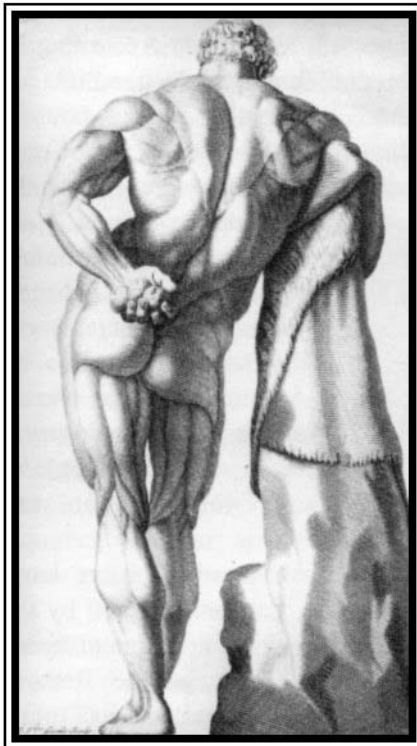


The History of Cardinal Farnese's "Weary Hercules"

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Rear view of the Farnese Hercules by famous engraver Michael Van Der Gucht (1660-1725). Van Der Gucht made three studies of the Farnese—front, rear, and a side view which we use on the *Iron Game History* masthead. Van der Gucht's engravings of the Farnese are remarkable for their heavy muscling and anatomical accuracy.

Joe Weider, the godfather of modern bodybuilding, told me in an interview last year that it was a boyhood trip to the museum in Montreal which set him on his career path. According to the now 84-year old Weider, "Seeing the Farnese Hercules was a revelation—a turning point in my life. It became the ideal I held in my head of what a bodybuilder should look like, and I don't know of any other piece of art that personifies power so effectively. There's just something magical in the Farnese that speaks to the sort of man—like me—who's always wanted to be bigger and stronger. It's kind of simple, really—what he has is what we want."¹

Weider's account of the Farnese's ability to inspire is not unique. Since the discovery of the massive statue in the Baths of Caracalla in Rome, in 1546, the Farnese Hercules has lit the imaginations of thousands of artists, physical culturists, and ordinary citizens who see in its masculine grandeur the ultimate mesomorphic ideal. To be fair, the statue has also had numerous detractors, who reject the statue as an archetype for aesthetic beauty and agree with art critic Martin Robertson's derisive assessment that it was nothing more than a "huge bag of swollen muscles."² Bodybuilding has often been similarly criticized. Regardless of one's personal taste, the statue described by art historians as the "Weary Hercules" has managed to influence the world of art and physical culture for more than two thousand years. This essay explores

the history of the statue and discusses its significance to the early physical culture movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The popularity of the Farnese as an ideal for twentieth-century bodybuilding will be more fully explored in a subsequent article.

No one knows what the earliest version of the statue really looked like but the evidence is strong that it was a slightly-larger-than-life-sized bronze, created by the sculptor Lysippos at about the time of Alexander the Great's death—323 B.C.E.³ Lysippos, who was attached to Alexander the Great's court, was known for his introduction of movement and realism to Greek sculpture in the late classical period.⁴ Pliny credits him with creating more than 1500 statues during his lifetime, including the well known, "Seated Boxer" and the standing "Athlete with *Strigil*."⁵ A Lysippian Hercules is mentioned by Statius in the First Century AD, by Pausanias in the Second Century AD, and by Libanios of Antioch in the Fourth Century AD, all or whom remark on the statue's great impact on those who saw it. Other evidence to support Lysippos' claim as the originator comes from a copy found in the ruins on the Palatine Hill in Rome which bears the inscription, "Work of Lysippos."⁶

According to archaeologist Cornelius Vermeule, Lysippos' statue was widely admired and emulated. Copies of the image appear on wall paintings, in marble reliefs, and on both Greek and Roman coins.⁷ Classicist Franklin P. Johnson has identified more than fifty dif-



