Peter Jackson Perfect Man

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Ein Mohr könnte schön heissen,
wenne seine Gesichtsbildung schön ist.
—J.J. Winckelmann

It has not always been made explicit by those who study the turn-of-the-century image of the male body, for example Maurizia Boscagli and George Mosse, that the body they study belongs to a white man (Boscagli 1996; Mosse 1996; Dabakis 1999). This paper deals with a point where gender and race and representation intersect, the point where black men’s bodies stand; or at least with that point where one black man stood among historical circumstances.

In May 1894 Peter Jackson, Australia’s champion boxer, who that month was back in San Francisco, was interviewed by a reporter from the San Francisco Examiner and asked who, in his opinion, had the perfect male body. Jackson could not name, or was too discreet to name, any individual who possessed one but, “taking men in tribes or races”, he said, “I consider Highland Scotchmen to come as near to my idea of perfection as any. I have also seen splendidly put-up Sikhs and Hindoos of an athletic turn, while if photographs and pictures are to count for anything the Zulus have some splendid specimens of manhood among them” (San Francisco Examiner 1894, 24). Such an answer in 1894 sounds like the Darwinist ethnography rampant at that time, when Regnault was making his films of Africans, those monuments of racial suprematism. Jackson’s response was made not a year after the World’s Columbian Exhibition in Chicago where all sorts of “natives” were displayed, along with freaks, indiscriminately, for sensation-seeking white visitors (Barkan and Bush 1995; Rony 1996; Maxwell 1999). But his answer was more sophisticated than that: this man knew that Hindus and Sikhs differed from one another; he knew that photographs were not entirely to be trusted; he had seen photos and pictures of Zulus. At least three paintings immortalised the fight at Rorke’s Drift, that Victorian Dunkirk; one of which, the huge oil by Alphonse de Neuville in the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Jackson himself may have inspected. Barthorp’s illustrated history contains a variety of iconographical items; and there the Zulu soldiers do look finer men than the British warriors (Barthorp 1980, Knight 1989). We may therefore con-
clude that Jackson’s remarks were informed and nuanced.

The truth is, however, that the force of these judgements can be fully comprehended only when it is understood that Jackson was a Black. A descendant of African slaves, he was born in 1861 on the island of St Croix in the Danish West Indies and came to Australia at seventeen. He made his boxing career equally in Australia and overseas, because after becoming the heavyweight champion of Australia in 1886 he had go abroad for opponents. He went to San Francisco, which was the American city most tolerant of boxing matches, and there Jackson became the Colored Champion of the World in 1888. He won the English heavyweight title in 1889. He never contested the heavyweight championship of the world only because John L. Sullivan, James J. Corbett, and Robert Fitzsimmons each, one after the other, hastily “drew the color line” once he had won the crown. Jackson could find nobody in America or Europe worth fighting. He lived by giving theatrical exhibitions of his talents, and he took to drink. Afflicted by tuberculosis he returned to Australia in 1900 and died in July 1901. Jackson lies buried in Toowong Cemetery in Brisbane, in a grand tomb paid for by public subscription (Wiggins 1997).

It appears that in 1894 Jackson was asserting in California, not thirty years after the end of the Civil War and just before the Jim-Crow laws (Logan 1997), that while Scots highlanders were the physical champions, in his view the colored races also had excellent claims to be considered the contenders for male perfection. And his interviewer was not fazed by this boldness, as we might consider it, but rather reported Jackson fully. Moreover, the week before, the San Francisco Examiner itself, the flagship Hearst newspaper, had raised the question of whether Peter Jackson, who seems to have been the Paul Robeson or Tyson Beckford of his day, himself possessed the perfect male body (Carby 1998, Dyer 1986, Thomas 1998).

