks while doing so (making the body a part of the political realm).

→Ancient Greece's influence on modern diet culture is notable, particularly in medicine, where concepts of morality and health were intertwined.

→Early philosophical thoughts regarding mind-body dualism appeared in Plato's Dialogues, where the mind and body are seen as separate entities. Plato believed the mind could dominate the body, as they were not interconnected and one could exert control over how their body developed.

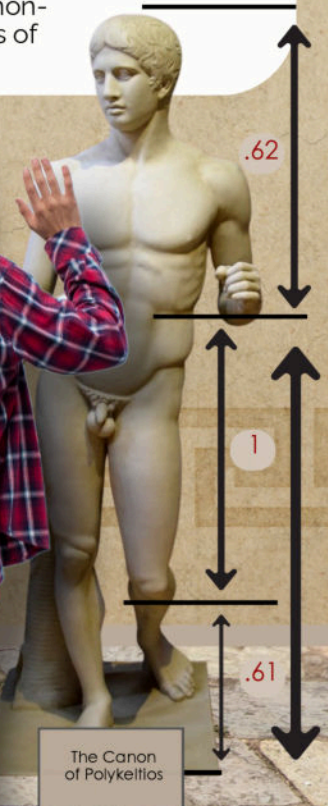
→Ancient Greece experienced extreme prosperity, leading to a complex relationship with the idea of "abundance". The Greeks were focused on ideas of moderation and balance, driven by a fear of hubris and moral decay. An overabundance of anything was linked to moral failing (sex, food, drinking, body fat). Those in fatter bodies began to be scrutinized for focusing too much on one pleasure, hypothesizing that this would lead to the destruction of social harmony.

→Fatness was linked to a disease of the spirit (as opposed to a disease of the body, which we see now in dominant narratives). Hippocrates, the father of modern medicine, introduced dieting and other efforts to reject "too much pleasure" in the name of health (the Greek word 'diaita' translates to 'way of life, regimen').

→This period also saw the link between racial hierarchies and diet culture, with non-Greek diets leading to perceptions of inferiority as a human.



Venus Genetrix
Callimachus



The Canon
of Polykleitos

MIDDLE AGES

500 AD
to 1500 AD

- Rise of Christianity made the naked body something shameful that should be hidden, marking a sharp shift in the ideals we saw in Ancient Greece. Christianity emphasized the spiritual perfection over the ideal physical form, devaluing physical beauty. The ideal man was one who was living in harmony with the universe.
- Christian teachings focused on rejecting bodily pleasures, promoting fasting as a way to achieve spiritual purity. Disabled or ailing bodies were seen as being possessed by spirits or being punished for sins. The body, therefore, was the source of temptation and moral failing, increasing body-based shame.
- Ideas surrounding your geographical location and how you looked continued and were indicative of your character and morality, justifying the brutality of the Crusades in the Middle East.
- Saints and Christian knights were depicted as the ideals of the time. The Christian knight was shown as courageous, strong, fair, tall, and handsome and celebrated for their acts against those in the Middle East

*Think about the "white knight" and its parallels to the Christian knight.
Have you seen this archetype show up in movies or books throughout your life?*



Book of Divine Works, Part 1, Vision 2:
The Cosmic Spheres and Human Being
VAN BINGEN, Hildegard



Bartolomé Bermejo,
Saint Michael
triumphant over the
Devil with the Donor
JUAN, Antonio

AGE OF DISCOVERY

1400 AD
to 1500 AD

→ In the 1400s, Columbus' voyages significantly impacted world history, including through the propagation of colonialism, racism, and diet culture.

→ Columbus feared illness and death when encountering new areas due to unfamiliar resources and food compared to Europe. This fear led Columbus to believe that eating the same food as Indigenous peoples could make him sick. As a result, European food was positioned as superior to Indigenous food, labelling it as "safe and good" versus "dangerous and bad". Colonizers associated any illnesses they experienced with the "uncivilized" food options available to them.

→ More ties between race and body types emerged, as colonizers theorized that the bodily differences they observed were linked to the superior food they consumed. To avoid any likening to Indigenous peoples, colonizers would restrict their eating or impose their European food on Indigenous peoples.

This reflects the belief that "you are what you eat"

→ Colonizers aimed to "civilize" those deemed as others, which required them to continue eating "correct" food. The demonization and scrutiny of their differences was used to justify this and other atrocities, such as the slave trade and sex trafficking, enacted against Indigenous peoples. This time also saw traveling circus shows where people with disabilities would be displayed for paying customers at various ports and then abandoned.



Birth of Venus
Sandro Botticelli



The Landing of Christopher
Columbus at San Salvador
John Vanderlyn



AGE OF DISCOVERY

1400 AD
to 1500 AD

→ Wealthy men in high society were particularly interested in studying and categorizing the human form, focusing on body parts and proportions and adhering to Eurocentric standards of beauty. Artists and philosophers sought to define the "ideal" man and woman, as seen in Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian Man, which illustrates perfect bodily proportions and harmony, reminiscent of Polykleitos' ideals from Ancient Greece.

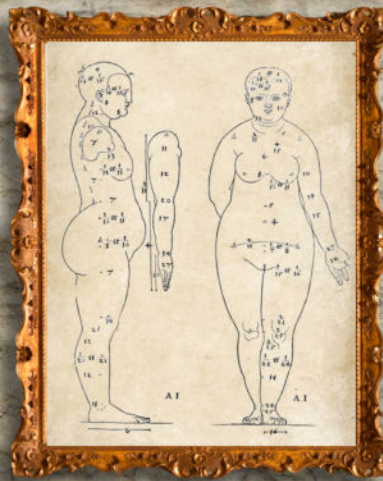
→ Notable artists like Dürer, Raphael, Botticelli, and Urbino had varying views on femininity (some believed beauty was in symmetry, others in the diversity of bodies), but shared the belief that men defined women's beauty. These ideals of female beauty, dictated by men, favored shapely bodies with larger limbs and well-rounded proportions. The Venus archetype was popularized as an ideal body type. Fat women were revered, associated with health and divinity; softness and pronounced hips were seen as superior to thinness.

→ The introduction of enslaved Africans to parts of Europe intensified curiosity about physical differences, leading to the inclusion of Black people in art, although always depicted as the feared or distasteful "other". Despite being favorably depicted for their voluptuous bodies, Black women were still portrayed as socially inferior. The art served as a way to reinforce negative public opinion of Black folks.

→ With the intensification of the slave trade, scholars increasingly aimed to define differences between regions and people through racial categorization.



Portrait of
Maddalena Doni
RAPHAEL



Side and frontal
view of the female
head type 7
DÜRER, Albrecht



Jacques Cartier
HAMEL, Théophile



RENAISSANCE

1400 AD
to 1600 AD

- During the early to mid-1500s, Henry VIII influenced social policy regarding people with disabilities, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and those of low socioeconomic status. Laws were enacted that forbade intercourse between men, hospitals for disabled people were abolished, and the Poor Laws were introduced—a set of laws aimed to address the poor, old, disabled, unemployed, and sick which shaped narratives around personal and moral failings if you were unable to work. Art from this era depicted disabled and aging individuals as burdens to society.
- Men's body image shifted focus from upper body strength to the lower body, emphasizing the groin and legs. Upper body strength was indicative of labour and being poor and so the focus shifted. Fashion encouraged men to display their strength through fitted tights, bejeweled codpieces, and heels to showcase calf muscles.
- The Renaissance continued to celebrate voluptuous, curvy bodies for women, with artists like Rubens (the Rubenesque women) honoring these forms. At the same time, we see the exclusion of Black women from art as the slave trade continued to expand to other parts of Europe and the idea of Black being the "other".
- Like in previous centuries, those in power looked for ways to differentiate between themselves and those without power. Black bodies were ascribed uncivilized and unattractive statuses, while white bodies were seen as pure and superior, contributing to negative stereotypes that still prevail today.
- Artists believed a voluptuous body was ideal, but fat male bodies began to be associated with poor character and intelligence at this time. This shift in perception is hypothesized to be linked with the increase in slavery and those in power looking for ways to differentiate themselves from any similarities they may see in body types with Black slaves.

If having a larger body can happen with those who are enslaved, it is no longer a sign of prosperity and wealth, so this can no longer be popular for white men who do not require fat to give birth.

- Fatness and racist stereotypes blended and fatness for white men came to signify greed and low morality.



RENAISSANCE

1400 AD
to 1600 AD

→ England gained immense power during this time, with Elizabeth I (the Virgin Queen who painted her face white) epitomizing purity and civility, further associating whiteness with attractiveness and Blackness with sexual deviancy and immorality. Black characters begin to pop up in famous bodies of work as comedic relief or as examples of things to avoid (ex: Shakespeare).

→ Female nudity in paintings increased, shifting focus from male nudity seen in Ancient Greece to women, influenced by the male gaze. Several Greek art pieces were reinterpreted during this era and reflected new societal values.

→ Wealthy Europeans continued to seek out ways to distinguish themselves from those deemed "other" and engaged in the pursuit of defining what was intellectual and noble and how they could categorize where someone fell in the social hierarchy. Intellectuals sought out ways to "master themselves" and to avoid being associated with base desires (i.e. hunger) and "savagery".

→ Influential figures like Shakespeare and Descartes began to promote fasting as a means to enhance mental clarity, linking it to moral superiority. Philosophers, scientists, and physicians began to focus their research on what fatness said about one's character and mental abilities, paving the way for common stereotypes of fatness equating to stupidity and laziness.

→ Descartes introduced his influential work of mind-body dualism (reminiscent of Plato's), which stated that the mind and body are separate entities. This work emphasized control over the body through exceptional intellect and willpower, cementing the idea that fasting and higher intelligence are connected.

Although we know today that the mind and body are interconnected, Descartes' work significantly influenced philosophy, science, psychology and more. Can you think of how this has impacted some common misconceptions regarding mental health?

→ At this time, only men were expected to adhere to thinness for intellectual credibility, while women were primarily viewed in terms of their physical appearance and childbearing utility. Although fasting was not universally accepted by the general populace as it was a privileged activity to engage in, the influence of high society and intellectuals shaped cultural narratives that impacted history.