One clue to the popularity of statue known as the "Weary Hercules" is that the image appeared on coins such as this one from Ancient Greece.

ferent surviving examples of the "Weary Hercules" produced between 320 BCE—when Lysippos is believed to have made the first model—and 212-216 AD, when the Farnese Hercules was made for the Baths of Caracalla.⁸ The Roman poet Statius' description of a small copy he saw at the home of his friend, Vindex, gives some idea of how Lysippos' version was viewed during this early era:

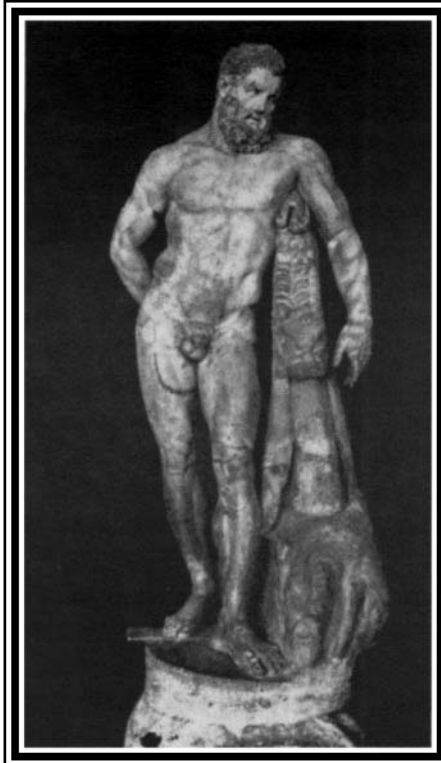
Amid his treasures . . . was a Hercules that with deep delight took my heart captive, and with long gazing I could not satisfy my sight, such a majesty was in the work, such a power was framed within those narrow confines; the god, the god was there!⁹

Kenneth Dutton argues in *The Perfectible Body: The Western Ideal of Male Physical Development*, that Hercules is symbolic of the search for divinity—but a divinity "to be attained through deeds and actions," not introspection and prayer.¹⁰ Lysippos' inclusion of the apples of the Hesperides in the statue's right hand—which Hercules earned by outsmarting Atlas—reminds viewers that this isn't just about body; it's also about mind.¹¹ As Dutton suggests, "It is precisely in its physical idealism that the sculpture is readable as an aspiration towards, or an invocation of, a perfected state of being."¹²

The Romans also admired Hercules and adopted him as part of their pantheon of Gods.¹³ A particularly strong cult surrounding Hercules developed in the last decades of the second century AD fostered by the Emperor Commodus Antoninus, the son of Marcus Aurelius.¹⁴ As a way to solidify his position with his new subjects, Commodus dressed in lion skins, began carrying a club, and often participated in the spectacles in the Coliseum where he fought both men and animals.¹⁵ Commodus, who reigned from 180-192 AD also commissioned new versions of Lysippos' Weary Hercules, but

had them made on a grander scale and with a face that bore a remarkable likeness to his own.¹⁶ According to archaeologist Vermeule, double and triple-sized images of the Hercules became commonplace in bath-houses, gymnasiums, and public squares during and after Commodus' reign, and smaller versions were frequently found in household gardens and domestic shrines.¹⁷

In 212 AD, when the Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus—known by his nickname Caracalla—began construction of the massive twenty-seven-acre resort that historians now refer to as the Baths of Caracalla, he apparently acquired from an Athenian sculptor named Glykon two 10' 3 ¾" Hercules statues for the main structure—a building that was 390 feet wide, 740 feet long and whose ceiling over the main swimming room rose as much as a hundred feet above the ground.¹⁸



This early copy of the "Weary Hercules" is believed to be a copy of Lysippos' original work. Note the less heroic proportions and lack of heavy musculing compared to Glykon's Farnese Hercules on the opposite page. The Lysippos copy is on display at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, Italy.