In both Europe and America at that time, there was considerable interest in men’s health and their fitness and coincidentally their beauty. Imperialism required healthy citizens and fit soldiers. The two countries that did not have large standing armies, England and the United States, became very aware of their need for fit populations when they embarked upon the South African War and the war against Spain. Military-style drilling in schools was intensified, and potential recruits were encouraged by every means to develop fitness. War was preceded, as Gail Bederman shows, by increasingly fervent talk about manliness and the cultivating of “primitive” virtues (Bederman 1995). Discussions of exemplary bodies like those of boxers and wrestlers and gymnasts tended to emphasise that women found them sexually attractive and that any fit man would attract women. In those years of eugenic enthusiasm it was from there only a short step to talking about men’s beauty (Mainardi 2001).

Peter Jackson had by 1894 spent some five years in San Francisco and was well enough known about the city; he had run a bar in one of the better
streets. In 1893–94 he toured with the San Francisco-based Stockwell’s theatrical company in Uncle Tom’s Cabin, playing Uncle Tom (Clark 2000). Usually this was a role taken by older white men in blackface. Jackson was only 33 but was helped by white eyebrows and whiskers to look older. He was not the first Black to play Uncle Tom. That honour went to Sam Lucas (1848–1916) in the late 1870s. His performance was applauded by Harriet Beecher Stowe herself. Jackson was, nevertheless, one of the first. He was an amateur actor, though still a pleasing stage presence. His acting prowess was not at issue because in the intermission between Acts I and II he went three rounds with another well-known heavyweight, Joe Choynski, from San Francisco. This latter boxer was fair enough to have played Little Eva. The boxing became the point of Jackson’s theatrical engagement. By 1893 Uncle Tom’s Cabin was a creaky vehicle of some forty years standing. The only novelty in this production must have been its Uncle Tom who really came out fighting; and any Blacks in Jackson’s audience must have seen a political message in the double guise of this Uncle Tom.

While Jackson was in San Francisco resting up after his acting venture, it happened that Eugen Sandow, sometimes called the Prussian Hercules, or alternatively the blond Hercules, was playing California in his athletic and body-building show. Sandow was effectively the inventor of bodybuilding because he first converted the venerable circus strong-man act into a beauty and fitness display (Chapman 1994). Because of Sandow, the San Francisco Examiner printed a pair of articles in its Sunday issues of May 20 and 27, 1894 asking, “Who is the perfect man?” and in effect asking, “Which man possesses the perfect body?” The inquiry was provoked by a lecturer at the San Francisco art school, Amadee Joullin, who in a lecture appropriated the title given Sandow the year before: “The Perfect Man.” Commenting on Joullin’s remarks, Sandow told reporters he had never claimed perfection for himself, blaming the New York papers; but even one short-lived Chicago newspaper, the Interocian, had published a piece on Sandow entitled “A Perfect Man” in August 1893.

The first article, on May 20, was illustrated by three figures drawn by Examiner sketch-artist Langford. In the centre was a drawing of the Apollo Belvedere from the Vatican Museums. This statue was a Roman copy of a celebrated icon of male beauty, the Greek original being attributed to Leonidas. To its right was drawn a nude Jackson, the black boxer from Australia, in a three-quarters rear view. To its left a frontal view of the German strongman Sandow, naked but for his trade-mark figleaf and sandals, both images after photographs by the fashionable San Francisco photographer Isaiah Taber. Langford’s caption read: “The Three Types of Manly Form.” The three types were not racial types but somatic types; nor were they arranged hierarchically; in effect the three were variations on the mesomorphic physique. The astonishing fact that Peter Jackson was a Black was not mentioned in the article at all.
In the text, the two articles reported the responses of a variety of experts to the question of whether Sandow was the perfect physical specimen of male humanity? The same question was raised about Jackson: was he perhaps a perfect male?

The question makes sense only if a scale of excellence existed, with perfection at the highest end. It did, as it happened: in 1894 Greek sculpture was the standard. Jackson himself remarked that “the inclination nowadays, of course, is to compare alleged perfect men with the old Grecian athletes and Roman gladiators. I think these ancients must have looked better in statues than they did in the flesh.”

