

AMERICAN HUNKS

The Muscular Male Body in Popular Culture
1860–1970

David L. Chapman and Brett Josef Grubisic

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THE PIONEERS

1860–1914

The muscular American male body began its long and gradual striptease in the mid-nineteenth century. Part of this growing ease with man-to-man comradeship came from the forced intimacy with other men (i.e., other soldiers) during the Civil War (1860–1865). Later, it was also encouraged by the development of photography as a medium of communication and through vaudeville as a way of spreading popular culture. Professional strongmen lifted weights and snapped chains on stage, and in the process they showed Americans what a muscular man looked like and what he could do. It was not until the Anglo-German muscleman Eugen Sandow (1867–1925) came along that a developed physique, rather than the performance of feats of strength, became the focus of the acts. Sandow was the first modern hunk America had ever seen.

The first American hunks were very different from today's versions. Early photographs of muscular men were usually of theatrical performers. In the first part of the nineteenth century there were no professional athletes in the modern sense of the term, so if a man wanted to make a living from his muscles and sporting prowess, he had to go on the vaudeville stage. In the early years, athletes did not really look the part (at least to modern eyes).

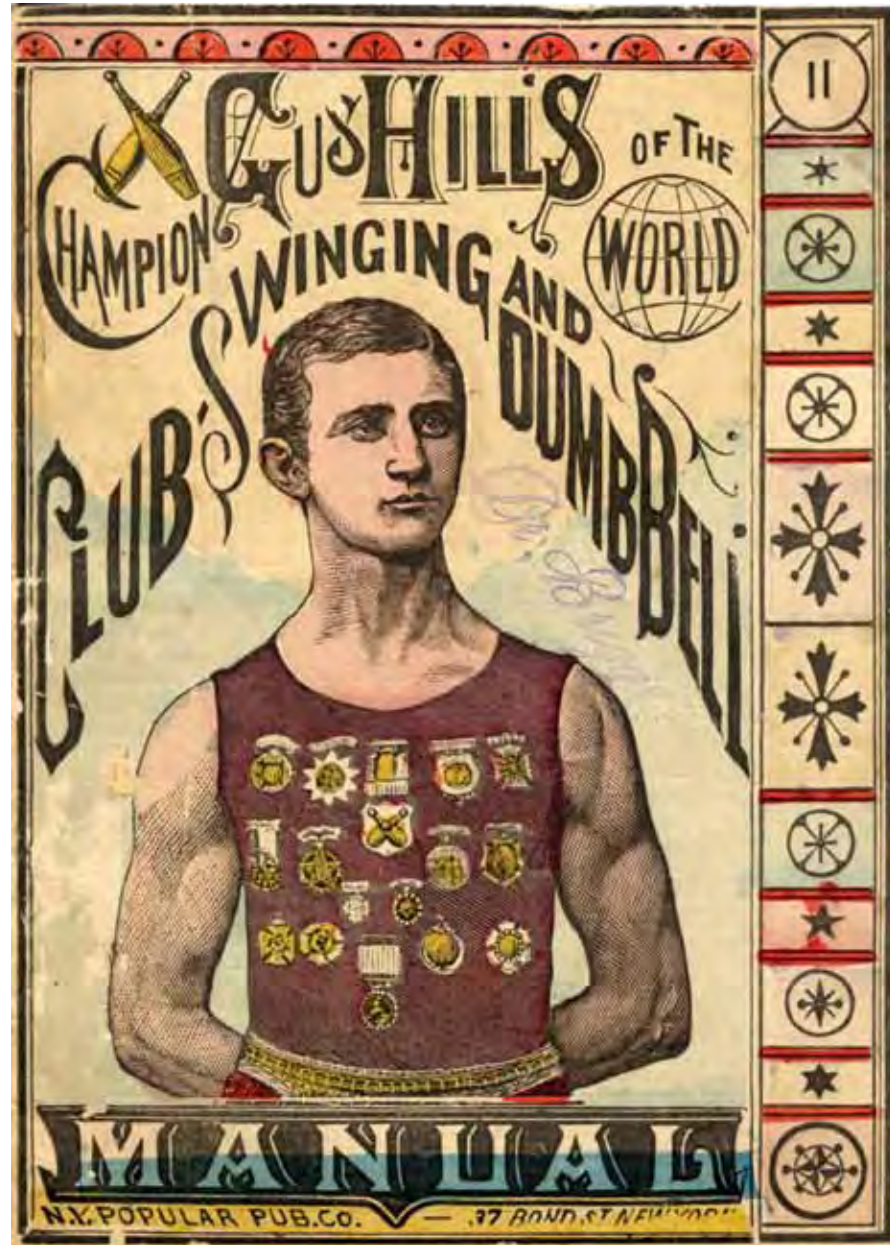
1.
Here is an image of an anonymous gymnast or strongman from around 1860. His elaborately embroidered tights are given more attention in this photo than his physique; the stitching has been carefully hand colored to emphasize its intricacy.