Thirteen hundred years later, Renaissance Italians, inspired by the Humanist movement, began archaeological excavations at the Baths.¹⁹ The head of one Hercules was found first, some six years before the section containing the torso, club and lion-skin was unearthed in 1546. The sculptor Guglielmo della Porta, a protégé of Michelangelo, helped Cardinal Allesandro Farnese—who would later become Pope Paul III—acquire the two pieces and had them moved to the Palazzo Farnese in Rome. Farnese was a great patron in the Renaissance art world, and like the Medici family he surrounded himself with intellectuals and artisans. He even hired Michelangelo to restructure his house and courtyard, and it was the great genius himself who suggested that della Porta carve a new pair of legs for the statue while he, Michelangelo, created a special façade to showcase the 10'3" colossus in the first courtyard of the Palazzo Farnese. And hence the name.

Several years later, when the statue's original legs were discovered at a farm outside Rome, Michelangelo urged Cardinal Farnese to leave della Porta's legs on the statue as evidence that sculptors of their age could do work that rivaled the best of the classical era.²⁰ So until 1787, during an era in which the statue enjoyed enormous popu-

larity, the "Farnese" was actually the work of two men—Glykon and della Porta.²¹ This is especially ironic since one of the statue's most influential admirers, the art critic William Hogarth, would argue in his 1753 *Analysis of Beauty* that the Farnese's perfection stemmed partly from the fact that "the judicious sculptor, contrary to all modern rule of enlarging every part in proportion, lessen'd the size of the muscles gradually down toward the feet . . . otherwise the statue would have been burdened with an unnecessary weight, which would have been a drawback from his strength, and in consequence of that, from its characteristic beauty."²²

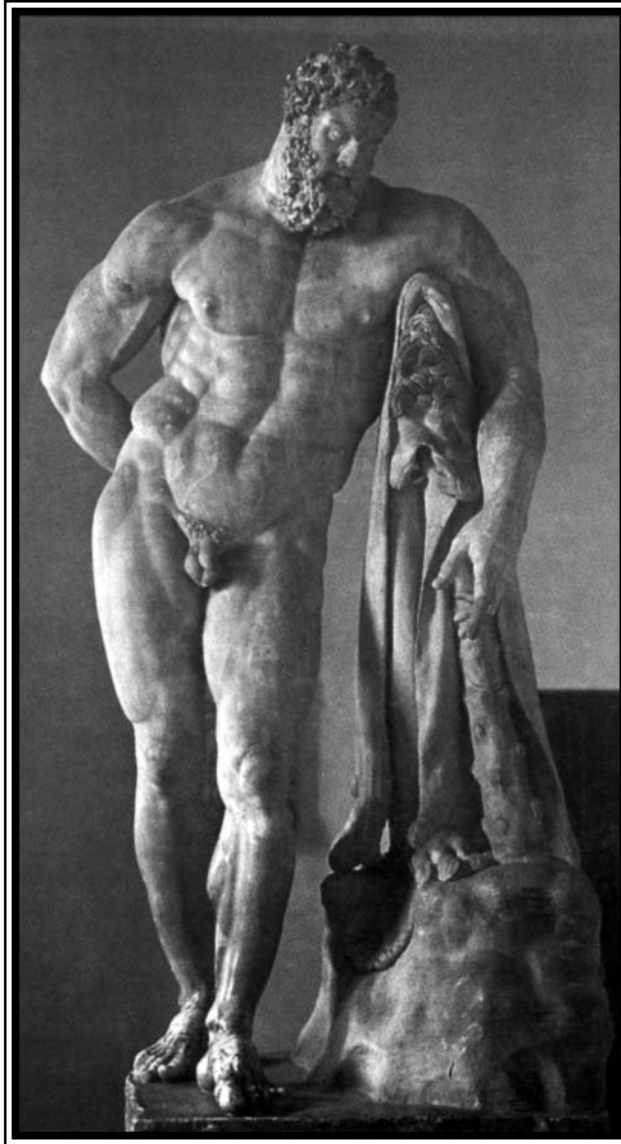
The Farnese's fame and influence quickly spread beyond the Farnese courtyard. The Dutch artist Jacob Bos, who was then living in Rome, made the first engraving of the statue, which was included in the 1562 set of engravings known as the *Mirror of Rome's Magnificence* (*Speculum Romane Magnificentiae*).²³ This open-ended collector's album, sold by a commercial print shop in Rome, helped spread the image of the Farnese throughout Europe as wealthy tourists began visiting Rome during the late Renaissance and circulating prints of the city's wonders. Later, Hendrick Goltzius, also of Holland, produced a beautifully detailed engraving of the statue which slightly exaggerated the statue's already heavy muscular definition and imbued it with an anatomical exactitude which—like modern bodybuilding photographs—no doubt caused many men to look at their own arms, legs and torsos and wonder why those same muscular delineations were not in evidence. In approximately 1800, Michael Van Der Gucht—known for his engravings of kings and famous politicians—produced three hyper-muscular engravings