It was not just “nowadays”, though, not only in the 1890s, that such a comparison was made. The standard had been set up around 1760, by the art historian J.J. Winckelmann, who crystallised earlier generations’ vague thinking about a canon of physical perfection in his two main works, the Reflections on the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks (1755) and the History of Ancient Art (1764).

What was being debated in May 1894 was not male beauty so much as the division between the Apollo and the Hercules. This was at the heart of Winckelmann territory, a matter well discussed by Potts (1994). The debate is about the question of the better body: the Herculean type versus the Apollonian type. There are conventionally two types of good-looking male body; but is Hercules with all his muscles the perfect man or is it Apollo, lithe and steely?

As the first historian of classical art, Winckelmann was trying to find in Italy, among the statues known to him, the one that illustrated perfect male beauty; the one, therefore, that could be used as the standard against which to measure other claimants to beauty (whether sculpted or in the flesh). Winckelmann believed that the Greek body must be the despair of modern men because such perfection could never be attained again. In one section of the History of Ancient Art, Winckelmann worked his way down the generic Greek body from hair to toes noting, for every site, the beauty that resided there. But which particular sculpted body was the most beautiful; which one to choose for the standard of beauty? He could not decide; he dithered. He certainly preferred the Apollo Belvedere to the Farnese Hercules; but in the end he seems to have opted for neither Apollo nor Hercules; instead he favored the depiction of adolescents, statues of young fellows before their muscles grew defined. But the discussions were confined within Greek limits: Winckelmann thought that only the Greeks were beautiful; not Caucasians generally, not Indo-Europeans—certainly not the other human races. His idea was that the sculptures were beautiful precisely because they were copied from beautiful human beings.

Therefore anybody discussing Peter Jackson’s body as beautiful had to break with Winckelmann. And the art historian had been explicit about Blacks. “As white is the color which reflects the greatest number of rays of
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light, and consequently is the most easily perceived, a beautiful body will, accordingly, be the more beautiful the whiter it is”, he asserted; though “he who prefers dark to fair beauty is not on that account to be censured; indeed, one might approve his choice, because he is attracted less by sight than by the touch” (Winckelmann 1968, I, 198). The slippage in Winckelmann’s sensibility was probably this: that the term “Greek statue” means a white stone statue, and that must mean a white man or woman. The truth is that many Greek statues are known to have been garishly painted in primary colors, and we can presume that they looked something like Audrey Flack’s figures (Flynn 1998). But that was not common knowledge in the eighteenth century. Winckelmann’s generation felt that white was appropriate, and that even to work in polychrome marbles seemed tasteless and baroque. Winckelmann detested the baroque.

So, certain people favored touch over sight. Brunettes are soft, he continued, and “the skin of blacks is far softer to the touch than ours.” Winckelmann concedes, in the 1880 G.H. Lodge translation, that “a negro might be called handsome, when the conformation of his face is handsome”; Hugh Honour translated this sentence as: “A black may be called beautiful if his features are beautiful” (Honour 1989). Winckelmann explains that “a traveller assures us that daily association with negroes diminishes the disagreeableness of their color, and displays what is beautiful in them; just as the color of bronze and of the black and [the] greenish basalt does not detract from the beauty of the antique heads.” That much was conceded. However, could any Black ever have a handsome face or beautiful features? Scarcely, it is to be feared, for they had a flattened nose, “the greatest disfigurement of the face” and “a deviation, for it mars the unity of the forms according to which the other parts of the body have been shaped.” There was also, sadly, said Winckelmann, “the projecting, swollen mouth which the negro has, in common with the monkey of his land, [and which] is a superfluous growth, caused by the heat of the climate.” Such a mouth must ruin any chance a Black has of being handsome, one would think (Winckelmann 1968, I, 197; Dyer 1997).