Elizabeth I
GOWER, George



The Beginning of
the Fast
SODOMA, Giovanni
Antonio Bazzi



ORIENTALISM

1600 AD
to 1800 AD

"Orientalism": the representation of Eastern cultures through a Western lens (e.g., in literature, art, philosophies)

- As trading increased with East and Southeast Asia and India, interest with the regions intensified and shaped public opinion. This interest began to influence research, literature, and cultural narratives.
- In Western narratives, Eastern societies were portrayed as fundamentally different and separate from the West. The East was seen as a land of mystery, pleasure, eroticism, and even terror, creating a sense of fascination mixed with fear. Depicted as the new "other" to fear and/or to fetishize, stereotypes abounded, slowly integrating themselves into the Western collective consciousness.
- The literary genre of "Oriental Tales" was popularized. These stories were set in "exotic" Eastern lands and often featured themes of mysticism and adventure. One famous example is Arabian Nights (aka "Aladdin") which became widely known in the West, painting an image of the East filled with magic and intrigue.
- Paintings, ballets, and novels would often depict a hero from the West vanquishing a villain from the East.



Arab knight old illustration.
By unidentified author,
published on Magasin Pittoresque,
Paris, 1840

Arabian Knights
television show,
aired 1968



AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT 1600 AD to 1800 AD

- With the Enlightenment movement, a focus on reason and science over religious authority took off, ushering in a new wave of interest in theorizing about humans' fundamental differences. This age can be understood by the influence of racist theories on the understanding of health and behavior in Europe.

- Nearly a century after England, the slave trade began to enter France. The sudden influx of Africans in France has been theorized as a contributing factor to the abundance of race related literature and research at this time due to the intensification of public fear and hatred of the "other".

- This also marked the rise of "armchair anthropology"; biased accounts, under representative findings, and sensationalized reports regarding faraway countries from researchers who never visited the areas or interacted with the people they were studying.

Research reports centered heavily on Africans due to an increased interest associated with the growing transatlantic slave trade, influencing public perceptions.

- Publications and research linking Africans to gluttony as a way to make sense of the diversity in body shapes they were noticing significantly shaped and reinforced racial stereotypes.

- The first racial categorization system was introduced by Francois Bernier in France, arbitrarily ranking people of different races by skin colour and placing white people at the top of a hierarchical structure.

- In a society marked by white supremacy, intellectuals theorized about which races were "naturally" suited for slavery. Bernier's ideas were widely supported by those in power who wanted to perpetuate the slave trade. These ideas were expanded upon and endorsed by intellectuals who benefited from the ongoing exploitation of enslaved people.

- Racial categorization systems were also used to compare different groups of women, favoring European ones by contrasting Black and white women and how closely they aligned to the "Venus" ideal of feminine beauty.

Within these categories, Black women could only be considered beautiful in terms of their proximity to whiteness (i.e. if they had Eurocentric features) and even then, they were still seen as lesser humans. Categorizing women reinforced their longstanding objectification, driven by the male gaze, regardless of race.

- New categorization systems emerged that focused not only on skin color but also on body types, climate, diet, and environment. These systems expanded racist ideas, linking Blackness and fatness to overindulgence and gluttony. For example, researchers claimed that Africans with larger bodies in food abundant environments were associated with laziness and stupidity, leading to gluttony and fatness.



Johann Friedrich
Blumenbach's
5 races:
introduction of
Cranimetry
in 1795.



AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT 1600 AD to 1800 AD

- Although these racial categorization systems are now seen as pseudo-science, their impacts have been devastating, which we will see throughout the remainder of the timelines.

- The Khoisan, an Indigenous group from Southern Africa, became of particular interest to European researchers. Saartjie "Sarah" Baartman, a member of the Khoisan who likely had a thyroid disorder, became infamous in Europe and symbolized the link between Blackness and fatness.

Displayed to British soldiers in South Africa for profit by her slave owner, Saartjie was eventually brought to England and advertised as part of an early iteration of a circus or "freak show."

- Referred to as the "Hottentot Venus," a name that reflected European views of her as the epitome of sexual desire for Africans, Saartjie was seen as both grotesque and sexually stimulating to the white male gaze. Her shows served to reinforce the racial stereotype linking Blackness and fatness to barbarism and primitiveness. The shows contributed to the idea that fat was peculiar and humiliating, something to be gawked at publicly.

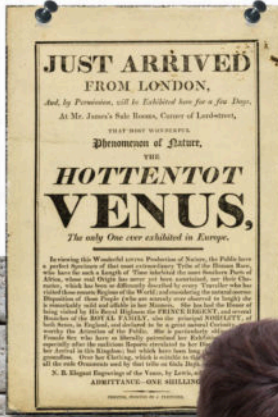
- This idea of fatness being a spectacle was perpetuated by similar exhibits of fat people at the time, shaping societal attitudes. The public discussion and ridicule of fatness seen in these exhibitions has had a lasting influence, continuing in modern media representations (think about fat characters in tv or movies now—are they shown to be one-dimensional, self-diminishing, eternally single, lazy, and so on?).

- Eating and fatness became associated with racial inferiority, laziness, and a lack of intellectual ability. This shift contributed to the development of the modern "thin ideal," marking a turning point in the perception of body types.

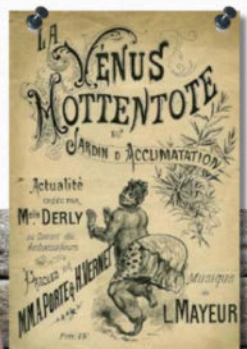
Centuries of admiration for fat bodies began to fade, giving way to anti-fat bias, rooted in anti-Blackness, and the rising preference for thinness in Western society.



Saartjie, The Hottentot Venus by Fredrick Christian Lewis (1810)



Advertisements for the exhibition of the Hottentot Venus, (1789-1815)



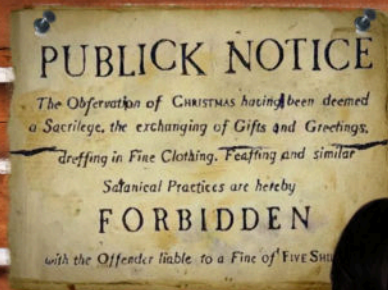
PURITANISM

1600 AD
to 1800 AD

- With fatness firmly linked to Blackness at this point, the values of thinness and discipline became of the utmost importance in English society. Dictated largely by wealthy men, a new standard for living was cemented, founded on a fear of being associated with the "other". For women, this focused primarily on what to eat, drink, and wear.
- Eating less became associated with refinement, and thinner figures were seen as a symbol of this behavior.
- Puritan values further promoted a fear of fatness and indulgence in food, which were seen as sinful.
- During this time, dietary restraint was promoted as a cure for both physical ailments and spiritual distress. Physicians, influenced by Puritan ideals, began promoting extreme weight loss and followed it themselves as an advertisement for their services. Physicians would often cite their weight loss as a gift from a higher power.
- Patients sought treatment not only for physical ailments but also for "sinful" eating habits.
- Diet texts encouraging starvation, avoidance of food, and purging spread widely, reflecting religious devotion and the idea that health was linked to virtue.
- Philosophers in new American colonies also began to suggest that the nation's beauty reflected its morality, giving this view significant influence, especially among high society women looking to define their superiority over those still in Europe.
- Fatness in women was increasingly viewed as immoral and ugly, a significant concern for women who needed to procure marriage matches. With fat men, however, they were still able to retain prominent societal roles and were even able to join clubs, such as "the Ugly Club" to wear socially undesirable traits like fatness as a badge of honor.
- Periodicals began ridiculing fat women, encouraging weight loss or suggesting they move to countries with lower beauty standards.
- Art increasingly depicted tall, slender, white women, highlighting their frames, long necks, and pale skin, reinforcing the beauty standards of the time.



Image of Puritanism
source unknown
(History.com)



Public notice
in Boston
(1659)



1806 advertisement
reprinted in 1912 edition
of Ye Ugly Face Clubb's
papers; aka the
"Most Honourable
and Facetious Society
of Ugly Faces,"
Liverpool, England, 1743-1754

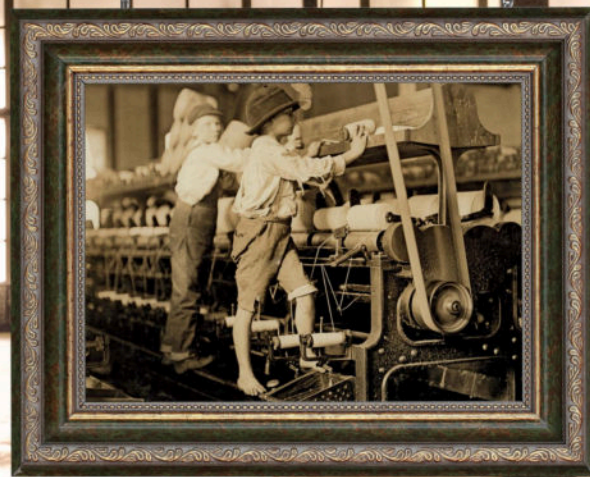


INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION 1768 AD to 1840 AD

- With the advent of the industrial revolution comes the transition of hand made to machine made products, developments in agricultural tools, such as drills, ploughs, etc., and changes in food storage technology. Industrial regions led to an increase in income as well as increased accessibility to food. With that, having food was no longer the predominant status symbol it once was.
- In an effort to redefine the line between the elite and wealthy and everyone else, or the "other", those in higher social classes begin to restrict. Poorer folks, especially those engaging in physical labour, did not have the luxury of intentional restriction, and those in larger bodies were then also associated with lower social classes. This marks a parallel to what was seen in Ancient Greece—restriction in the face of abundance.
- Another advancement from the time was the introduction of ready-made clothing in standardized sizes, which served to further distinguish fat and poor people from the elite. With custom clothing options decreasing, body, as well as social, comparisons increased, serving to isolate poor and fat people.