2.
William Hanlon, “the greatest living gymnast” from the mid-nineteenth century, seems to sport more tassels than muscles. Thanks to long exposure times and unreliable photographic equipment, the early photos of these professional hunks were often static and overly posed. Here the photographer attempts to liven up the scene by having Hanlon step forward delicately on one leg while gripping a cord that emerges from heavy draperies. Charles D. Fredricks made this “Specialité” photo in New York. Pencil date on reverse: May 12, 1863.



3. Gus Hill was master of a sport that is no longer practiced; he was a club swinger. Indian clubs were large, bowling-pin shaped objects that were swung around the head and shoulders in order to increase dexterity and muscularity. Gus Hill had a popular traveling show in which he swung clubs in complicated routines. This booklet was published in 1880, and it features a hand-colored engraving of the athlete on the cover.



4. Wrestling was a particularly manly sport that became increasingly popular in the middle 1800s. This photograph from around 1870 shows that images of muscular males were perennial favorites with the public, and few men of the time were hunkier than wrestlers. The only name on the card is "Austin," and the man's relatively slender physique, high-heeled boots, and somewhat prissy pose make the subject look old-fashioned. Still, for the time, he must have been hot stuff. Austin was photographed by Rockwood Studios in New York.



clockwise from bottom left:



7. Another method of publicizing muscular men was via the cigarette card. In 1888 Goodwin & Co. of New York produced a set depicting sporting champions, and this image of wrestler and strongman Emil Voss was in it. Cigarette cards were small, illustrated images that were slipped inside packages of smokes. The subjects were varied, but in the early days they kept to those most interesting to men (since proper ladies never smoked). Voss was German by birth, but he wrestled in the United States in the mid-1880s.

5. Making scrapbooks was all the rage in the 1800s, and this lithographed, die-cut strongman was meant to adorn a child's book of memories. Although his physique is unimpressive, he manages to balance two cannonballs on his arm while holding a large kettle bell. His costume and props make it possible to date him from around 1870.

8. In order to emphasize the superior qualities of its farm machinery, Walter A. Wood used anthropomorphic symbols for strength, lightness, and simplicity in this trade card from around 1880. The athlete representing "strength" is a bull-necked, shirtless bruiser who is dressed as a wrestler or professional strongman.

6. Professional strongmen were always popular subjects on advertising trade cards like this one for Clark's Mile-End Spool Cotton Thread. The implication of this whimsical illustration is clear: Clark's thread is as strong as a Hercules. The card dates from about 1880 and is based on a common stunt in Victorian music halls. The real stage strongman would lift a barrel (often with people sitting on it) using nothing but his teeth.

9. Body image has clearly undergone a massive change from the 1890s when this trade card was produced. In those days a fat man was assumed to be a healthy man, and he might stay that way so long as he consumed sufficient quantities of Dr. Grove's antimalarial medicine. It took a long time and a lot of persuasion to convince people that simple avoirdupois did not indicate fitness. To many middle-class people of the time, a body that was taut and muscular was merely an indication of hard labor, not physical vigor.

10.
Not all hunks were professional athletes, as these two handsome young men prove. The two youths were probably members of a gymnastics society, and they mimic a maneuver with Indian clubs in this tintype from around 1865. Again, because of the slow camera speed, they would have had to hold this pose for several seconds. Later, a photo technician went back and lightly pinked their cheeks, giving the men a sweet and gentle appearance. Tintypes were the cheapest form of photography available, and during the American Civil War (which was raging when this photo was taken), people in large cities could immortalize themselves on metal.



11.
There was clearly some confusion in the nineteenth century American mind about the proper model of masculinity. That ambivalence was given a visual form by the great cartoonist Thomas Nast in this illustration from *Harper's Weekly* in 1879. Which model was best for American youth: the weak but brainy egghead or the pinheaded but muscular athlete? "Is there no middle ground?" asks the famous cartoonist.