But Winckelmann was not against Blacks in particular, for he disparaged oriental faces, too. “Slanting eyes”, he says, “when found among us, and in Chinese, Japanese, and some Egyptian heads, in profile, are a departure from the standard. The flattened nose of the Chinese, Calmucks, and other distant nations, is also a deviation, for it mars the unity of the forms according to which the other parts of the body have been shaped.” Winckelmann insisted that this was not his preferences speaking, that it was not a matter of taste at all. It was because “our ideas and those of the Greeks relative to beauty, being derived from the most regular conformation, are more correct than those that can possibly be formed” by other nations (Winckelmann 1968, I, 197). Thus Winckelmann and all who followed him in the academic art world effectively excluded Queen Nefertiti as well as Peter Jackson from
any beauty competition.

If, then, the task of looking like a Greek statue was not easy for most Whites, excepting maybe only the modern Greeks, it was almost impossible for Blacks.

At this point, however, it is appropriate to remind ourselves that Blacks had been portrayed by the Greeks. There are at least four books on the subject. Black bodies were represented, but very few of them were heroised or even idealised as were Greek bodies. Most of them were grotesque, or of the realism pushed to the edge of grotesquerie that Greek depictions of barbarians usually were; and most were only painted or in terracotta, very few being in noble stones like black basalt and the marble called nero antico. But some heroic Blacks were portrayed even among the few ancient artefacts that have survived. Ethiopian warriors and notably the figure of an athlete in Munich testify to some recognition of Blacks with built bodies (Snowden 1970). But it would be extremely difficult for a modern black man to find many classical antecedents for his physical development; that is supposing, of course, that a Black would even want to search for his models among Greek statues. Jackson’s scepticism about the ancient athletic statues is probably typical.

We must not lose from sight, therefore, the long-standing consensus about male beauty, which one might call an art-school prejudice, which prevailed in 1894 when the San Francisco experts compared Sandow and Jackson to the Apollo Belvedere and to each other.

Four of the experts were artists (Lewis 1956, Hjalmarson 1998). Amadee Joullin, who set off these events, was born in San Francisco in 1862, lived all his life there, and died there in 1917. He was noted for his landscape painting. Two other San Francisco natives had just returned from studies in Europe. Evelyn McCormick (1869–1948) had until a few months before been in Paris where she exhibited landscapes at the Salon. John Stanton (1857–1929) had returned to San Francisco the year before, after five years in Paris, having enjoyed some success and having exhibited also in Munich. He is known for his marine paintings, his portraits, and murals. He taught at the San Francisco School of Design for some fifteen years.

The other two artists were Europeans who were then living in San Francisco. Solly Walter, born in Vienna in 1846 and resident in the USA since 1878, moved west to San Francisco in 1883. He founded a school of drawing and became a member of the San Francisco Art Association. In 1900 Walter died even further west, in Honolulu. The other foreign artist was the German sculptor Rupert Schmid (1864–1932), a graduate of the Royal Academy of Munich who had recently made his home in San Francisco and carved the “California Venus.” It is probable that those artists the Examiner contacted were more competent than other people in San Francisco to pronounce on the artistic perfection of Sandow’s body and incidentally on Jackson’s body. It may be remarked that Hjalmarson’s chatty account of the artists’ fas-
cation with Sandow’s body succeeds in ignoring the matter of Jackson.

The Examiner also adduced the testimonies of Dudley A. Sargent, a professor of physical education at Harvard, and Dr T.D. Wood, a professor of hygiene and physical training at Stanford. Sargent’s report on John L. Sullivan’s physical condition was appended to the heavyweight champion’s autobiography, *Life and Reminiscences of a 19th Century Gladiator*, that had been published in 1892 (Sullivan 1979, 214–222). From this latter work the reporter borrowed paragraphs tending to make the point that immensely muscular men are less likely to be athletes and more unlikely to be dime-museum freaks. Wood, for his part, said that “Jackson may have the best physique of any pugilist living, but it is the result of pugilism, and the trouble is with the business. “Twere better for the youth of to-day to take the physique of a Gladstone as an ideal.” Woods moralised endlessly, and as a physician should have known that boxing had not by itself produced the physique Jackson had. Sandow himself said rather sanctimoniously that “A man cannot fight a prize fight and be a gentleman” (*San Francisco Examiner* 27/5/1894, 24).