Parsons
Harper's Bazaar
(1861)

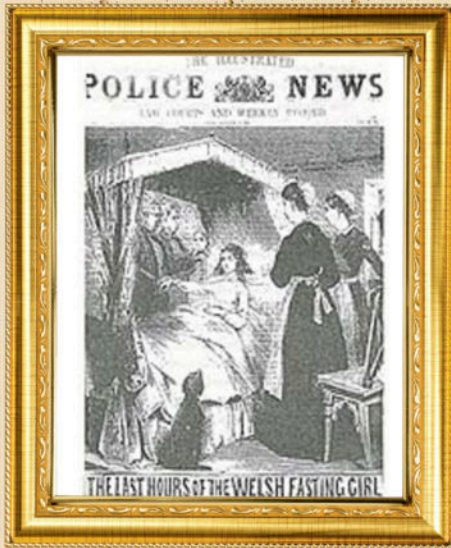


Library of Congress,
Washington, D.C.
(LC-DIG-indc-01581)



AGE OF REFORM

1800's AD



"Fasting Girl"
Sarah Jacob,
by unknown author



"Fasting Girl"
Mollie Fancher,
by unknown author

- With the development of a new colonial society in the Americas, European ideologies remained dominant. Colonizers feared being associated with racial groups outside the "first tier". A new narrative emerged, emphasizing Anglo-Saxon heritage as the ideal, "pure" white race, opposed to, for example, Anglo-Normans, who were stereotyped as having "primitive" or "savage" characteristics because of their physicality.

- This shift in categorization was on the basis non-Anglo-Saxons were genetically closer to Africans and Asians, making them racially inferior. Differences in body types, physical traits, and dietary habits were used to justify these classifications and redefine who is the "other".

- The new colonies extended these associations to people from Eastern Europe and Ireland who may have been stockier or had darker skin tones, as part of a broader effort to undermine their status, limiting their immigration to the colonies.

During this time, we also see the predecessor to the modern BMI introduced – the Quetelet Index. This index, developed by a mathematician and not intended for medical purposes, attempted to assess the social ideals of the "average man". Quetelet focused entirely on white European men and positioned them as the "average" person and body, excluding non-white populations from being viewed as "normal".

- Quetelet's work was often cited and shaped the idea that white bodies were the norm, ideal, and superior. The Quetelet Index influenced the fields of both eugenics and positivist criminology. We will see later in the timeline that the modern BMI continues to perpetuate these racial biases and serves to pathologize non-white populations.



AGE OF REFORM

1800's AD

- The Age of Reform also saw a renewed interest in religion and moral efforts like limiting liquor sales. Ministers, such as Sylvester Graham (of graham cracker fame), became involved in promoting dietary reforms tied to religious salvation. Graham preached that certain foods (animal meat, tea, coffee, spices, sugar) led to unholy sexual desires and advocated for diet changes to restore moral purity.
- During the temperance movement, earlier ideas around exoticism and orientalism being linked to unholiness, deviousness, and temptation were reignited. Drinks like coffee and tea were demonized.

Reports of "fasting girls" also spread; young girls who claimed to fast for prolonged periods and experienced physical symptoms (e.g., loss of sight, smell, taste), citing them as divine gifts. Many of these girls secretly ate or died from starvation (which we understand now as a potential early account of anorexia nervosa). They were displayed and spoken about as curiosities, further fueling the fascination with fasting and linking it to moral superiority and divine favor.



It is only among those who subsist on the non-flesh diet, that the more perfect specimens of symmetry are found.

(Graham 1835)

Taking all vegetable eating nations together. . . they are a larger and much better formed race of flesh eaters.

(Graham 1835)

Sylvester Graham
Presbyterian minister
and dietary reformer



RISE OF THE MAGAZINE 1800 AD to 1900 AD

- New ideas emerged, including the concept of women's right to education. However, what that entailed for women was limited and shaped by puritanical, racist, classist, and misogynistic views widely spread through "ladies' magazines".
- These magazines were marketed not only to the elite, but to an emerging middle class, making their impact widespread.
- Thin white women in accessible fashion were put on display in every issue, linking thinness to superiority and affluence for a broader demographic.
- Temperance, self-regulation, and control over desires (sexual and dietary) were a central focus, cementing the image of the proper, Christian, American woman.
- The magazines encouraged the use of corsets and the practice of eating less to appear delicate and desirable to men.
- The Venus archetype, once celebrated as the Goddess of Love, became associated with unhealthy and undesirable traits, marking a stark departure from Renaissance beauty standards.
- Famous American publications like the New York Times and Harper's Bazaar praised the "American frame," linking thin bodies to status and refinement. These publications also perpetuated anti-Black and anti-fat sentiments, demonizing larger bodies and pathologizing anyone who may be attracted to them.
- There was also a rise of advice columns, like Harper's Bazaar's "For the Ugly Girls," which aimed to help women correct their physical appearance and diets to fit into polite society, reinforcing the idea that a woman's value is inherently linked to their body.
- These magazines played an important role in society, as a woman's best chance for upward social mobility was through securing prosperous marriage matches.



Harper's Bazaar
"For the Ugly Girls"
November 2, 1872

RISE OF THE MAGAZINE 1800 AD to 1900 AD



* Coca-Cola 1860's *



* Godey's Lady's Book 1864 *



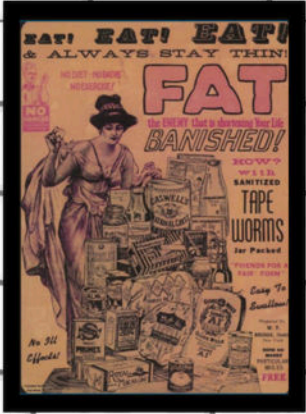
* Magazine Ad 1890's *



* Ritter & Co Ad 1891 *



* News/Magazine Ad 1925 *



* Detroit Free Press Early 1900's *



* Ionized Yeast Ad 1934 *



* Neet Ad 1925 *



* Weight Gain Plan Ad 1943 *



* Deodorant Ad 1943 *



* Australian Women's Weekly 1946 *



LAW AND LABOUR PRACTICES 1800 AD to 1900 AD

- This time period is marked by various laws and practices that shape the bigger picture regarding how people are forced to show up in the world. People are required to "mask" their traits or employ strategies to alter their appearances to gain basic privileges as well as social advantages (e.g., income, social and political currency, freedom from violence, etc.). These efforts to conform are deeply rooted in systems of exclusion and exploitation, where marginalized identities were commodified, policed, or erased for the benefit of dominant groups.
- We see the introduction of the "Ugly Laws", which criminalized the presence of individuals deemed "unsightly" (e.g., BIPOC, disabled, unhoused, poor, diseased) in public spaces. These laws targeted anyone deemed "other" and institutionalized the erasure and policing of marginalized bodies from public life. These laws ran until 1974 in some parts of the United States.
- During the same period, we also see exclusionary policies in the Canadian and American Immigration Acts, which still have an influence on modern day immigration policies. These acts noted that immigrants with any physical or mental disability would not be allowed in the country. Should they arrive by ship, the ship owner would then be charged a penalty and be held responsible for their care, dissuading them from helping immigrants.
- This era was also defined by deeply entrenched racialized policies that weaponized systemic violence against those deemed "other." Indigenous peoples were subjected to cultural genocide through the residential school system, and Chinese laborers were exploited for life-threatening work during the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway, only to be forcibly excluded and legislated against once their labor was no longer needed.
- Those who did not fit the colonial ideal were deliberately erased from the national vision of a "White Canada," treated as disposable tools rather than as people with rights, histories, and futures.



From 1881 to 1884, nearly 16,000 Chinese landed in Victoria on their way to work on the Canadian Pacific Railway in British Columbia's interior

THE LAW IS STRONG AND CLEAR

Mayor Sutro and Chief Crowley Know That It Is Their Duty to Suppress Mendicancy.

No person shall, either directly or indirectly, whether by look, word, sign, or deed, practice begging or mendicancy in or on public thoroughfares of the city and county of San Francisco, nor in any public place. Any person who shall violate the provisions of this section, shall be deemed guilty of a misdemeanor, and on conviction thereof, shall be punished by a fine not exceeding twenty-five dollars, or by imprisonment in the county jail not exceeding twenty-five days, or by both such fine and imprisonment.

On the conviction of any person for violating any of the provisions of this section, if it shall appear that such person is without means of support, and infirm and physically unable to earn a support or livelihood, or is, for any cause, a proper person to be maintained at the Alms-house, the fine and imprisonment provided for in the preceding section may be omitted, and such person may be committed to the Alms-house.

Any person who is diseased, maimed, mutilated, or in any way deformed so as to be an unsightly or disgusting object, or an improper person to be allowed in or on the streets, highways, thoroughfares or public places in the City or County of San Francisco, shall not therein or thereon expose himself or herself to public view.

Any person who shall violate the provisions of this section shall be deemed guilty of a misdemeanor, and on conviction thereof, shall be punished by a fine not exceeding twenty-five dollars, or by imprisonment in the county jail not exceeding twenty-five days, or by both such fine and punishment.

On the conviction of any person for a violation of any of the provisions of this Order, if the same shall seem proper and just, the fine and imprisonment provided for may be omitted, and such person be committed to the Alms-house.

"It is hereby made the duty of the Police Officers to arrest any person who shall violate any of the provisions of this Order."

San Francisco Chronicle

WOMAN WEIGHING 685 POUNDS ARRESTED FOR BEING TOO FAT

Double Doors of Bastille Have to Be Opened to Admit Corpulent Prisoner

San Francisco, May 6 - Obesity is a crime, according to local police, who arrested a woman weighing 685 pounds on a warrant charging her with a violation of the law which prohibits a person from publicly exhibiting a deformity.

The Woman was brought to the prison in taxi cab and before she could booked it was necessary to open the double doors of the prison.