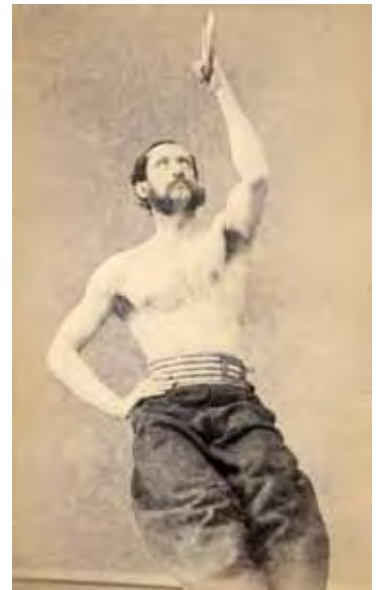
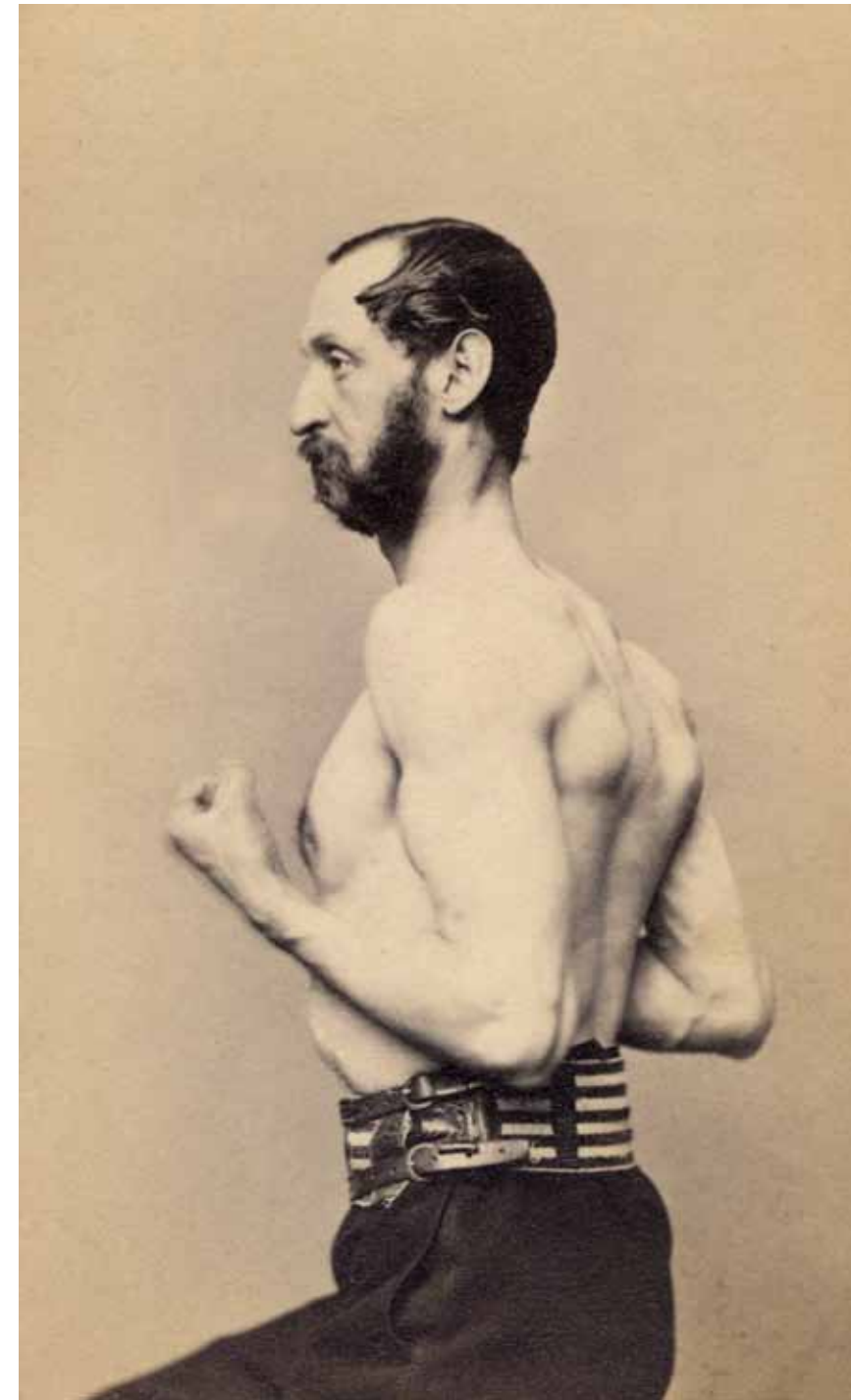
12.

The caption of this cover illustration from the November 30, 1892 issue of *Puck* reads, “The hero of the hour—the muscular masher eclipses the dainty dude.” The girls around him all sigh in admiration for the scruffy but muscular football champion while the elegant dandy dithers in the background.



