

Performing masculine perfection: Eugen Sandow's american male ideal



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Abstract

In the late 1800s masculinity as understood in the United States' urban northeast underwent a major transformation as the preceding emphasis upon decorum and civility gave way to a new ideal based on masculine health and fitness. This thesis seeks to demonstrate the significant role that Eugen Sandow, a Prussian born strongman who rose to international fame at the turn of the century, played in this masculine transformation. Sandow rose to stardom alongside theatre impresario Florenz Ziegfeld and used that stardom to revolutionize American manhood. Sandow was a performer, an athlete, and marketing genius. These three distinct identities coalesced to allow Sandow the opportunity to inspire a nation.

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Victorian strongman Eugen Sandow was once an image of masculine perfection. He was the celebrity poster boy who made fitness popular. But how impressive is his physique today? As a youth Eugen Sandow would visit museums and study the Grecian ideal depicted in the statues. These bodies became his formula for the perfect physique and he would adopt the poses as he flexed his muscles in picture postcards and on music hall stages, sending Victorian ladies - and men - into a frenzy. But Sandow was a very modern man. As a body obsessive, he gave us the idealised image of ripped abs that have become the Holy Grail for many body conscious men. Before him, no-one believed that a human could achieve the sculpted perfection of classical art.