

Eugene Sandow's "Grecian Ideal" and the Birth of Modern Body-Building

Eugene Sandow, a German bodybuilder, was born in Königsberg, Prussia, on April 2, 1867 and died on October 14, 1925.¹ Among the many accomplishments of his life, he became known as the "father of modern bodybuilding" because of his revolutionary ideas in physique development. Physical fitness was a major component in his early life, as demonstrated by his participation in athletics and gymnastics.² During this time, Sandow visited the cities of antiquity, such as Rome, which brought him an overwhelming love of the ancient depiction of the human form and a desire to obtain it.³ This fascination led to his work in developing modes of self-improvement of his physical form and later on, as a traveling strong man in Holland, he developed further his love for fitness.⁴ He continued to develop a well-rounded physique through his participation in competitions, ranging from wrestling, to feats of strength, to physique competitions, which took place all over the world.⁵ Throughout his life, he strived for the perfect physique, which he called the "Grecian Ideal."⁶

¹ Sandow, Eugene, and G. Mercer Adam. *Sandow on Physical Training: A study in the Perfect Type of the Human Form* (New York: J. S. Tait & Sons, 1894), 21-3.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Sandow, *On Physical Training*, 23-35.

⁵ Sandow, *On Physical Training*, 119-29.

⁶ Sandow, *On Physical Training*, 119-29.

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Sandow described his ideal as "Grecian" because he was convinced that the Greeks had insurmountable knowledge of the body's form and developments, even without the knowledge of modern science. He stated that the Greeks, "simply observed that the increased bulk, strength, and energy of the organ or limb is in relation to the amount of employment" and "there is ever an advance in size and power, until the ultimate attainable point of development is reached," and "that man's material frame is composed of innumerable atoms, and that the strength of the body as a whole, is in relation to the youth and newness of atoms."⁷ In his pursuit, he measured and examined Greek statues, such as The Dying Gaul, Hercules Farnese, and the Artemision Bronze, and constructed routines and practices to achieve these physiques. Sandow, in constructing his perfect regimen to develop his "Grecian Ideal," produced two detailed works, *Strength and How to Obtain It* and *Sandow on Physical Training: A Study in the Perfect Type of the Human Form*.⁸ Both works established a training protocol and measurements, giving concrete details of his ideals. These two works present his journey and study to produce the materials and methods for the production of a perfect human form, which would amaze physicians and artists and direct their attentions, further, to the sculptures of ancient Greece.

Sandow's work is important because his reception of the classical past brought about a historic change in the way athletes sculpted their bodies through fitness. Sandow's "Grecian ideal" was a powerful return of a lost ideal to a modern society. Sandow's "Grecian ideal" is truly the physique desired

⁷ Sandow, *On Physical Training*, 3.

⁸ Eugene Sandow, *Strength and How to Obtain It* (London: Gale & Polden, 1897).

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by the Greeks. However, was Sandow's ideal really the same as that of ancient Greeks? A close examination of the ancient physique and the ideal human form will reveal the accuracy of Sandow's presentation of form and physique.

Sandow's interpretation is crucial to understand the impact of the classics on modern society and how the individuals in such a society receive the Grecian ideals of form. Sandow states that the Greeks created the physical form of beauty through knowledge, and therefore he began by acquiring knowledge on the subject of physiology and anatomy; this knowledge was the basis of his regimen.⁹ Sandow, however, noticed the lack of communal desire for physical perfection, stating: "In spite of the increasing value of individual life and the distinctive mark of the civilization of our time little has yet been done ... we have systematically and intelligently done next to nothing in the way of physical culture."¹⁰ He yearned to prescribe a systematic approach to construct a society that could acquire his "Grecian ideals." He ultimately produced such a routine, which is dependent upon specific anatomical regions. The ideas that Sandow produced were and still are the basis of modern weightlifting and dieting techniques and modern bodybuilders often utilize the same movements that were perfected by Sandow. Without the work of Sandow, there would be less basis for modern physical development. He revolutionized, and in many cases perfected, the basics, and he provided a framework for the gradual evolution of bodybuilding. He can justifiably be called the "father of modern bodybuilding."

⁹ Sandow, *On Physical Training*, 12-21.

¹⁰ Sandow, *On Physical Training*, 12-21.