McCormick said she favored Donatello over Michelangelo; she said of Sandow that “I regard him as a good model for a disc-thrower, but no study is necessary to show that he is not an Apollo. He is a model of strength, not of refinement.” Schmid thought that Sandow might model for Hercules, with some modifications, because “in the antique Hercules there is a certain appearance, or else the statue is not Hercules. Just as in a Venus, one must always make the pose to indicate nothing but beauty.” Schmid’s English was not the best; but he obviously did not see Sandow as Apollonian. Jullien said that Sandow had packets of muscles sticking out of him, so that “still better is the figure of Peter Jackson who might seriously be considered as a perfect man, or nearly perfect. The lines are fine and delicate from the wrists to the small ankles. On him are no bunches of muscle, such as in Sandow seem abnormal instead of natural.” Stanton, the painter, went furthest, in saying that “Peter Jackson to my mind approaches nearer the elegant proportions of the old Greek statues than Sandow. The lines of his contour of figure are more finely drawn, more delicate than those of Sandow.” Stanton’s is a surprising judgement! A black man more Greek than a white man?

In those very years the expatriate American sculptor Harriet Hosmer, creating a model for her Lincoln Monument in 1889–1890, set up a sculptured antithesis of Africa and Greece. On the projected memorial an African sibyl, majestic and mysterious, was balanced by a mourning victory (a *nike*) with classical Greek features. Hosmer thereby intended to counterpoise Greek beauty and civilisation against the primitivism embodied in the African figure (Savage 1997, 126). It would seem impossible that that generation should have placed alongside one another a Benin bronze and a Cycladic *venus*, let us say: counterpoising African beauty and civilisation against Greek primitivism. But Stanton almost arrived at that point; and it does not hurt to remember that when he had returned to San Francisco from Paris in 1892,
already Paul Gauguin had left his native France to paint in Tahiti.

None of the interlocutors in this debate were reported as alluding to one very obvious fact about Jackson. Except in the fourth headline on May 27 1984, the whole discussion was conducted without acknowledging that he was a Black. Jackson’s race was ignored by the contributors and he was discussed as incarnating one type of male body, that is the Apollonian type. Five weeks earlier, the New York Herald of April 17th had said: “If I were a sculptor, and wanted a model of a perfect figure to illustrate the happiest possible combination of strength and agility—a between of Hercules and Mercury—I would choose Peter Jackson,” a statement which does not raise any racial issue. But the Examiner articles went further in asking seriously, whether Peter Jackson, out of all men, had the perfect body.

This is astonishing. Hatt, in his paper on the black male in sculpture, notes that, while the nude is generally taken as “defining a universal masculinity, it should also be noted that it can be viewed as class specific; [because] the inscription of forms of labor on the working-class body marks it out as ineligible for the representation of essential manhood” (Hatt 1992, 35 n.31). And Hatt asserts that the ideal nude is also race-specific: the body of the Black or the Chinese or the Indian being, in western sculpture, unacceptable as standing for essential manhood. To answer the questions about to whom it might be unacceptable, and why, would take us too far from the present subject (see Solomon-Godeau 1997). But we can say the same of very young men, and old men, of any race. These types of men are also ineligible, for the ideal male nude is age-specific too (shall we say, forever 33?). And we can say the same even of athletes, who have inscribed on their bodies the one sport at which they excel, showing great legs or powerful arms, whatever, and thus ruining their proportions.