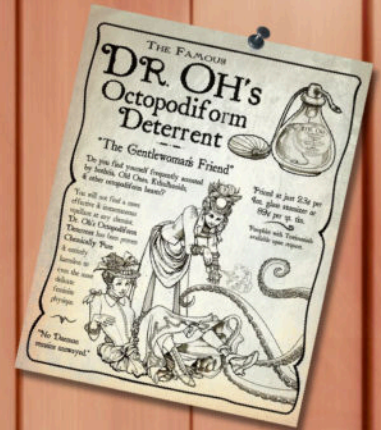
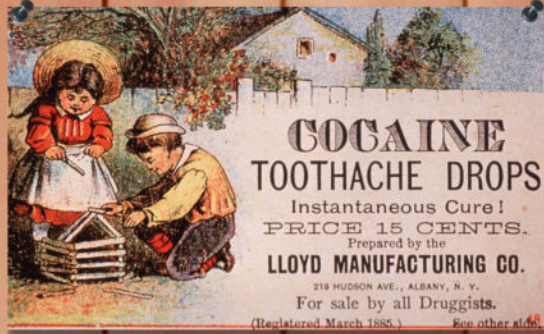
ANTI-FAT

ALLAN'S ANTIFAT is the great remedy for Corpulence. It is purely vegetable and perfectly harmless. It is the only medicine that will reduce the weight of the body, and will not injure the system. It is the only medicine that will reduce the weight of the body, and will not injure the system. It is the only medicine that will reduce the weight of the body, and will not injure the system.

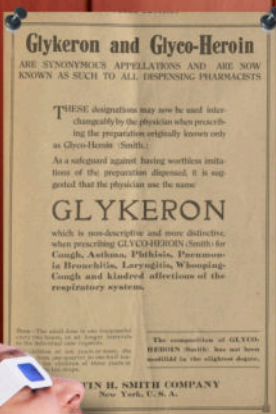
DR. J. C. WATSON'S ANTIFAT. Prepared by J. C. Watson, Buffalo, N. Y.

TRAVELLING SHOWS

1800 AD
to 1900 AD



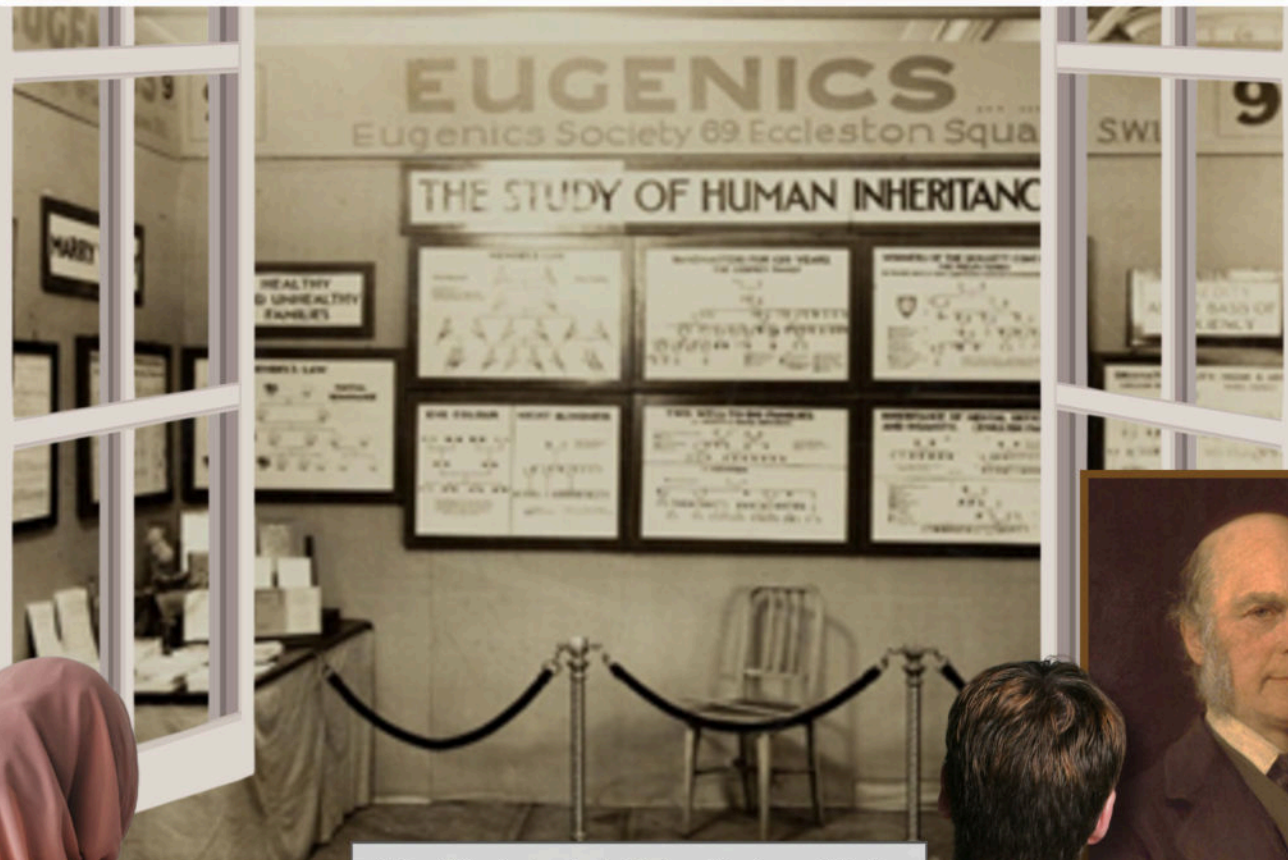
- There is a rise of traveling "medicine shows" where physicians and performers sold "patent medicines," often with dubious or fake credentials. These shows exploited disabled individuals and BIPOC communities—either as subjects to be "cured" or as exoticized figures (e.g., Indigenous knowledge being appropriated for products, which then gave rise to the term "snake oil" as a synonym for scams).
- Most notably, P.T. Barnum's shows became popular and displayed people with disabilities and diverse body types as public spectacles. Although exploitative and ableist, for many disabled people, these performances were among the few ways to secure employment.



EUGENICS

1800 AD
to 1900 AD

- Although these racial categorization systems are now seen as pseudo-science, their impacts have been devastating, which we will see throughout the remainder of the timelines.
- We then see the rise of eugenics, coined by Francis Galton (cousin of Charles Darwin), which was the pseudoscientific belief in improving the human race by selectively breeding people with "desirable" traits.
- Galton's theories were influenced by Quetelet's Index (please see the last issue), which sought to define the "average" or "ideal" human body—a concept that fueled discriminatory practices.
- The goal was to eliminate disease, disability, and so-called undesirable characteristics, which often meant targeting marginalized communities as eugenics was rooted in white supremacist ideology, aiming to "perfect" humanity by promoting whiteness as the ideal.
- Tactics included forced sterilization, institutionalization, and segregation of those deemed "unfit."



1930s exhibit by the Eugenic Society. Two of the signs read "Healthy and Unhealthy Families" and "Heredity as the Basis of Efficiency"



1882 portrait of Galton by Gustav Graef

THE ARYAN RACE

1800 AD
to 1900 AD

- Another shift in racial categorization occurs and we see the rise of the Aryan race.
- Irish immigrants, once racialized and discriminated against, were no longer deemed "foreigners" as their immigration rates declined and they became assimilated into society. Their physical and cultural traits were reimagined to align with the dominant Anglo-Saxon ideal, and they were reclassified as part of the "Nordic" or "Aryan" race.
- With an increase in immigration from Southern and Eastern Europeans, social tensions shifted and, once again, body diversity was used as a racial marker. Immigrants were labeled as "hybrid" people, racially white but culturally and biologically "closer" to African and Asiatic groups – thus reinforcing racism, xenophobia, and antisemitism.
- This shift upheld a racial hierarchy where Northern and Western Europeans were positioned at the top, while Eastern and Southern Europeans were racialized as "lesser whites," further entrenching white supremacy within white populations. This association made them undesirable additions to the American and Canadian populations.

- Publications like Cosmopolitan reinforced these ideas by praising "Aryan beauty" —emphasizing thinness, whiteness, and "purity" as uniquely American ideals. These media narratives celebrated the supposed superiority of white American women, rooted in their Anglo-Saxon lineage.
- Galton's eugenics movement, mentioned above, provided the pseudoscientific foundation for these racial hierarchies.
- Eugenics and racial science thus worked hand-in-hand with media, immigration policy, and beauty standards to exclude, other, and devalue anyone whose bodies or ancestries disrupted the white North American ideal.



March 1894 issue of The Cosmopolitan



PU COPY OF THE NAZI-ISSUED NUREMBERG LAWS: September 1935, German Jews stripped of their citizenship, reducing them to "subjects" of the state



PHYSIQUE CULTURE

1800 AD
to 1900 AD

- The modern Olympics were introduced, reviving the cultural ideal of the "perfect Greek body" as a symbol of athleticism, discipline, and national pride.
- This renewed fascination with Ancient Greece, particularly among Germans, inspired a widespread physical culture movement that emphasized nude male exercise and bodily perfection. In Germany, this movement was deeply tied to nationalism and the Aryan race, with thinkers like Friedrich Nietzsche linking the German identity to the strength, aesthetics, and supposed lineage of the Ancient Greeks.
- The revival of the Olympic Games and renewed admiration for Ancient Greek aesthetics symbolized a return to classical ideals of strength, beauty, and racial superiority.
- These ideals were actively used to reinforce white supremacy, particularly through the lens of the "ideal" Aryan body, and to exclude anyone who didn't fit this mold.

Obesity and its only Cure.

Drugs are nauseous and weakening and do not cure, but the **Krause BELT** and **CORSET BELT** effect a cure practically without the knowledge of the wearer. To the slim they give a graceful and elegant appearance and ensure the proper set of any gown. Gentlemen will also find this belt most beneficial and comfortable. Send for our Illustrated Booklet giving full particulars



Compression Belts
Ladies or Gents
White, Dove, or
White Silk ... 32/6
All White ... 40/-
Send for Booklet

Corset Belts
or Drab 23/6

IF MEN "HATE THE SIGHT OF YOU" — READ THIS —



LET'S BEAT IT— HERE COMES THAT SKINNY DAME

MEN HATE THE SIGHT OF ME, I'M SO SKINNY. I'M GOING TO TRY IRONIZED YEAST


YOU'RE GORGEOUS SINCE YOU'VE GAINED WEIGHT!

A FEW WEEKS LATER

THOUSANDS OF SKINNY GIRLS GAIN 10 TO 20 LBS.—QUICK!