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The physique of an ancient Greek varied depending on class, occupation, and overall role in society.¹¹ Although there was variation, the concept of peak physical fitness, as a result of efficient and high quality work, was a major focus. For example, Socrates states, in Xenophon's *Memorabilia* 3.12, "it is a base thing for a man to wax old in careless self-neglect before he has lifted up his eyes and seen what manner of man he was made to be, in the full perfection of bodily strength and beauty."¹² However, this physique itself was not meant to be the primary focus; the desire to look good simply for the purpose of looking good was considered vanity and filled with ill intentions.¹² Therefore, the development of health, strength, and an ideal physique were for the overall common good.

Socrates later on addressed the unathletic appearance of Epigenes, a young man who was with him and was possibly the son of Antiphon,¹³ and presented the importance of physique as a reflection of work and motivation, adding, "there is no contest of any sort, nor any transaction, in which you will be the worse off for being well prepared in body; and in fact there is nothing which men do for which the body is not a help."¹⁴ Thus for Socrates, the reason for developing an ideal physique was that such a physique would benefit the state; however, it was athletes who mostly acquired such a physique. As Nigel Spivey has noted, working in the gym was a civic duty, it was a necessity for state status, and was a place of completing the

¹¹ "Greek Society," Ancient History Encyclopedia. Accessed April 23, 2017. <https://www.ancient.eu/article/483/greek-society/>.

¹² Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, Translated by H. G. Dakyns. March 24, 2003. Accessed April 24, 2017. <http://www.classicreader.com/book/1792/29/>.

¹³ Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, 3.12.

¹⁴ Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, 3.12.

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acquisition of total knowledge.¹⁵ How would the ancient Greeks have acquired the ideal physique?

The Greeks did have knowledge of resistance in building muscles; however, the physical interactions through endurance routines were the major source of development.¹⁶ Another necessary component of physical development for the Greeks was diet. Greek athletes mostly ate fruits, vegetables, and legumes, accompanied by watered down wine and some meat coming mostly from goats.¹⁷ The Greeks in their social construct adopted the connection of "beautiful and good," (*kalos k'agathos*) a phrase that was used often to describe aristocrats.¹⁸ This connection of appearance and conduct was a basis for the judging of a person's character in harmony with their appearance, an ugly physique meant ugliness in character, and the opposite assumption was applied to beauty.

In pursuit of displaying the ideal of *kalos k'agathos*, the Greeks hosted competitions, very similar to modern bodybuilding shows, which were meant to award the athlete with the most idealized physique.¹⁹ Although little is known about the specific criteria of judging, it appears that the mesomorph form was most desired. Men were pressured to acquire a physique with "broad shoulders, contoured thorax, firm waist, powerful thighs."²⁰ Spivey also states that the

¹⁵ Nigel J. Spivey, *The Ancient Olympics: A History* (Oxford: Oxford U Press, 2004), 30-3.

¹⁶ Sandow, *Strength and How to Obtain it*, 41.

¹⁷ Ann C. Grandjean, "Diets of Elite Athletes: Has the Discipline of Sports Nutrition Made an Impact?," *The Journal of Nutrition*, April 20, 2017.

¹⁸ "Kalos k'agathos." *The Art and Popular Culture Encyclopedia*. Accessed April 20, 2017.

http://www.artandpopularculture.com/Kalos_kagathos.

¹⁹ "Kalos k'agathos."

²⁰ Spivey, *The Ancient Olympics*, 31.

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desired character of the athlete included *euexia*, *eutaxia*, and *philoponia*, which prescribes the need of bodily condition, good order, and love of training, the same ideals as those presented by Socrates in Xenophon's *Memorabilia*.²¹

Further examples of the Greek idealized figure can be seen in Pindar's *Olympian 1*.²² Here Pindar heightens Hieron's strength, courage, and beauty by expressing his victory through a story of the gods. This heightened expression of athletic accomplishment presents the notion that the ideal physique of athletes was accompanied by godlike proportionality and symmetry. By contrast, the negative example that proves this societal ideal appears in Homer's account in the *Iliad* of Thersites' appearance and the overall communal distaste for his physique. Thersites is said to be "bowlegged, walked with a limp, his shoulders slumped over his caved-in chest, and up top scraggly fuzz sprouted on his pointy head."²³ He was considered to be a blemish of the Greek army, and his portrayal shows that a poor physique was rejected by aristocratic society. This depiction of what is considered unacceptable reinforces the concept of the ideal physique of ancient Greece.

