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Sculpting the Heroic and the Homoerotic

Physical culture played an important role in the emergence of homosexual communities of desire. It was necessary, if the body was to produce the desired effect within advertising culture, to render it present in some ways, and invisible in others. This is especially relevant to the potential homoerotic reading of body images. In making the body into a more tangible commodity or circulating erotic good, photographs were crucial.¹ From its very beginnings, photography was used as a means of validating an ideologically and historically based social order which assumed an unchanging constitution of real space. If there was a literal sculpture machine, it was the technology of the camera. The realism of the photograph and other reproductions seemed at first a kind of antidote to the swirl of life’s complexities as they were mirrored within the expanding print media of the fin de siècle.² Ideal sculptural images, both old and newly carved, or photographically reproduced, quickly assumed a new importance as evidence of the desired static self, representative of a stable history and a clearly concrete present. Photographically contrasting the heroic and the erotic was one of several oppositions that both inscribed and erased individual desires and experiences. Changing industrial technologies and nationalistic commercial imperatives made the mass dissemination of such oppositions not only possible but desirable. The use of the before and after photo had already been pioneered by Booth in promoting his conversion of drunks and vagrants.³ The police mugshot was being used on a wider scale, and in medical and other reputed social-scientific analyses, photos of the diseased and degenerate were also being employed.⁴ The means of reproducing photos had also improved and the means of having them taken were more readily available.

The colonization by health culture commerce of this relatively new space of identity formation was thus accomplished within the context of a developing mass economy in which men especially

M. A. Budd, The Sculpture Machine © Michael Anton Budd 1997
were more able to compare themselves, 'invidiously' as Veblen thought, to one another, and to ideal images. As a way of charting the self through life, the growing presence of photos had a marked influence on bodily conceptions generally. The objective stance of the pathologist could be adopted to some extent by any person in possession of a 'post-mortem portrait'. This is an important insight in terms of the commercial selling of fitness. It implied a clearer notion of a standard of normalcy with regard to bodies and the creation of a seemingly concrete and absolute objective perspective quite outside of bodily experience. From such a seductive pathological standpoint the corporeal could be analysed and judged in new ways and in turn could presumably be reshaped.

The first of Sandow's 'Great Competitions' was introduced in the initial issues of his magazine. It was a contest that aimed to attract readers and students for mail order instruction, to provide the magazine with photos to publish, and create general publicity for Sandow's gymasia and other enterprises. The contest response provides a look at the genesis of a modern male body image as a participatory process. Pictures were sent in from all over Britain. Some contributors posed formally in the ways that strongmen did on cheap postcards. A larger number of entrants simply faced the camera, while others stood with their backs to it, perhaps in order to hide their faces. Most men simply looked forward with their arms crossed across their chests. All photos were cropped so that the men appeared only from the waist up. Some wore moustaches, their haircuts were universally short, most were younger, a few middle-aged, some skinny, others brawny, or tattooed. A few wore singlets, though most were shirtless. Almost all of the photos were studio portraits with matt scenery backgrounds. Rather than revealing an obvious bodily ideal, the photos submitted presented a myriad of different body types. Although publications such as Sandow's constantly made reference to the symmetrical ideal of classicism, even the great strongman himself was shorter and stockier than typical examples of male perfection from antiquity. In this sense, the idea of normalcy was more complicated than it would at first appear to be.

Sandow selected the photos for publication 'haphazardly from a number', and kept a 'monster album' of all photographs sent to him at his headquarters ('Sandow Hall', Savoy Street, the Strand, London). Gold, silver and bronze statuettes of Sandow were given as prizes at the first Albert Hall competition. The eventual group