APRIL 1918 ILLS OF NERVOUS MEN & WOMEN HOW TO CURE THEM

PHYSICAL CULTURE



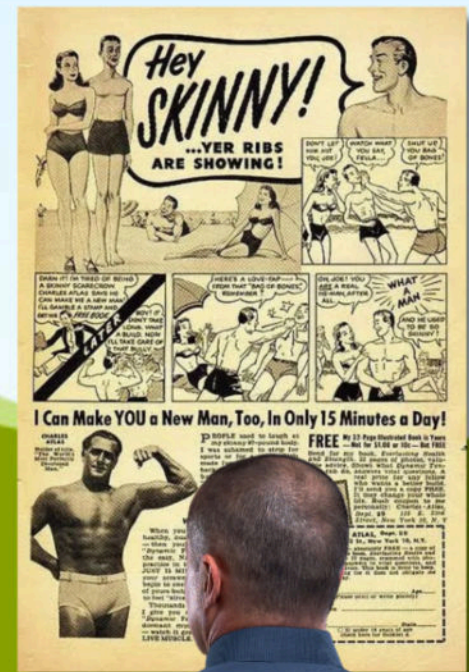
EARTH'S GRANDEST TEMPLE THE PERFECT HUMAN BODY.

In this Issue
Horton Sinclair on
Be Assured?

PHYSIQUE CULTURE

1800 AD
to 1900 AD

- Simultaneously, women were gaining unprecedented social power, provoking widespread anxiety and backlash among men. In response, society saw a surge in hypermasculine ideals, linking muscularity to moral strength and manhood. The imagery of the Greek body being the pinnacle of manhood was co-opted to reinforce this trend.
- Bernarr Macfadden, a key figure in early bodybuilding, launched the Physical Culture magazine and promoted the belief that physical strength was a man's personal responsibility, equating weakness with moral and social failure.
- Men were encouraged to reclaim dominance through hypermasculinity, discipline, and physical transformation, reinforcing the idea that a man's worth was visible on his body.
- Scholars hypothesize that this obsession with reasserting masculinity was a coping mechanism for men experiencing instability in their traditional roles due to changing gender dynamics.



GIBSON GIRL

1800 AD
to 1900 AD

- In the early 1900s, the Gibson Girl emerged as America's new beauty icon. The Gibson Girl was a fictional, highly stylized depiction of a tall, slender, white woman. Marketed as the century's "New Woman," she gained national popularity, even in regions where body diversity was more common.
- The Gibson Girl was a sketch, not a real person, yet she was portrayed as the ideal woman. Her exaggerated, unattainable proportions set a physical standard that women were expected to emulate. We can view her today as a predecessor to Barbie.
- Charles Dana Gibson, the artist behind the image, claimed her beauty was the result of centuries of "purebred" European procreation, tying beauty standards to white supremacist ideologies.
- Publications circulated the Gibson Girl's exact waist and weight measurements, encouraging women to compare themselves directly to this fictional ideal. As women began fixating on weight, the scale was introduced to doctor's offices. Whereas it was once only accessible if admitted to a hospital, women increasingly turned to doctors for self-monitoring as they pursued these unrealistic standards.
- Over time, the home scale was introduced and became a common household item.
- Some scholars point to this as the birth of modern diet culture as we know it, rooted in racialized and classist ideals of beauty, and driven by the pressure to physically conform to a socially constructed image.



Gibson Girls (1898)
illustration by
Charles Dana Gibson

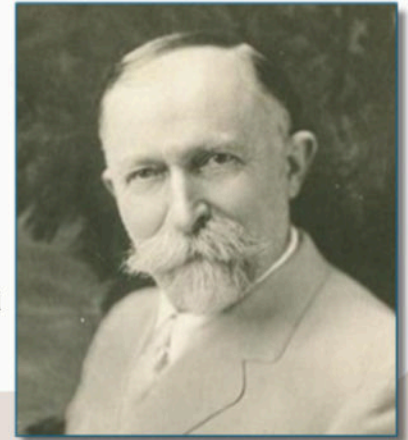


iconic Gibson Girl portrait
by its creator,
Charles Dana Gibson,
circa 1891

KELLOGG

1800 AD
to 1900 AD

- Western medicine intensified its fixation on body size, health, and morality, laying the groundwork for many of the biases still entrenched in today's medical system.
- This period saw a clear call back to Ancient Greece, whose philosophies on bodily balance, purity, and discipline deeply shaped centuries of medical thinking. The idealized Greek body continued to function as the prototype for what health, beauty, and morality should look like.
- Medical journals began increasingly pathologizing higher-weight bodies, often based more on physicians' personal opinions than on empirical evidence.
- John Harvey Kellogg, the famed cereal inventor, was also a physician and sought to refine the American body and diet in service of preserving the so-called Anglo-Saxon race.
- Drawing inspiration from early Greek ideas of bodily control and moral health, Kellogg viewed indulgence, especially in food and bodily pleasures, as sinful. His health crusade focused on discipline through diet, promoting bland foods like cereal and graham crackers to suppress appetites and maintain racial "purity."
- Under the guise of promoting "health," Kellogg helped entrench anti-fat bias in the medical field.
- Thinness became a symbol of morality and control, especially for women. While Kellogg noted it was desirable for women to have some curves, especially in relation to fertility, fatness was demonized and associated with being "savage", reinforcing both sexist and racist ideologies.
- Kellogg also founded the Race Betterment Foundation and played a major role in early eugenics and racial science.
- As an early and influential member of the American Medical Association (AMA), Kellogg's work was widely disseminated among American physicians by the 1910s. His ideas became embedded in institutionalized medicine and significantly contributed to the dominant discourse on race, gender, and body regulation across the country.



Dr. John Harvey Kellogg
1915



WORLD WAR I

1900's AD

- In the early 1900s, North America saw an intensification of both racialized immigration policies and the growing belief that bodily control was a marker of moral and civic worth.
- These developments reinforced the idea that health, appearance, and character were intertwined and that only certain bodies were worthy of national belonging.
- The 1906/1907 Immigration Acts in Canada and the U.S. heightened earlier exclusionary policies, requiring would-be immigrants to undergo medical examinations to determine whether they were "desirable." The term "undesirable" referred not only to those with disabilities or illness but also to individuals with the "wrong" race, ethnicity, religion, or body size.
- Authorities feared that "undesirable" people might "contaminate" North American bloodlines or be unemployable due to their appearance or assumed inferiority.
- Social practices such as the "paper bag test", where individuals were judged on whether their skin tone was lighter than a brown paper bag, reinforced white supremacy and determined who could access basic social privileges.



WORLD WAR I

1900's AD

- During World War I, the government intensified its rhetoric around food restriction, urging citizens to ration in solidarity with soldiers. The U.S. Food Administration's slogan "Victory over Ourselves" linked self-discipline to patriotism and moral virtue.
- Overeating, or even simply eating enough, was framed as selfish and shameful. This period cemented the belief that willpower determined body size, and that fatness was not just unhealthy but a failure of moral character.
- Together, these developments reveal how bodies were politicized and policed, through immigration policies, wartime propaganda, and social norms, reinforcing the idea that only certain people, in certain bodies, were fit to be part of the national image.



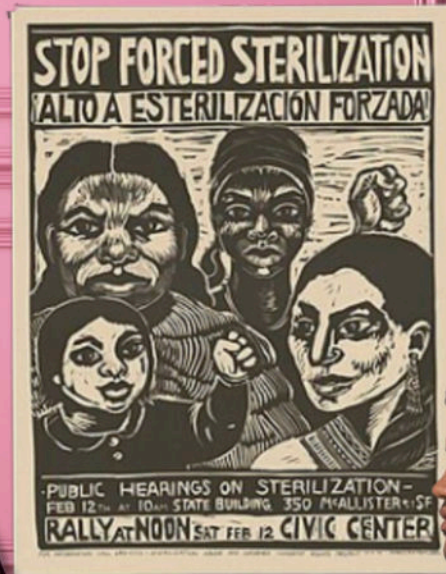
- The 1920s marked a period of immense social anxiety and transformation, which triggered efforts to regain control, particularly over women's bodies, autonomy, and reproduction. As women began claiming more public space and power, the backlash took many forms (e.g., medical, political, aesthetic, and racial).
- Periods of societal upheaval often result in control over marginalized groups, particularly women, who were still viewed as second-class citizens in Western society.
- In response to World War I and shifting gender dynamics, the "flapper" counterculture emerged, where upper-class white American women sought political and sexual freedom, pushing against traditional norms. However, this form of rebellion was not accessible to most women, particularly BIPOC and working-class women.
- Medical publications of the time emphasized bodily control for women, reinforcing racialized standards of not being too thin to damage fertility, but not being too fat to bring shame upon the white population. Being perceived as "too fat" or "too thin" was not simply about individual choices but was also influenced by one's social position within a system of power and privilege.
- Fashion reflected these tensions. Women began wearing shapeless frocks and binding their breasts to create a flat, rectangular look.
- Androgynous style was also a subtle form of queer expression, especially among lesbian women, who adopted cropped hair, suits, vests, and top hats to signal identity in a socially coded way.



ROARIN' 20'S

1920's AD

- Doctors and eugenicists were especially concerned about white women's fertility, fearing that too much weight loss, independence, and new fashion trends would interfere with reproduction.
- Meanwhile, men's fashion shifted toward stronger, tailored silhouettes, reinforcing ideals of tall, lean masculinity.
- Hair removal became tied to whiteness and class. Advertising campaigns framed body hair as embarrassing and unclean, especially underarm hair, suggesting that smooth, white skin was the new standard of femininity. Hairiness was linked to immigrants and lower-class women, reinforcing xenophobic and racist beauty norms.
- The eugenics movement also escalated in Canada during this period. Compulsory sterilization policies targeted BIPOC, disabled, and low-income people, especially Indigenous women and Latinas, to ensure the "success" of the Anglo-Saxon race. As white women entered the workforce and birth rates declined, eugenicists pressured them to reproduce "for the cause."
- As of 2021, the Canadian Standing Committee on Human Rights acknowledged that forced sterilization still occurs, particularly against Indigenous women, often under the radar due to systemic racism and discrimination.