of the Farnese showing it from different perspectives. Van Der Gucht's side view of the Farnese has been used as the *IGH* logo since 1990.²⁴

Another man no doubt influenced by the statue was Cardinal Farnese's personal physician, Hieronymus Mercurialis (1530-1606) who lived at the Farnese Palace during the eight years he worked on his masterpiece of antiquarian exercise advice—*De Arte Gymnastica apud Ancientes*—published in 1569.²⁵ Although the first edition of the book possessed no pictures, the second, 1573, edition was one of first books to show illustrations of men exercising. The drawings, executed by Pirro Ligorio, who also lived at the Farnese Palace at the same time as Mercurialis, contain some of the most strikingly muscular images ever seen in a treatise on physical education.²⁶ Historian Nancy Siraisi, in a provocative article for the *Journal of the History of Ideas*, has documented that Mercurialis' and Pirro Ligorio's work relied heavily on artifacts and material remains for their interpretations of what sport and exercise would have looked like in ancient Greece and Rome.²⁷ Although Siraisi does not specifically mention the Farnese as a source of inspiration for Ligorio's hyper-muscular drawings, it seems unlikely that either man could have passed the ten-foot Farnese on

a daily basis and not been influenced by the example of what an ideal man could be.

In approximately 1600, Peter Paul Rubens also turned to the Farnese Hercules as the basis for his approach to art composition. In a short essay called, "De Imitatione Stationarum," contained in his notebooks, Rubens argues that "the artist who aims at perfection must have a profound knowledge of ancient sculpture."²⁸



Massive yet graceful, the Farnese Hercules is currently on display at the Museo Archeologico Nazionale in Naples, Italy.

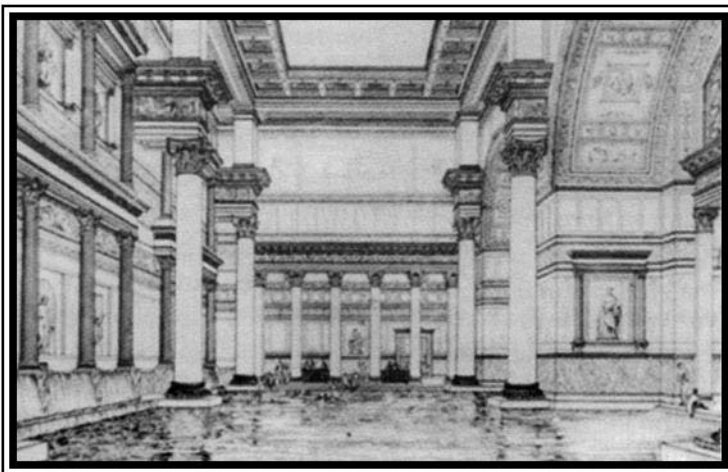
Rubens then suggests that the men of his era have degenerated in physical stature, in fitness, and in intellectual capacity. He writes, "The principal cause of the difference between men of our age and the ancients is the sloth and lack of exercise of those living; indeed one eats and drinks, exercising no care for the body . . . By contrast, in antiquity," he continued, "everyone exercised daily and strenuously in palaestras and gymnasiums." He then cites Mercurialis' *De Arte Gymnastica* which argues that change is possible for the men of his era and that arms, legs, neck and back will all grow and increase in muscle, "fed by the juices which the heat of activity attracts."²⁹