We can now turn to a detailed comparison of Sandow's Grecian ideal to the ancient Greek ideal; we will use artistic representation and analysis to accomplish this analysis. The comparison of the two ideals must begin in the purpose behind the physique. Sandow expresses this to be the physique itself, regarding symmetry and development of the muscles for the

²¹ Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, *passim*.

²² Richmond Lattimore, *The Odes of Pindar* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1942), 1-4.

²³ Homer, *The Essential Iliad*, Translated by Stanley Lombardo (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), 22.

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sole purpose of good appearance. For the ancient Greeks, however, even for the athletes who were judged by the quality of their physiques, a good deal of scrutiny fell on the character of the athlete as well, because the development of a good character was thought to be the primary purpose for such a development.²⁴ The ancient Greeks found pride in developing the entire person, which for the athletes was finalized by aesthetic perfection. Plato emphasizes the complexity of the athletic physicality, in Book 3 of *The Republic*, stating "the very exercises and toils which he undergoes are intended to stimulate the spirited element of his nature" ²⁵

Sandow did not entirely disregard the purpose of the human body as a machine, and he stressed the necessity of performing tasks efficiently. Sandow does express the importance of practical training, and he utilizes gymnastics as an example, without any direct implication that it was based on the Greeks' major form of exercise.²⁶ Through his analysis of gymnastics, he shows how the movements performed aid in the well-being of an athlete and provide a secondary effect of increased breathing and physiological enhancement. However, all through his discussion of its importance, he still focuses on the necessity of incorporating such movements as secondary tools for the primary goal of acquiring aesthetic perfection. By contrast, Maria Wyke summarizes the true ideal for ancient Greek physical culture, as "a social institution of the ancient city-state, which fully integrated the aesthetic ideal of the beautifully formed male physique, with the moral and political ideal of the

²⁴ Plato, *The Republic*. Translated by Robyn Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

²⁵ Plato, *Republic*, 411b.

²⁶ Sandow, *On Physical Training*, *passim*.

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good male citizen."²⁷ Furthermore, the difference between the two approaches varies with the tools utilized in acquiring such physiques. Sandow utilized rudimentary dumbbells, barbells, and body weight movements to acquire his physique, whereas the ancient Greeks used resistance movements, in wrestling and grappling, along with endurance movements. Similarly, the diet of Sandow utilized specific foods for their relative macro-nutrient values, such as carbohydrates, fats, sugars, and protein.²⁸ Since the Greeks lacked knowledge of macro-nutrients, they ate mostly fruit, vegetables, and beans, foods that were readily available.²⁹ Sandow's regimen differed from that of the Greeks, due to his knowledge of muscle development and the varying nutritional components of his diet, which was used to supplement his regimen of physical exercise.

Sandow acquired a desire to construct a way to build such a physique, in part because of his introduction to the Greek body through their artwork, specifically sculptures.³⁰ From this experience, he developed a regimen that prioritized focal points of the body, to emphasize the regions that the Greeks wanted to be emphasized.³¹ In Sandow's journey to this newly developed Grecian ideal, he sought to exemplify its likeness to the ancient Greek form by posing in the same manner in which the ancient sculptors positioned the figures. A complete comparison of the two forms can be accomplished through the analysis of art, as Sandow attempted to recreate such artwork.

²⁷ Maria Wyke, "Herculean Muscle!: The Classicizing Rhetoric of Bodybuilding," *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 4, no. 3 (1997): 51-79.

²⁸ Sandow, *Strength and How to Obtain it*, 42-3.

²⁹ Wyke, *Herculean Muscle*, 51-79.

³⁰ Sandow, *On Physical Training*, *passim*.

³¹ Lattimore, *Odes of Pinder*, 1-4.