RETURN OF BMI

1920's AD
to 1930's AD

Photo credit: Onurdongel

- In direct contrast, and what some hypothesize as a deliberate reaction, to the flapper movement's bold rejection of the male gaze, medical authorities such as the American Medical Association began promoting vague and contradictory guidelines for women's bodies. These guidelines were framed as health advice but largely functioned as a means of social and bodily control.
- Women were told not to be too thin (to fulfill their presumed role as mothers) and simultaneously warned against becoming too fat, especially as they aged, placing them in a constant state of bodily scrutiny.
- An early iteration of the Body Mass Index (BMI) began to gain traction in North America in the form of "ideal weight tables". Promoted by insurance companies, the tables were used to define "normal" weight and assess client risk for the purposes of maximizing profitability. American insurers relied on self-reported, inconsistent, and unstandardized data, ignoring critical factors such as differences in body composition, other health indicators, race, and so on.
- These tables were then used to deny insurance coverage to individuals deemed "overweight" and gave some doctors justification to refuse care, regardless of a patient's actual health status.
- Critically, women and racial/ethnic minorities were often excluded from these studies, yet the findings were still applied universally, contributing to systemic bias in medical settings.
- The statistical methods used in early BMI-related studies were often misleading. In large data sets, even minor differences in body weight were labeled as statistically significant, despite having little to no real impact on actual health outcomes. These findings were frequently overinterpreted, reinforcing rigid and simplistic standards for "ideal" weight that overlooked key factors like age, muscle mass, and social determinants of health.



Paper bag ad for Bile Beans, circa 1939

Magazine Ad circa 1920's

Newspaper ad circa 1930

THE 1930'S

- By the 1930s, concerns about thinness and its supposed health risks became less of a focus and was replaced by a growing obsession with fatness. After previously being told they were too skinny, women were now being told they were getting too fat.
- In response, doctors and health professionals began developing new methods to control body size, such as the introduction of calorie counting. Diet literature encouraged readers to stop referring to food by its name, e.g., "bread", and instead by its caloric value, such as "100-calorie bread."
- Diet books surged in popularity, often topping bestseller lists, and helped reinforce the idea of food as numbers rather than nourishment.
- At the same time, the ideal female body type became increasingly contradictory: women were expected to be both slender and curvy, with large breasts and hips paired with a small, defined waist.
- The rise of Hollywood and the silver screen further cemented gendered body ideals in popular culture. Film introduced the notion that the camera "adds weight," prompting actors to strive for even leaner physiques.
- For women, this era saw the rise of screen sirens and blonde bombshells (e.g., Jean Harlow), whose exaggerated hourglass figures set the beauty standard. Meanwhile, masculine clothing became associated with lesbianism, prompting a cultural push toward hyper-feminized appearances that catered to the male gaze and helped women avoid social exclusion.



May, 1934
Ionized Yeast ad.



Delineator,
March 1933, page 97.



Kruchen Salts for
weight loss. Circa 1933.



THE 1930'S

- For men, the ideal body shifted to the mesomorphic physique: tall, lean, and muscular, with broad shoulders and a narrow waist (e.g., Clark Gable and Gregory Peck).
 - In response to the sexual liberation of the 1920s, the Hays Code was introduced as a set of industry guidelines to censor film content and reinforce religious and traditional moral values. The code prohibited or heavily restricted depictions of same-sex relationships, criticism of the church, nudity, and other content deemed inappropriate.
 - Marginalized groups, including racial and ethnic minorities, disabled individuals, and others outside the dominant ideal, were routinely depicted in film as dehumanizing caricatures. These representations served to reinforce existing power structures rather than portraying them as fully realized, complex human beings.
- Asian women were reduced to hypersexualized roles like the "Dragon Lady" or "Lotus Blossom", casting them as submissive or dangerously seductive. Asian men were often shown as calculating villains (e.g., Dr. Fu Manchu or Ming the Merciless), reinforcing racialized fears. Disabled characters were typically framed as either villains or objects of pity, promoting negative and limiting narratives, while Black individuals were mostly portrayed in servant roles, echoing long-standing visual traditions (think back to Renaissance era art) that reinforced white superiority.
- In the medical world, Southern and Eastern Europeans, Jewish people, and other non-Aryan groups were increasingly pathologized for their body types, which were deemed "fat" or undesirable. This era saw a rise in antisemitism and xenophobia within medical literature, including articles that demonized cultural foods and debased ethnic groups for their supposed dietary habits.



Boris Karloff in *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (1932) publicity still



Emperor Ming the Merciless - Charles Middleton, 1938



René Lacoste (right) wearing the polo shirt he created, 1933

A CODE
TO GOVERN THE MAKING
OF MOTION PICTURES
the
Reasons Supporting It
and the
Resolution for Uniform
Interpretation

of America, Inc.

THE 1940'S

- While the concept of eugenics has been discussed throughout each issue of the magazine, its prominence surged in the 1940s, particularly with Nazi Germany's systematic attempt to eliminate so-called "undesirable" traits, targeting Jewish people, disabled individuals, LGBTQIA+ communities, and ethnic minorities, in pursuit of an Aryan supremacist agenda.
- The "pin-up girl" became iconic in the 1940s; women were objectified in media to boost morale for soldiers at war, often using beauty products, hip/butt padding, and hair tools to perfect their appearance.
- Red lipstick symbolized victory and companies like Elizabeth Arden made lipstick to match women's military uniforms, emphasizing the link between beauty and moral and patriotic obligations. The phrase "Beauty was your duty" became popular during this time.
- Post-WWII, there was a growing emphasis on male muscularity fueled by a desire to demonstrate national vitality.
- Charles Atlas, seen as the father of bodybuilding, rose to fame and promoted physical strength as a source of confidence and power.
- In 1948, the first Mr. Universe contest emphasized strong physiques like barrel chests and sculpted legs. Shortly after, characters like Superman wore padded suits to appear more muscular.
- Societal pressure to marry and start families increased. Both men and women were encouraged to carefully manage their appearance to improve their chances of marriage and successful reproduction.



Betty Grable in her famous 1943 pin-up. It became one of the biggest-selling photographs of World War II, selling over five million copies.



Advertisement for Charles Atlas' "Dynamic Tension" bodybuilding system. Advertisement from the pulp magazine Weird Tales (September 1941, vol. 36, no. 1)



Kirk Alyn portrayed the Man of Steel in two 15-part movie serials in 1948 & 1950



Max Factor ad, August 1940



THE 1950'S

- The 1950s mark the rise of corporate America. An increase in jobs and post-war prosperity led to a heavy focus on capitalism and a consumerism-driven economy. As such, there is a boom in marketing and product development centered around corporate success.
- With men returning from war, society strongly emphasized marriage and family life, leading to the Baby Boom.
- Women were pressured to pursue the so-called "M.R.S. Degree," centering their lives around finding a husband. There was also a significant rise in marketing directed at the ideal housewife, reinforcing domestic roles and consumer-driven femininity.
- Media and fashion promoted hyper-feminine ideals, reinforcing narrow standards of beauty and gender roles.
- For women, the hourglass figure is re-popularized as the dominant beauty standard, with an emphasis on bust and curves. Women are encouraged to use contouring and shaping garments to achieve this look.
- Playboy, launched in 1953, promoted the hourglass ideal with its first cover star, Marilyn Monroe. Notably, the cover was published without Monroe's consent, underscoring how normalized it was at the time to disregard women's bodily autonomy and self-agency. The magazine quickly became a cultural phenomenon.
- Media and literature also reinforced the ideal appearance of the American man aspiring to climb the corporate ladder. The "executive look" takes off and emphasizes tall, boxy frames and broad shoulders to appear dominant and masculine. Height was idealized for giving men a domineering presence and clear distinction from women.



Alcoa Aluminum twist off ketchup bottle ad, 1953



Chase & Sandborn Coffee ad circa 1952



Marilyn Monroe Playboy Cover Circa 1953



Tropical weight Darcon and Wool suits Circa 1951



THE 1950'S

- Societal pressure to conform to a "wholesome" and "normal" lifestyle intensified during this period, creating rising tensions for Black Americans, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and those with dissenting political views, who were marginalized for existing outside the dominant cultural narrative.

- The "clean-cut", white, "all-American" image permeated all facets of pop culture and there was a deliberate avoidance of Black cultural influences (e.g., demonization of rock and roll, preference for crew cuts, etc.). Black Americans had to often adopt fashion and grooming choices associated with white cultural norms, such as straightening their hair and modifying speech patterns and tone, as a means of navigating systemic racism and gaining social acceptance.

- The 1950s music scene also reflected broader cultural tensions between Black and white communities. Rock and roll, created by Black musicians, became both a tool of resistance and a target of racism. Public opinion was divided: some saw rock and roll as dangerous, rebellious, and tied to racist stereotypes about Black people being "uncivilized" and "sexual." Others saw it as a progressive and unifying force that challenged social norms and racial prejudice.

- As a youth counterculture emerged, rock and roll became a symbol of rebellion. Artists like Elvis Presley helped popularize Black-originated music among white audiences, making it more "acceptable" to the mainstream.

- Magazines like Physique Pictorial and Beefcake played a key role in popularizing the muscular male body. At a time when gay pornography was heavily censored, these publications became significant within gay male culture, celebrating hyper-masculinity as both erotic and subversive.

Artists like Tom of Finland depicted exaggerated, macho figures to challenge stereotypes that portrayed gay men as inherently feminine. While these images empowered some by reclaiming masculinity, they also reinforced patriarchal ideals by devaluing femininity and equating power and desirability with traditionally masculine traits.