Those who know Rubens paintings will not find it surprising that the statue he found most useful in terms of his own imitation and inspiration was the Farnese Hercules. Rubens' notebooks contain a number of studies of the statue, and as art historian Jeffrey Muller notes, the Farnese was Rubens' model for ideal manhood again and again in his heroically proportioned figures.

Rubens' notion that the way to "learn" to be an artist was to study and imitate the classics of the past would linger on for the next several centuries. When Johann Winckelmann (1717-1768) published his influential *Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks* in 1755, he not only established a canon of "good" art that other artists could turn to for inspiration and practice; he also stressed the idea that certain works of art did not imitate nature—but were actually superior to it.³⁰ Winckelmann's belief that the Farnese Hercules, the Apollo Belvedere, and the Laocoon were the best examples of male perfection was linked, as it had been for Rubens, with his belief that these sculptures showed—in various degrees—the effects of regular exercise. In his 1766

Reflections Concerning the Imitation of the Grecian Artists and Sculpture, Winckelmann writes, "It was in the exercises that the body acquired that masculine and noble *contour* (his italics) which the Grecian artists gave their statues, and which had nothing in it either unmeaning or superfluous." He admired the Spartans, whose frequent nudity, he argued, kept the young men lean and fit. "...corpulence or fatness," he wrote, are "equally inconsistent with bodily proportion and vigour." Those who choose to imitate the Greeks, Winckelmann continued, will find in them "something . . . transcendent and sublime; they will find, in them, that *ideal beauty* of which the model is not visible in external nature, and which an ancient commentator Plato tells us, is only to be found in the human mind, where it was originally planted by the primitive source of eternal beauty."³¹ Winckelmann's inclusion of Hercules in his academy of ideal sculptures—and his suggestion that we have a Platonic form for these icons of masculine beauty—soon meant that art institutes, museums, universities and other public centers began acquiring plaster copies and new versions of the statue to satisfy the needs of a public gone mad on neo-classicism. The Farnese was suddenly everywhere. Paintings depicting art institutes invariably showed the Farnese as among the canon of good art; copies were made for many of the great estates of Europe—including Versailles—and in one of the more extreme examples of its popularity, a thirty-foot-tall (9.2 meters) copper Hercules was created by Johann Anthoni between 1713 and 1717 and placed on a special pyramid, on top of a castle, where it still watches over the city of Cassel, Germany.³²

With the excavation of Herculaneum (city of Hercules), which began systematically in 1733, Hercules' fame and importance as an icon naturally increased, and there was a revival of interest in the entire Hercules myth.³³ The Grand Tour, made by so many young, wealthy aristocrats, was not complete without a trip to see the Farnese, and dozens of references to the statue show up in the travel diaries and letters sent home by these cultural tourists of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries. Tobias Smollett, to quote just one example, wrote in 1765, ". . . but that which the connoisseurs justly esteem above all the rest is Hercules by Glycon, which you know as well as I do, by the great reputation it has acquired."³⁴ Even in the United States the statue had a following. When Thomas Jefferson made a list of the statues he wanted to acquire for a sculpture garden he planned for Monticello, the Medici Venus was number one on his list, and the Farnese Hercules



This artist's drawing of the interiors of the Baths of Caracalla suggests the opulence and massive scale of the ancient Roman landmark.

was number two.³⁵

The Farnese also appeared in eighteenth-century German educator J. B. Basedow's *Elementarwerke*, an important book in the early history of physical education.³⁶ Basedow includes the image of the Farnese statue, uses Hercules as his model for a lesson in athletics, and also uses the figure of Hercules in two other plates in the book.³⁷ While Basedow's use of the Farnese Hercules is the first example I'm aware of in such didactic literature, those who've studied the Nineteenth Century would agree with me when I assert that it would certainly not be the last.