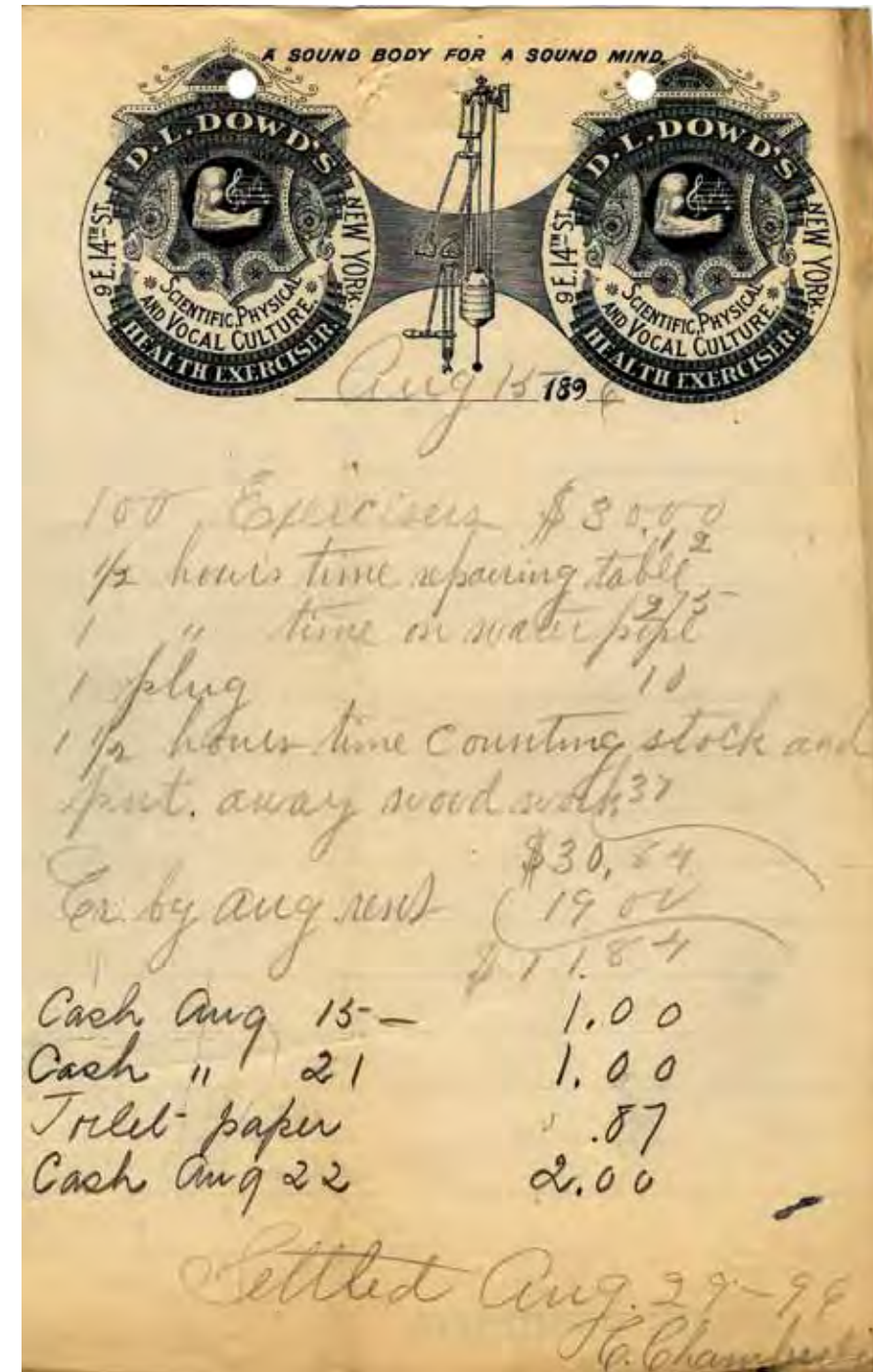
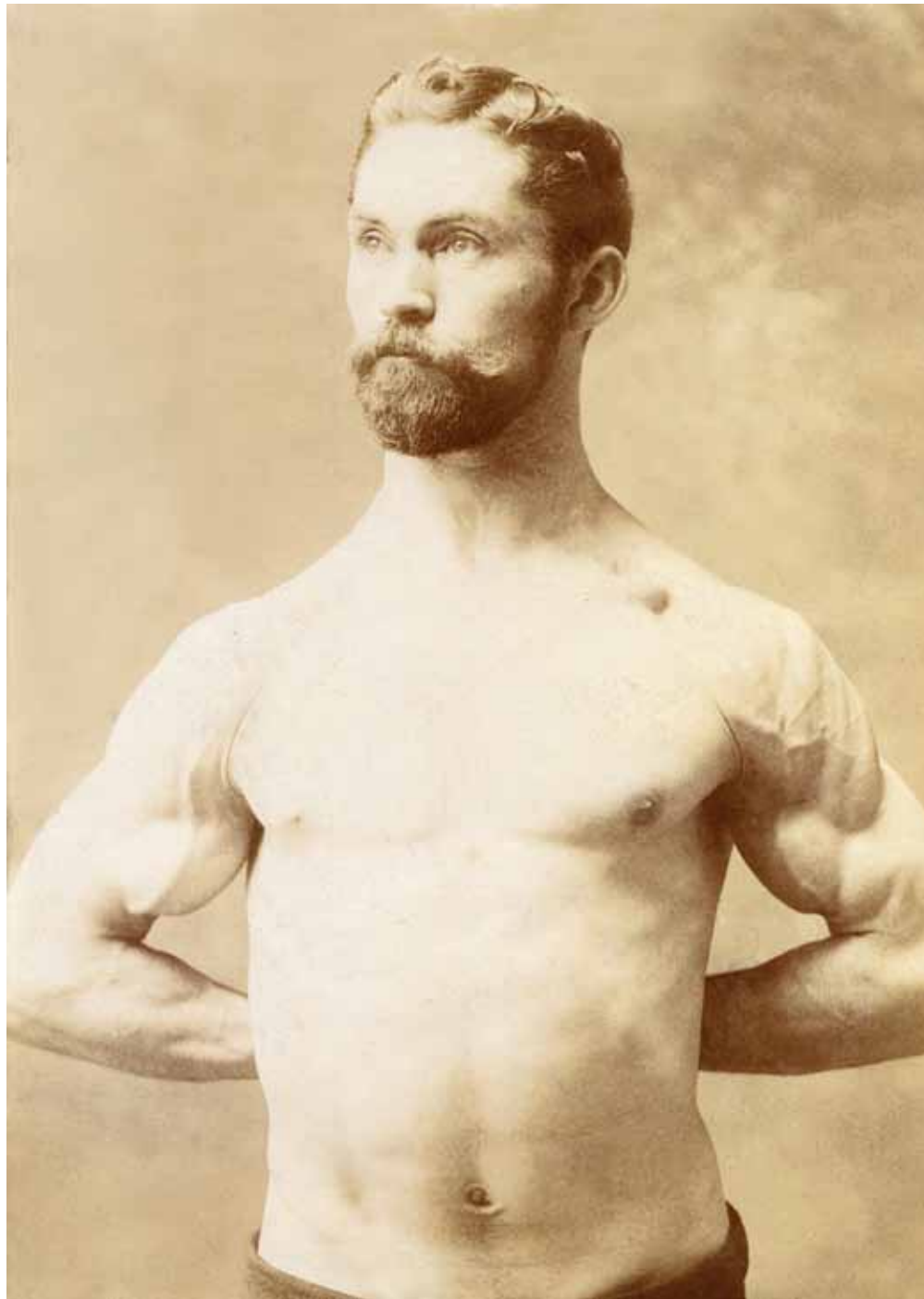
13.

These photos of Abner S. Brady are almost certainly the first physique photographs ever made in America. Brady opened one of the first megagyms in New York City in 1861, but around 1866 he moved to Washington, DC, and operated a large gymnasium near the Capitol. Taken by Alexander Gardner, he also recorded many of the nation's politicians (including President Lincoln). This photo and the one that accompanies it were made in 1866, and they are some of the first to emphasize the subject's naked muscles. It therefore illustrates well an early incarnation of “the Powerful Body” in American photography.



14.

Brady flexes his biceps by doing a pull-up on a hanging ring. Although his physique is unimpressive by today's standards, this photo was taken long before modern tools and techniques made bodybuilding a science rather than a guessing game.



15. David L. Dowd was another early physical culture instructor. At the age of 23, Dowd looked at himself in the mirror and was not pleased. He began to study anatomy with the sole intention of building up his muscles and his stamina. Using himself as a guinea pig, he invented several bodybuilding apparatuses. This photo of him, taken in about 1880, shows that he was successful in his attempts. He later operated a "School of Scientific, Physical and Vocal Culture" in New York City.

16. The letterhead of Dowd's Institute shows a muscular arm along with a musical scale, all set in the vague shape of a dumbbell. This bill for services rendered is dated August 15, 1896.