Van Heusen Ad 1940's-50's



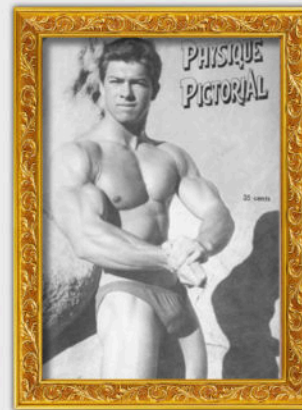
1950's Men's hair styles



Chuck Berry
Circa 1957



The Supremes with Mary Wilson,
Florence Ballard, and Diana Ross
(1950s-60s)



Bob Mizer in 1962
Physique Pictorial Vol 12 No 1



Elvis Presley
Jail House Rock
Circa 1957



THE 1960'S

- New medical studies began to challenge assumptions about weight, indicating that thinness wasn't always healthy and "obesity" didn't always lead to issues like heart disease. Despite these nuanced findings, anti-fat bias persisted in the medical community.
- Ancel Keys, who rebranded the Quetelet Index as the modern Body Mass Index (BMI), acknowledged that fatness did not necessarily predict poor health or early death. He also recognized that earlier tools like insurance tables and the Quetelet Index were flawed in accurately linking weight to mortality. Despite this, Keys endorsed BMI, driven in part by his belief that fatness was morally "repugnant", revealing how aesthetic and moral judgments continued to shape medical thinking.
- The 1960s marked a major cultural shift, acting as a counterculture to the conservative values of the 1950s. As baby boomers came of age, they wielded significant social and political influence.
- The decade was defined by activism, liberation movements, and a rejection of mainstream norms. To name a few:
 - Anti-War Movement
 - Civil Rights Movement
 - Fat Acceptance Movement (led by fat, queer, Black women – the origin of today's Body Positivity Movement)
 - Black is Beautiful Movement (challenging white beauty standards)
 - Gay Liberation Movement
 - Second Wave Feminism (workplace equality, reproductive rights, etc.)
 - And so many more (Asian American Civil Rights Movement, Chicano Rights Movement, etc.)



The Civil Rights Act
Dr. Martin Luther
King Jr.
Circa 1964

"Obesity" is "disgusting -
ethically repugnant"
(Keys 1961)

"Maybe if the idea got around
that obesity is immoral, the
fat man would start to think"
(Keys 1961)



Ancel Keys
Circa 1957



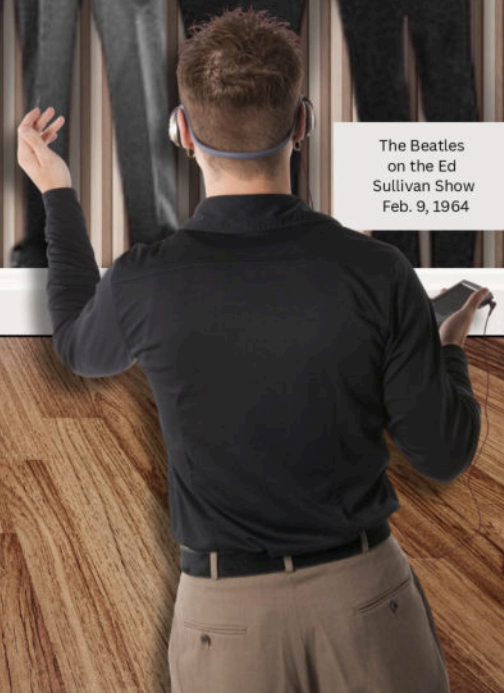
THE 1960'S

- There was an increase in female workforce participation and the rise of the "Single Girl" – a new image of the independent, self-sufficient woman who wasn't defined by marriage, which coincided with the widespread availability of the birth control pill.
- A backlash to these social movements led to the return of restrictive body standards, especially for women. The "Twiggy" aesthetic emerged, favoring extreme thinness as the beauty ideal, free from the exaggerated curves of the 1950s.
- Weight Watchers was founded, promoting weight loss through point-counting. It became normalized to take extreme measures to lose or hide weight and shapewear was replaced by diet and exercise.
- "Ready-to-wear" fashion became widespread and targeted working women with disposable income. This helped solidify magazine models as body and fashion icons.
- Much like the shift seen with women, men's body ideals also moved toward a slick and slender look, moving away from the previously favored large and boxy frame. Influential figures such as Sean Connery's James Bond and the early Beatles exemplified this leaner aesthetic.
- In contrast, male athletes—particularly in competitive sports and bodybuilding—began using steroids, which became increasingly common by the 1970s. With little public awareness, athletes' physiques grew progressively extreme due to escalating steroid dosages, helping to establish unrealistic body standards that would become even more prominent in the decades to follow.

Sean Connery
as James Bond
Circa 1960's

Twiggy Lawson
Circa 1967

The Beatles
on the Ed
Sullivan Show
Feb. 9, 1964



THE 1970'S

- The late 1960s/early 1970s were marked by counter-cultural movements in response to sociopolitical unrest. In general, we see the rise of androgyny, gender-nonconforming fashion, and interest in Eastern ideologies (e.g., David Bowie, Led Zeppelin, The Beatles in India).
- Gender-bending fashion became common across all genders, often emphasizing the contrast between body and clothing. Narratives around rejecting the male gaze through self-expression intensified and we see more representation for LGBTQIA+ individuals.
- By the mid-1970s, "wellness culture" (popularized by a 60 Minutes segment) emerges, emphasizing mind, body, spirit, and environment.
- The societal focus shifted from exercise to natural food, holistic health, and self-care practices. These wellness practices were often exclusive to white, middle-class individuals with the luxury of time and money. Pursuing wellness became a status symbol.
- The counterculture movement extended into the food world, where there was a widespread rejection of convenience foods like microwavable meals and packaged snacks (items that had defined the 1950s and 60s). Instead, there was a growing obsession with so-called "natural" or "whole" foods.
- This shift brought an increased interest in plant-based diets, vegetarianism, and ingredients rooted in non-Western cuisines, such as brown rice, tofu, seaweed, and lentils. These foods, once marginalized, were suddenly rebranded by mostly white, middle-class folks as symbols of purity, health, and enlightenment. The same foods that had once been stigmatized or viewed as "foreign" or "inferior" were now being elevated by white communities and treated as status symbols, often without acknowledging or respecting their cultural origins.



David Bowie - Life on Mars
London 1939



Elton John
Circa 1970



Lee Majors and Farrah Fawcett
People Magazine - July 1977



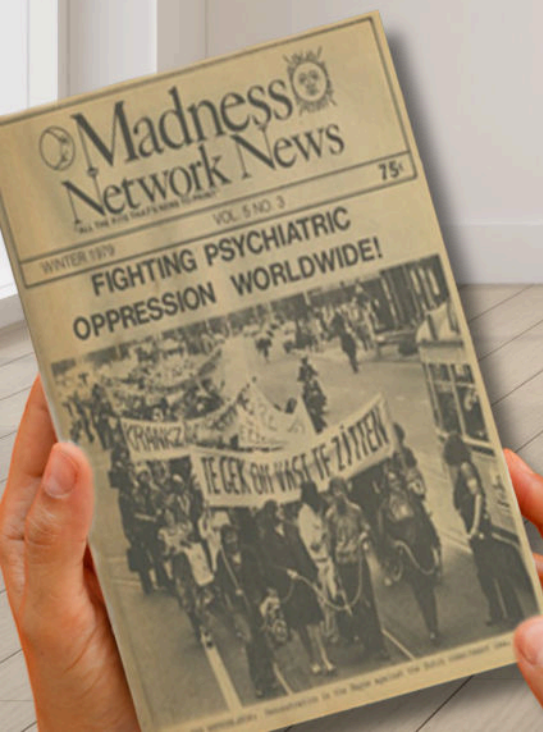
Linda Carter- Wonder Woman
Circa 1975



Insight Meditation Society
1977 "Sitting in the Upper
Walking Room



Divine, 1970s -
inspired story from
"I Am Divine"



THE 1970'S

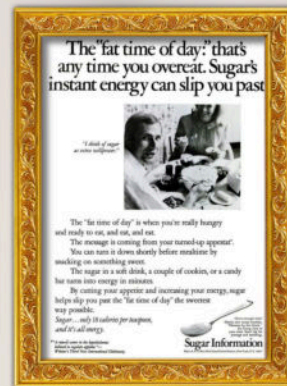
- Diet books at the time adapted to this shift in narratives and began to re-popularize the idea that illness resulted from personal failure or ignorance.
- The thin ideal from the 1960s evolved thanks to wellness culture and now both men and women were expected to not only be thin, but also athletic.
- The disco queen aesthetic popularizes and there is a pressure for women to appear long-legged, toned, and thin.
- A surge in eating disorders occurs, often fueled by celebrity endorsements of low-carb diets, diet pills, and recreational drugs
- Men began to show more skin in their outfits to highlight their frames.
- We also see the creation of Playgirl, nearly 20 years after Playboy launches, reflecting growing sexualization of male bodies.
- Marginalized communities, particularly Black Americans, also began to turn to alternative wellness practices due to deep mistrust in the medical system. This distrust stems in part from events like the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, where Black men were misled and denied treatment so researchers could study the disease's progression. The study became a lasting symbol of institutional racism and exploitation in healthcare. Similarly, the anti-psychiatry movement arose in response to widespread abuse, further eroding trust in mainstream medical systems.



Françoise Rubartelli on cover of 1969 Vogue



Tuskegee Syphilis Study, circa 1932-1972



USA Sugar Association 1970's Ad Campaign



Photo Credit: Faruk Tokiulolu



THE 1980'S

- The 1980s start off with a struggling economy, and political leaders try to restore national confidence (ex: Reagan's famous "Make America Great Again" captures this push for strength).
- This time period becomes known as the age of austerity, with major cuts to social programs and a "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" mindset shaping public policy.
- This period also marks the BMI entering everyday conversation, thanks to major reports from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- While prominent health departments began illustrating health disparities rooted in social and environmental factors, they largely blamed individual choices, shifting responsibility onto people rather than systems.
- Folks began to hear prominent figures in government telling people to manage their own health through diet and exercise instead of looking to medical providers or broader social support.
- With leaders like Reagan, Thatcher, and Mulroney promoting neoliberalism, society moved toward a strong sense of individualism. This meant social determinants of health were often ignored, which played a major role in the devastating spread of the AIDS crisis.
- There is a push toward exercise, toning, and aerobics, along with the rise of the supermodel as a cultural icon. People leaned heavily into diet pills and shakes, believing these were key to maintaining the ideal body.
- Health and fitness became things you had to buy into through fee-for-service weight-loss plans, home exercise programs, and other products that excluded many marginalized communities.
- While all of this is happening, the widespread and misleading idea that "obesity" simply comes from eating more calories than you burn, ignoring the complexity of metabolism and biology, becomes more cemented.



THE 1980'S

CONSUMERISM

ERA OF EXCESS

- The decade exploded with industries built around muscular male bodies: Chippendales, Men's Fitness, Men's Health, and iconic Calvin Klein underwear ads. The 1980s were commonly known as the bodybuilder decade, fueled by steroid use and public training spaces like Muscle Beach, where men visually compared physiques (echoing the gyms of Ancient Greece from issue #1).