Even so, the Farnese was always one of several competing ideals. The statues known as the Doryphoros, or Spear Carrier, and the Apollo Belvedere also had their adherents, as did Myron's slenderer Discus Thrower. By the late Nineteenth Century, as Roberta Park writes in the *International Journal of the History of Sport*, the new science of physical anthropometry focused the attention of physical educators on producing bodies that would fit a canon of proportions based on physical ideals realistic for the average man. The notion of emulating the Greeks still mattered, but it was the youthful Apollo's ratio of neck to calf and arm that most men aspired to copy—not the Farnese's great girths. It wasn't that the Farnese's measurements weren't known—Gerard Audran had worked out the proportions, in fact, in 1683—but that they seemed unattainable. Late nineteenth-century physical educators turned away from the Farnese because they needed an ideal that an average man could possibly achieve through exercise systems which largely eschewed weightlifting; almost no one at that time understood what a transformative power systematic weightlifting could have. Even Dr. George Barker Windship, who inaugurated the first true heavy weight training movement in the United States in the middle of the Nineteenth Century, didn't know when he began his workouts what he might one day become because he had no other models of the benefits of lifting. However, in an act of rare courage, once the undersized Windship gazed on the plaster copy of the Farnese in the Boston



Jacob Bos' 1562 engraving of Hercules shows the statue placed in the niche designed by Michelangelo at the Palazzo Farnese.

Athenaeum, he, like Weider, would consider no other path. The lesson he learned from the Farnese, wrote Windship, was what a body would look like that was "compatible with the exercise of the greatest amount of strength." Continuing, Windship added, "Some years earlier I might have been more attracted by the Apollo Belvedere; but it was a Hercules I dreamed of becoming . . . and the Apollo was but the incipient and potential Hercules."³⁸

Does this ancient statue still matter? Absolutely. Wherever you look in the history of modern bodybuilding and weightlifting, the Farnese Hercules appears as the elemental icon. Sandow emulated the Farnese in a series of famous photos by the photographer Napoleon Sarony and also claimed that it was viewing classical statuary as a child that had established

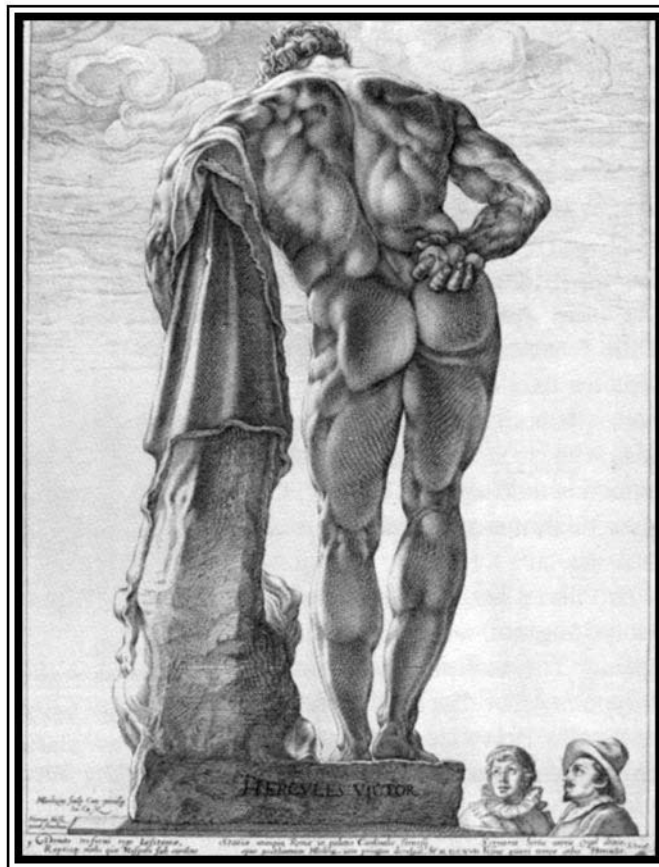
the direction of his life.³⁹ Professor Atilla, Sandow's mentor, posed with a small copy of the Farnese for an 1887 oil painting done at Queen Victoria's court, and when the Royal Family wished to honor him, the diamond-studded stick pin presented to Atilla contained a small painting of the Farnese. He died holding it in his hand. In Paris, Edmond Desbonnet also evoked the Farnese many times in his magazine *Le Culture Physique* in the early Twentieth Century. And, finally, in 2003, when Texas artist Scott Bodenheimer was invited to contribute to an art exhibition entitled "38 for XXXVIII" to coincide with the 2004 Superbowl in Houston, Bodenheimer's submission was a regulation Wilson football painted with front and rear images of the Farnese Hercules. When asked, Bodenheimer explained that he wanted to portray the beauty he saw in the physiques of modern football players and thought that the Farnese Hercules was the ultimate expression of that heavy grace and athleticism.⁴⁰

