

IMMORTALIZING GRIMEK

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PHOTOS COURTESY LON HANAGAN

One of the most famous images in the iron game is the photograph of John Grimek leaning on a gleaming white pillar, one impressive arm lifted upward, and the other one angled downward to the pillar. Grimek's knee is bent slightly as it echoes the curve of his upraised arm, and the athlete's earnest face looks upward to the sky. The pose, the physique, and the lighting all contribute to the overall impact of this marvelous image. It is a classic—a genuine icon of the sport. The story of how this picture was taken reveals not only some reasons for its greatness, but it also shows that the ephemeral conjunction of time, place, and participants must all be right in order to produce a memorable photograph.

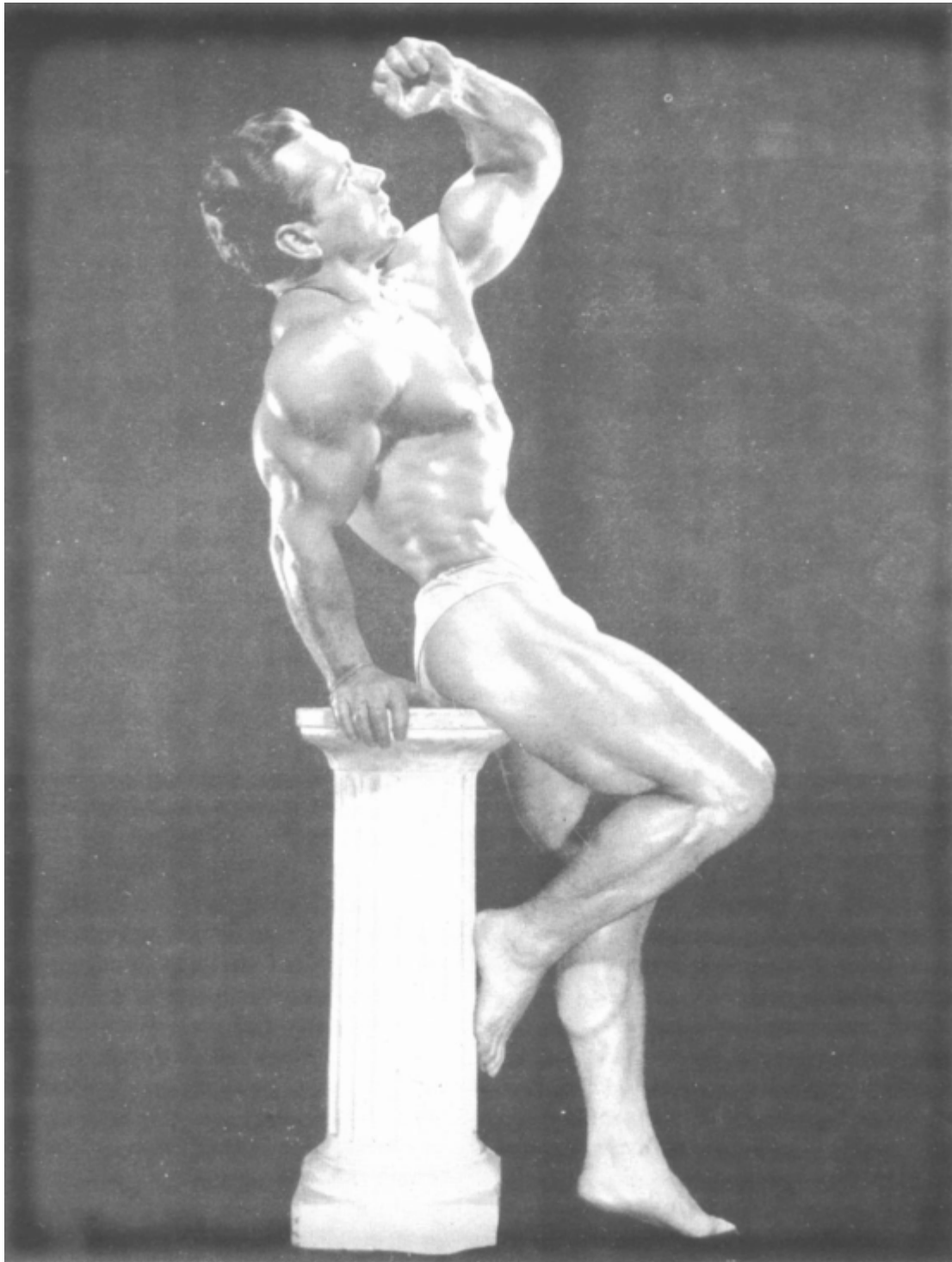
By 1942 physique photographer Lon Hanagan had been taking pictures of New York bodybuilders for several years, and several of his shots had even been used on the cover of *Strength & Health* magazine. Eventually, his technical prowess and artistic sense attracted the attention of John Grimek, so the athlete decided to drive up to New York from his Pennsylvania home and pose for some photographs. Bodybuilding journalist Gord Venables accompanied him to record what they all sensed would be an important event. It was the article by Venables that appeared in April of 1943 that provided the best written evidence of the events that followed.