- For the first time to this degree, shirtless and hyper-muscular men became a common media image, showing up in ads, films like Conan the Barbarian and Rambo, and fitness culture.

- Researchers often connect this muscular ideal to Reagan-era messages that emphasize self-reliance, toughness, and traditional masculinity. With economic insecurity and shifting job markets, the cultural narrative leaned heavily on the idea of men as strong protectors – a role visually reinforced by the decade's obsession with muscular bodies.

- As HIV/AIDS spread, the drive for muscularity took on a new facet – it became a way to signal you were healthy and not sick. Many people worried about appearing too thin, since thinness began to be associated with illness and social rejection.

- Media narratives increasingly portrayed people with HIV/AIDS as undesirable, asexual, or unable to fully participate in society, reinforcing harmful ableist ideas.

- Gay men, already facing discrimination, often felt pressure to distance themselves from anything associated with HIV/AIDS. Many did this through grooming, fashion, steroid use, and intense fitness routines, all aimed at appearing "healthy," "virile," and socially acceptable. This created a painful overlap of homophobia and ableism.

- As the 1980s continue and Baby Boomers enter adulthood, consumerism skyrockets. People embrace an era of excess, especially in fashion, with big shoulders, power suits, and bold silhouettes symbolizing strength and authority.



THE 1990'S

- The 1990s are the decade when the World Health Organization declares "obesity" its global enemy, intensifying fear-based messaging around body size.

- BMI categories (already arbitrary and not grounded in robust medical evidence, as explored in previous issues) are shifted downward so that more people fall into "overweight" or "obese" categories. Despite the American Medical Association raising concerns with the new cutoffs, they went through. Important to note, the task force influencing these new BMI cutoffs was funded by companies selling new weight-loss drugs, raising major conflicts of interest.

- The 1990s see the catwalk becoming the pinnacle of what's chic. Women are pushed toward extreme thinness, often turning to cigarettes, drugs, and severe restriction to stay as slim as possible. Men experience similar pressures, encouraged to be very lean but still toned, creating a narrow and demanding version of the ideal male body.

- This decade sees one of the highest recorded rates of anorexia nervosa, reflecting how intense these pressures were.

- Curves, especially "big butts", become undesirable again, reinforcing an ultra-thin ideal.

- Although mainstream body ideals continue to favor thinness, the 1990s do bring some progress in representation. RuPaul's MAC Viva Glam campaign becomes a landmark moment and a significant move toward queer and gender-diverse visibility in beauty advertising.

- Additionally, the term Two-Spirit is formally acknowledged during this decade, giving broader recognition to Indigenous gender identities as well as transgender studies emerges as an academic discipline, signaling institutional shifts in how gender diversity is understood and studied.



THE 2000'S

- The 2000s mark the official beginning of the so-called "obesity epidemic," a period where fat bodies are heavily demonized in public health messaging and media. This renewed focus relies on the racially biased BMI, weaponized to paint BIPOC communities as the "most diseased" or lacking self-control. This revives long-standing racist stereotypes around fatness, morality, appetite, and discipline.

- In terms of body ideals, the 2000s swing back to a focus on strength, unlike the ultra-thin 1990s aesthetic. Televised events like the Victoria's Secret Fashion Show help define this aesthetic, showcasing models' intense and often unattainable workout routines.

- Low-rise jeans become wildly popular, specifically to show off toned stomachs.

- The decade also sees a rise in yoga classes, personal trainers, gym culture, and a general fixation with "healthy" strength.

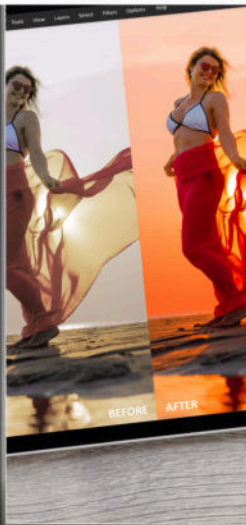
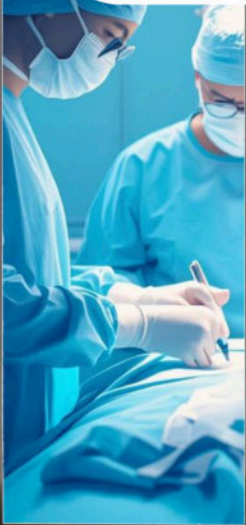
- Cosmetic practices like spray tanning and surgical procedures such as liposuction and tummy tucks surge in popularity as low body fat is put on a pedestal. Programs like Weight Watchers and Jenny Craig experience major membership increases, reinforcing the era's emphasis on dieting and body control.

- The rise of reality TV intensifies unhealthy appearance standards and public shaming. Shows like The Biggest Loser and America's Next Top Model create extreme, unrealistic expectations around weight loss, fitness, attractiveness, and "perfect" bodies.



THE 2010'S

- The 2010s bring back the desire for curves, but in a very narrow, selective way; highly emphasized butts and breasts, with the rest of the body expected to stay small and toned.
- We see a major rise in plastic surgery, including butt lifts, breast augmentations, and contouring procedures.
- Photoshop and digital editing become standard in advertising and social media, further distancing beauty standards from reality.
- Social media becomes a new "third place" where identity is performed in front of an audience, often pushing people toward conformity, perfectionism, and enhanced appearance management.
- Rapid advances in phone cameras, filters, apps, and targeted ads feed a constant sense that your face and body should be optimized.
- Men experience a renewed push toward muscularity, particularly the "barrel chest" look: broad, built, and defined from top to bottom. The trend demands visible muscle definition, reinforcing a hyper-fit, superhero-like ideal.
- Throughout the decade, the media continues to amplify fear around the so-called "obesity epidemic," keeping fat bodies framed as risky, unhealthy, and socially problematic.
- In 2013, epidemiologist Katherine Flegal conducts a landmark analysis reviewing decades of medical research on weight and mortality, offering findings that challenge mainstream beliefs. Even though the findings were backed by extensive data, public backlash was intense, fueled by deeply ingrained anti-fat attitudes.



THE 2020'S

Although we are still in this decade, some trends have become apparent.


- Influencer culture has truly taken off, with social feeds becoming highlight reels that intensify comparison.
- As dating apps continue to rise in popularity, people are increasingly pressured to present themselves through carefully curated photos, a setup that amplifies comparison, insecurity, and rejection sensitivity. For 2S LGBTQIA+ users, these platforms often push reductionist labels, encouraging people to flatten themselves into stereotypes.
- Reality TV regains huge cultural influence, often showcasing manipulated or surgically modified bodies (Love Island, Too Hot to Handle, Drag Race, Botched, etc.)
- Additionally, over the past few years, weight-loss drugs have risen sharply in visibility.
- We are also seeing a significant shift back into wellness culture (as discussed in the last issue). Wellness markets itself as an active pursuit of health, longevity, and self-enhancement, emphasizing individual choice, discipline, and responsibility.
- As explicit dieting falls out of social favour, wellness culture becomes its more socially acceptable successor: still promoting thinness, muscularity, and "ideal" body shapes, but now repackaged as "lifestyle choices."
- Wellness has an undeniable elitist layer: succeeding at it requires time, money, access, and often a body already close to Western beauty norms.
- We see influencers promoting "no-makeup" makeup, "clean girl aesthetic", "pretty privilege", clean eating, and intensified quest to look youthful, tying these trends to both ageism and white supremacy.



THE 2020'S

- Wellness culture equates health with moral goodness, creating a hierarchy where people who appear "clean," "natural," or "glowing" are seen as superior.
- After years of surgical procedures like BBLs and breast augmentations, many celebrities begin reversing plastic surgery. This has been framed as a return to "authentic health," reinforcing that a certain kind of natural beauty equals virtue.
- Often, for women, wellness is sold through cleanses, spiritual auras, and Eastern-influenced rituals. Whereas for men, it's framed as engineering, optimization, and peak performance, a scientific quest rather than a spiritual one.
- We are seeing tech elites promote "biohacking" as a way to optimize productivity and push the body beyond natural limits (ex: intermittent fasting, ice baths, extreme routines, supplements, gadget-driven health monitoring).
- These practices are reminiscent of early philosophers and ascetics who believed self-denial could bring enlightenment, but now they're sold as tech innovation. Biohacking culture has become an exclusive club marketed primarily to men, reinforcing old patterns of misogynistic gatekeeping around "higher knowledge."
- There is also a rise in young men feeling as if they must constantly "perform" masculinity or risk shame and social exclusion. We can see this in the "gym bro" culture, hustle mindset, and the alpha/beta male dichotomy.
- Prominent male influencers are offering simplified solutions to men's anxieties by promoting hypermasculinity and discouraging men from seeking mental health support. These pressures have been shown to contribute to risky and disordered behaviours, like steroid use, extreme dieting, and compulsive exercise.
- Alternatively, there has also been a clear increase in diverse body representation across media. We can see more diverse stories being funded and promoted in film and television. We are also seeing an increase in body diversity campaigns. This shift often coexists with rainbow capitalism and tokenism, which is representation as a marketing tool rather than a structural change and there is still progress to be made.





Across this five-part timeline, one truth becomes increasingly clear: whenever marginalized communities gain visibility, agency, or political ground, society responds by tightening the rules around whose bodies are allowed to be seen as valuable.

Beauty, health, and fitness standards have long been tools of social control, codified through cisheterosexism, white supremacy, ableism, and anti-fat bias, to keep people in line.

As Da'Shaun L. Harrison (2021) notes, we are taught from birth what our bodies must look like if we want to belong, and we are policed relentlessly when we diverge from those expectations. But recognizing this pattern gives us power.

When we understand that these body ideals were constructed, we can finally begin to refuse them. Divesting from these narratives is an act of resistance.

As we collectively unlearn the narratives we were handed, we open up room for all bodies, fat, disabled, queer, trans, racialized, and otherwise marginalized, to exist without surveillance, without justification, and without shrinking.

That is the invitation this timeline leaves us with: to not only understand how body norms have constrained us, but to imagine, and build, a world where every body is allowed to be fully human.

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<https://bana.ca/magazineresources/>



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