That Bodenheimer chose the Farnese to represent these modern gladiators is hardly surprising. No other image of the male physique has been of such resonant significance to the world of sport and physical education. Although modern training methods and pharmacologic aids now make it possible for men to surpass

the muscular mass of the Farnese, no modern body has as yet possessed the statue's rare combination of size, implied strength, and harmony. To paraphrase Joe Weider, "what he has is what we *still* want."

Notes:

1. Interview with Joe Weider, April 2004, Austin, Texas.
2. Martin Robertson, *A History of Greek Art* (London: Cambridge University Press: 1975): 467.
3. Cornelius Vermeule, "The Weary Herakles of Lysippos," *American Journal of Archaeology* 79(4) (October, 1975): 323. See also: Walter Woodburn Hyde, *Olympic Victor Mounments and Greek Athletic Art* (Washington: Carnegie Institution, 1921), 252-254.
4. Vermeule, "Weary Hercules," 253.
5. A *strigil* was a curved implement to remove dirt and sweat from the body used by athletes to cleanse themselves. For more information on Pliny and Lysippos see: http://www.sikyon.com/Sicyon/Lysippos/lysip_eqq0.html, viewed on 5 May 2005.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Vermeule, "Weary Hercules,"
8. Franklin P. Johnson, *Lysippos* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1927), 190-200.
9. Statius, *Silvae* IV, 6. Translated by Slater. In: Franklin P. Johnson, *Lysippos* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1927), 290-292.
10. Kenneth Dutton, *The Perfectible Body: The Western Ideal of Male Physical Development* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Co., 1995), 29.
11. For the story of the twelve "Labors of Hercules" including the capture of the apples of the Hesperides, see: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hercules/labors.html>.
12. Dutton, 31.
13. "Hercules," *Wikipedia* on-line encyclopedia viewed at www.answers.com/main/ntquery?method=4&dsis=222&dekey=Hercules&gwp=8.
14. Commodus played a central role in the film *Gladiator* released in 2000.
15. M.I. Rostovtzeff, "Commodus-Hercules in Britain," *Journal of Roman Studies* 13(1923): 91-105. See also: M. P. Speidel, "Commodus The God-Emporer and the Army," *Journal of Roman Studies* 83(1993): 109-114; and Dennis Quinn, "Commodus (AD 190-192)" *De Imperatoribus Romanis: An On-line Encyclopedia of Roman Emperors* at www.roman-emperors.org/commod.htm.
16. Vermeule, "Weary Herakles," 327.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Besides the Farnese Hercules, fragments of a second statue exist and a column capital has been found bearing the same image. See: Robertson, *History of Greek Art*, 467. Antoninus' nickname came from a knee-length garment he introduced to the populace and favored himself. "The Baths of Caracalla in Rome," at: www.inforoma.it/feature.php?lookup=terme; Francis Haskell and Nicholas Penny, *Taste and the Antique: The Lure of Classical Sculpture: 1500-1900* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 229-230.
19. The architectural genius Palladio was especially interested in the baths and encouraged their exploration in the first part of the 1500s. L. Richardson, Jr. "Introduction to Roman Topography: The Renaissance Humanists," viewed at www.cvr-lab.org/Library/Richardson/RichardsonIntroduction.html, on May 15, 2005.
20. Francis Haskell and Nicholas Penny, comp., *The Most Beautiful Statues: The Taste for Antique Sculpture 1500-1900: An Exhibition at the Ashmolean Museum from 26 March to 10 May 1981*. (Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, 1981), 35; and Haskell and Penny, *Taste and the Antique*, 229.
21. Haskell and Penny, *Taste and the Antique*, 229.
22. William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty* (London: 1753), 15. Viewed online at: www.bbk.ac.uk/hafvm/hogarth/chapter1/ch1page_15.html.
23. "Low Countries, 1400-1600 A.D." viewed on 4 August 2004 at: [www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/clan/hod_41.72\[2.63\].htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/clan/hod_41.72[2.63].htm).
24. "Farnese Hercules," viewed at: www.answers.com/main/ntquery?method=4&dsid=2222&dekey=Farnese+Hercules. Viewed on May 14, 2005. See also, "Low Countries," at www.metmuseum.com. Information on the life and works of Michael Van Der Gucht can be found on the website to the National Portrait Gallery in London. See: <http://www.npg.org.uk/live/search/person.asp?LinkID=mp07672&role=art>.
25. Peter C. McIntosh, "Hieronymus Mercurialis 'de Arte Gymnastica': Classification and Dogma in Physical Education in the Sixteenth Century," *British Journal of Sports*