No, the only bodies that will serve are really the bodies of white, gym-toned dilettantes of virile age, who have nothing better to do with their bodies than make them symmetrical and harmonious; fit indeed, but fit for nothing in particular unless to be gazed upon. Exactly like Eugen Sandow in 1894. Theoretically such bodies alone can be used by sculptors to represent essential masculinity, or masculinity as such. And in fact, in 1901, a plaster cast was made of Sandow, the blond Hercules, and put in a natural history museum and labelled, quite simply: Man (Budd 1997, 61–62). This is why the treatment of Peter Jackson in the San Francisco Examiner begs for scholarly illumination.

In his deeply considered study of Civil War monuments, Standing Soldiers Kneeling Slaves, Kirk Savage finds four aspects of the portrayal of Blacks by American sculptors in Jackson’s time which can be read as signifying social and psychological progress. Firstly, their posture: they begin by crouching, progress to kneeling, and conclude standing upright. Secondly, their gaze begins as downcast, or at least averted from the gaze of the viewer, and the end they are looking the viewer in the face. Their clothing, similarly,
shows their status. Naked at first, they then go shirtless or wearing rags and tatters, and end up clothed and occasionally even stylish, sometimes in military uniform. Lastly they are portrayed with accessories, starting with manacles and leg-irons, then with hoes and baskets to symbolise work, and ending with army-issue rifles. The naked chained crouching slave is at one end of the spectrum; at the other end there is the uniformed soldier with his rifle who looks back at you. Savage says of the black soldier, that “he has acquired manhood (the level gaze), power (the gun), and legitimacy (the uniform)—all three reinforcing and requiring one another” (Savage 1997, 98).

Because fighting is considered by most to be the most masculine activity there is, the soldier is conventionally the most masculine of men; but usually the boxer is placed next. However, the boxer is normally shown stripped to the waist, semi-clothed and thus coded poor or backward if Savage is to be followed. Uncle Tom must be coded the same way, tattered and therefore backward. Yet one must concede a qualitative jump when, stripped of his old duds, Uncle Tom started into punching a blond man. This must have been rather like enrolling an escaped slave into a Union regiment.

There is ambiguity everywhere in this discourse on male perfection. Another point made by Savage concerns the John Ward’s Freedman statue of 1863. “The lack of clothes”, he says, “suggests the precariousness of the man’s position as he tries to move from one world to another, yet that same lack allows the “ideal” display of the male body, so much appreciated by contemporary critics” (Savage 1997, 57). It seems to be a question of whether appearing stripped is a sign of lack or of plenitude, whether the naked body is to be taken negatively or positively. If the body is worth looking at, then nudity does not diminish it, more probably the reverse. But the very concepts of “worth looking at” and “not worth looking at” bring us around to that canonical beauty which Winckelmann sought so desperately to locate.

This whole episode in San Francisco is intriguing. Nothing in the literature seems to explain how a Black could have been seriously discussed as the perfect man—in the USA, in 1894. Maybe there was something specific about San Francisco at that time, reputedly the most easy-going city in America, though histories suggest that for Blacks in the early 1890s San Francisco was not particularly open; and by the late 1890s it had closed rather more (Daniels 1980). Or maybe there was this about Jackson, that he was not an African American. Or we might consider that Hearst was creating scandal simply to sell more Examiners; though no outraged letters to the editor followed, from any of its 72,000 purchasers (in a population of 300,000).

The San Francisco episode is almost as enigmatic as the fact that the Australian public in the 1880s and 1890s, after a century of mistreating the Aborigines and at the height of the anti-Asian and anti-Kanaka ferment, took a Black from the West Indies to their hearts, made him one of their greatest sporting heroes, and on his tomb incised the words spoken by Antony over the body of Brutus: “This Was A Man.”
NOTES

1 The matter of this article will form part of a full biography of Peter Jackson to appear in 2003. I have to thank Professor Kirk Savage of the University of Pittsburgh for his helpful comments on a draft of the article.

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