At the age of 32, John Grimek was at the peak

of his muscularity. He had been victorious in the Mr. America contest in both 1940 and 1941, and since he had shown every sign of continuing to win the competition, the rules had to be changed making victory a one-shot deal. It was therefore as the most perfectly built man in the world that Grimek entered Lon Hanagan's Second Avenue apartment.

In addition to being a photographer, Lon was also a very competent musician. For many years he had been a professional organist and worked regularly at Radio City Music Hall, but it was Lon's phonograph record collection that first grabbed Grimek's eye. According to Venables, the photographer had "more albums than our music store in York." John loved classical music, and he asked if Venables could put some music on the phonograph while he posed. Lon agreed enthusiastically. So with the stirring, graceful tones of Sibelius's *Second Symphony* playing accompaniment, Grimek stripped and began to pose. Lon had set up a large mirror directly behind the camera so that John could see himself and correct his poses. In the meantime, Lon balanced his camera on a stack of 78's and began making physique photography history.

John did not have a definite set of poses to go into. Rather, he did what was part of his muscle control routine, and he gracefully slid from one set of poses to another as seamlessly as the symphony that



THE MOST FAMOUS IMAGE IN THE HISTORY OF BODYBUILDING
JOHN GRIMEKAS PHOTOGRAPHED BY LON HANAGAN NEW YORK CITY, 1942
JOHN NEVER HUNG PHOTOGRAPHS OF HIMSELF IN HIS HOME BUT AFTER HIS DEATH HIS WIFE ANGELA HAS PUT
SEVERAL PHOTOS ON DISPLAY AS A WAY OF KEEPING HIS MEMORY FRESH. THE IMAGE ABOVE IS IN HER BEDROOM
AND IT WAS THE FIRST ONE SHE HUNG.

was playing on the console. The results of this combination were majestic. Grimek never looked more massive, and thanks to his inherent ability to pose gracefully, he was able to display his muscularity to great effect. Some of the poses called for Grimek to be semi-relaxed and others demanded the illusion of action, but he succeeds in appearing bold, massive, and masculine no matter what the pose.

“I left the posing to John,” Lon confirmed. “He really knew what he was doing, so I didn’t interfere very much.” Fortunately, Lon was as artful at lighting as John was at posing, and Grimek had the good sense to leave the technical side of things to the photographer. Lon used only three lights: one overhead for general illumination and two photofloods. One of these was a small Photoflood No. 2 in a Victor Reflector fitted with clamps so that it could be fastened anywhere.

In all, Lon took two dozen poses; about fifteen of these were against a black background and the rest were against a white background. Toward the end of the session, Lon brought out a prop pillar, and he took several pictures of John sitting or leaning up against the plaster pedestal as Grimek tried out several poses. But then Hanagan had an inspiration that was to make physique photography history. John struck a beautiful attitude with his left arm raised in a biceps flex as his right hand grasped the edge of the pillar.