Hendrick Goltzius' (1558-1617) engraving of the Farnese Hercules, published in 1617, succeeded in capturing the statue's massive scale and rugged muscularity.

- History* 1(1) (1984): 73-74.
26. Nancy G. Siraisi, "History, Antiquarianism, and Medicine: The Case of Girolamo Mercuriale," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 64(2) (2003): 231-251.
27. *Ibid.*
28. Jeffrey M. Muller, "Ruben's Theory and Practice of the Imitation of Art," *The Art Bulletin*, 64(2) (June 1982): 229.
29. Muller, "Rubens Theory," 232.
30. "Neoclassicism: The Classical Ideal," Viewed at: www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/neoc_1_1.htm.
31. Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *Reflections Concerning the Imitation of the Grecian Artists and Sculpture* (Glasgow: Printed for Robert Urie, 1766), 10-11 & 15-16.
32. For information on Cassel (Kassel) Germany see: <http://victorian.fortunecity.com/hurst/664/historic.htm>.
33. Ayers Bagley, "Hercules and Moral Education in the Enlightenment, viewed at: <http://education.umn.edu/EdPA/iconics/reading%20room/ZIP/moral.doc>.
34. Tobias Smolett, "Travels Through France and Italy, Letter XXXIII, Nice, March 30, 1765." Viewed on-line at http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/s/smaolett_t/travels/chapter33.html on August 5, 2004.
35. Bagley, "Hercules and Moral Education."
36. J.B. Basedow, *Elementarwerke fur die Jugend und ihre Freunde* (Berlin: 1744).
37. Bagley, "Hercules and Moral Education."
38. George Barker Windship, "Autobiographical Sketches of a Strength-Seeker," *The Atlantic Monthly*, 9(January 1862): 108.
39. Eugen Sandow, *Sandow's System of Physical Training*, (New York: J. Selwin Tail & Sons, 1894): 24-25. The Sarony photos appear opposite pages 54 and 76 in this book.
40. See: <http://www.bodenheimer.com/qt040farnesefootball.htm>.