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Therefore, a comparison of Sandow's recreation to the original work can reveal the success of his approach. The works of art Sandow later analyzed are Roman copies of the original Greek bronze works, but they are considered to be accurate representations of the original art.³² Figure 1a presents Sandow's striving for Greek perfection, in his modeling of *The Dying Gaul*.³³ Figure 1b shows the Roman copy of an original bronze Greek sculpture.³⁴

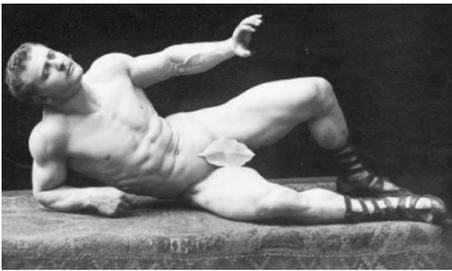


Figure 1a



Figure 1b

Both Sandow's pose and the original statue exhibit symmetry and balance throughout their form. Although the Gallic soldier is meant to have a weak and collapsed appearance, Sandow portrays a sense of power and strength. Sandow's representation of the piece, attempts to mimic the despair expressed by the figure. Both figures share key components in which their musculature is comprised. These include prominent anterior, posterior, and lateral deltoids, shaping a broader upper torso, tapering into a tight well-developed waist. Their pectoral

³² Penelope Davies, Walter Denny, Frima Hofrichter, Joseph Jacobs, Ann Roberts, and David Simon, *Janson's History of Art* (Upper Saddle River: Pearson Education, 2007).

³³ Sandow, *On Physical Training*.

³⁴ Used by permission of photographer (Xuan Che); Davies, et al., *Janson's History of Art*, 177-229.

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symmetry is a key component of beauty and a major focal point of both ideals. While there are many similarities, some differences are apparent as well. Two major differences are seen in the development of the bicep and forearm. These differences can be understood as the result of training technique, as Sandow utilized slow and controlled weighted movements which specifically targeted such areas; while the Greeks secondarily worked these groups. This, therefore, resulted in Sandow developing larger bicep and forearm growth.



Figure 2a

Figure 2b

Another opportunity for comparison is presented by the Greek bronze sculpture referred to as the Hercules Farnese (Figure 2a), also known as Hercules Resting and Sandow's photograph of himself in the same pose (Figure 2b).³⁵ As one can see in

the figures, symmetry is a key feature for both physiques. Both figures contain symmetry by proportion and overall balance. The proportionality of each segment of the torso is balanced throughout. This example allows for a better observation of leg symmetry and definition, which is a prominent component of both ideals. The focus on core development, including exaggeration of the obliques, is visible in both figures. Similarly,

³⁵ Sandow, *On Physical Training*; A. Marie-Bénédicte, "Hercules resting | Louvre Museum | Paris." Accessed April 20, 2017. <http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/hercules-resting>.

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both figures present similar tapering of the latissimi dorsi (large muscle covering the entire range of the back), not an exaggerated taper but rather a slight taper, still allowing the desired "V" shape. There is a small contrast in arm development, specifically bicep size. This difference is most likely a result of the routines performed by the Greeks, as they did mostly throwing for arm development, involving mostly pushing or expanding motions of the arms, resulting in greater tricep growth, compared to bicep growth.

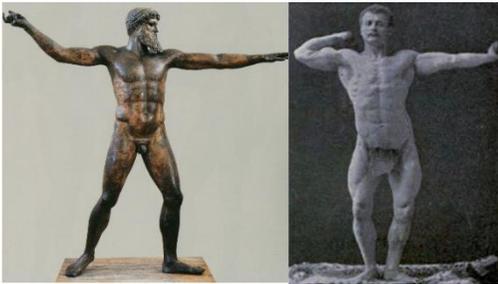


Figure 3a

Figure 3b

A final comparison of Sandow's Grecian ideal to the representation of the ideal physique created by the Greeks, will be done

through the analysis of the Artemision Bronze (Figure 3a), believed to be a representation of Zeus or Poseidon³⁶ and a photograph of Sandow (Figure 3b) showing a bicep exercise, in a position similar to the Artemision Zeus (Figure 3a). As stated before, Sandow has a much more prominent bicep development. Furthermore, Sandow's quadricep definition and size is far greater than that of the Artemision Zeus. Both show similar back tapering, size, and shape. Overall, Sandow presents a physique quite similar to that depicted in Greek sculpture.

³⁶ Davies, et al., *Janson's History of Art*, 312.

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Sandow's Grecian ideal nearly perfectly represents the ideal of ancient Greece in terms of artistic form and figure. Sandow mimicked the median symmetry, and developed the key regions that are clearly emphasized by the Greek artists. In terms of visual analysis and comparison of Sandow's ideal to the Greek ideal as presented in these examples of ancient Greek art, Sandow perfectly refined a training regimen that allowed him to produce such an ideal. Therefore, Sandow's "Grecian ideal" is truly a return of a lost ideal to his modern society.

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