Lon immediately recognized that this was a perfect pose, but the lighting he had used was beginning to seem flat to him, so in order to liven up the shot, he tried something different. “In my left hand, I held the device that tripped the shutter,” he explained, “and in my right hand I had a No. 2 Photoflood bulb in a reflector; I held it upright by the base. Just as I snapped the shutter, I swirled the light rapidly in a circular motion. Since this was an experiment, I didn’t really know how the thing would turn out, but I was lucky and the effect was perfect.” The bulb caught the sheen of the sweat and peanut oil that the athlete had rubbed on his body and created an effect that could not have been foreseen. When he developed the picture,

Lon knew at once that he had achieved something wonderful: the picture has a three-dimensional quality that it would not have had otherwise. The rich blacks and the bright highlights combined to form a gorgeous whole. He and Grimek had collaborated to create a classic image of muscularity.

Later, when he was asked what made that picture so great, Lon theorized that the reason for its success was because it was unique. “I could never duplicate that picture,” he explains. “It was one of a kind.” The real reason for its success, however, may be more brilliant than either of the creators suspected at the time. The picture represents a series of contrasts that offer a subtle, unspoken, and almost imperceptible appeal. For instance, there is a tension between the graceful “S” curves created by the athlete’s arm and knee and the stone-like pillar against which he rests—it is a contrast between the living flesh and the deathless stone. The Greek column also serves as an emblem of classical eternity, and it reminds us that the stone is beautiful but lifeless, just like all great works of art. This is contrasted with the flesh, blood, and sinew of a living human being who represents the apex of physical beauty in all its spectacular evanescence. The photograph therefore gives the viewer a perfect balance of hard masculine muscle and soft feminine grace, of sinuous curves and geometrical angles, and ultimately of the eternal and unchanging nature of art with the temporary and mortal beauty of the human subject.

Such aesthetic considerations are far from the consciousness of most viewers of the photograph. They just recognize a good physique, a pleasing pose, and a technically perfect picture. Grimek, certainly, understood the photograph’s appeal, and he asked Lon to make a life-sized copy of the picture for himself. Lon thought this was such a good idea he made one for himself as well, and he later decided to put this large print to good use. At one time, the photographer opened a studio on 46th Street, and he put the picture of John in the window in order to attract customers. As Lon tells it, “People would see [the picture] from across the street, and wonder to themselves, ‘Who is

that well built fellow in the window?' Then, when they got closer, they could see that it was a photograph."

Shortly after this, Lon sold the negatives of their two sessions to John Grimek. "He wanted them, and I sold them," the photographer explained laconically. Unfortunately, the negatives were later lost, so there will never be any other prints made from the negatives.

Like the subject of the photograph, there will never be another original.

Notes and Sources:

Material for this article was taken from "The 'Shooting' of John Grimek" by Gord Venables which appeared in Strength & Health, April 1943 (pp. 18-21 & 48) and from a November 27, 1998 interview with Lon Hanagan.

John Grimek was notoriously persnickity about pictures of himself, so his admiration of Lon's work is particularly significant. Grimek would often discard a photograph of himself that did not measure up to his own perception of absolute perfection. "When I don't like a picture," Grimek wrote in 1959, "I destroy it. I know I've torn up a lot of negs and pictures which others thought were terrific and wanted to buy the neg and photos. I threw them into the fireplace. Just something about the picture I don't like. It's not the muscles, because most of these I've thrown away had plenty of muscles, good muscularity, but it was something about the whole pose, the awkwardness, that I disliked, and rather

than keep it around to irritate me, I got rid of it." [Letter from John Grimek to Angelo Iuspa, February 4, 1959, in the collection of Michael Murphy.]



LON HANAGAN IMMORTALIZES JOHN GRIMEK AT THE PHOTOGRAPHER'S NEW YORK STUDIO, 1942. THIS PICTURE WAS TAKEN BY GORD VENABLES AND OFFERS A RARE GLIMPSE OF HANAGAN AND HIS MOST FAMOUS SUBJECT. RECENTLY, AN EXHIBITION OF LON'S PHOTOGRAPHS WAS HUNG AT THE PRESTIGIOUS WESSEL & O'CONNOR GALLERY IN NEW YORK CITY.