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book review of

Looking at Men: Art, Anatomy and the Modern Male Body by
Anthea Callen

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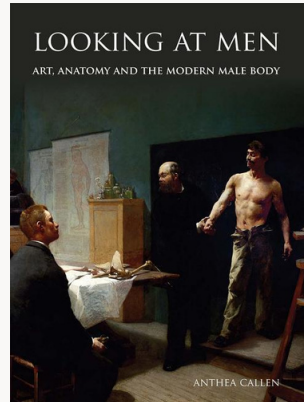
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Anthea Callen,
Looking at Men: Art, Anatomy and the Modern Male Body.
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Every art historian who specializes in the long nineteenth century has engaged at one point or another with the male nude in art, from the *beau idéal* figures of Jacques-Louis David's history paintings to the abstracted bodies among Paul Cézanne's bathers. Nevertheless, representation of the male nude in mainstream art, film, and social media remains controversial, its taboo nature often generating responses ranging from excitement to disgust to embarrassment. The male nude certainly has received less critical attention in art history than the female nude, which has been displayed, appreciated, and critiqued extensively, and analyzed with methods ranging from formalism to feminism. White, heterosexual, male power undoubtedly has played a large role in bolstering this paradigm. The recent exhibition *Nackte Männer (Nude Men)* at the Leopold Museum, followed by a second showing at the Musée d'Orsay, attempted to rectify this imbalance; inevitably, the exhibition faced pushback from conservatives through active forms of censorship, while still generating record-high ticket sales for both museums.^[1]

Public engagement with male nudes at an exhibition, however, is different from experiencing the subject in an illustrated book. The touch of fingers on the page provides a level of personal interaction, perhaps even satisfaction, as one peruses bodies in private. Anthea Callen's *Looking at Men: Art, Anatomy and the Modern Male Body*—beautifully illustrated with male bodies in paintings and photographs, and intellectually stimulating in its examinations of and theories about these works of art—argues that similar types of tactility played an important role in how artists and anatomists visualized the male body in the nineteenth century. Displacing the *flâneur* as the observer of modern life, whom she describes as “mute, disengaged,” Callen argues for the authority of the artist-anatomist, an individual whose engagement with bodies (living and deceased) was “loquacious” and “plurisensorial” (16).^[2] Beholding these bodies in the classroom, artist-anatomists utilized all of their senses to bear witness to the stripping of male bodies—with the posing of buff, working-class models, or the flaying of skin from dissected corpses—in pursuit of creating the idealized male form.

A Professor Emeritus at both the Australian National University and the University of Nottingham, and as a Fellow of the Royal Society of the Arts, Callen is an established authority in the field of nineteenth-century French art. Versions of three of the chapters in *Looking at Men* have been published before and are brought together here with new and updated research to round out her thesis.^[3] With occasional tongue-in-cheek references (e.g., Chapter 4 is titled “Size Matters”), Callen’s book, in her own words, is about “sex, power and death,” or rather the connections among these ideas that reveal the “reflexive relationship” between art and medicine throughout the nineteenth century (11). For Callen, anatomy refers both to the study of the body’s external form and physiognomy, as well as to its inner workings through dissection. Art historians know the study of anatomy was an important part of an artist’s training in the academies of Paris, London, and elsewhere, with the goal of representing idealized bodies in history painting, but Callen contends that the study of anatomy also sought to improve medicine through more accurate, artistic representations of the human form, which inevitably helped build and reinforce the rising wellness and health movements prevalent at the end of the century. Art and medicine thus were interconnected and mutually beneficial in the search to develop the idealized male body both aesthetically and scientifically.

The first chapter opens with a close reading of a painting few will know: a large modern-history painting entitled *The Anatomy Class at the École des Beaux-Arts*. Painted by François Sallé, it won a third-class medal at the Salon of 1888. The painting shows Dr. Mathias-Marie Duval, the very popular anatomy professor at the École from 1873 to 1903, lecturing to students, directing their attention toward the live model’s half-clothed body, comparing and contrasting it to the *écorché*, bones and anatomical drawings in the room. Callen excels in her reading of this painting, dissecting, as it were, the formal composition and lighting, as well as the individuals and their interactions and gazes. Her emphasis on the tension between the classicizing *écorché*, posed as the *Borghese Gladiator*, and the naturalism of the working-class model is a theme that echoes throughout the book. Duval’s teachings were inspired by Darwinian evolution and the physiognomic studies of Duchenne de Boulougne (teacher of Jean-Martin Charcot), and while Duval did teach dissection, he primarily emphasized the live body in his anatomy classes, encouraging students to work from the outside-inward. This broke from the tradition of most previous professors of anatomy who had emphasized dissection as a way to examine the body from the inside-outward. According to Callen, then, the teachings of Duval, and his successor Paul Richer (discussed below), were intrinsic to the development of the healthy body movement as their dual roles as anatomists and artists intersected and encouraged students to develop a new vision of the perfect male form.

Callen continues her intuitive discussion of this painting in chapter three, “Doubles and Desire,” by examining the homosocialism of the all-male student body and their gazes on the teacher and model. She begins by showcasing contemporaneous paintings of anatomy classes by artists such as Henri Gervex and Thomas Eakins (emphasizing the US painter’s training in France), pointing to how the female bodies in their paintings are objectified by the male gaze. Through the lens of queer theory, Callen emphasizes how Sallé’s painting demonstrates a homosocial gaze, and by extension homoerotic desire, on the part of the students toward the objectified male body displayed before them. The foundational structure for her argument is an exploration of Robert Louis Stevenson’s novella *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), which has been parsed at length in literary studies as

symptomatic of developing clinical studies on divided male sexuality, the homosexual being seen at that time as monstrous and abnormal. Callen uses this doubling of man to look closely at three homoerotic exchanges in the painting: between Duval and the model through their touch; between the classical *écorché* and the working-class model; and through the model posing for the students, most notably the student in the center foreground (Sallé himself?), whom she sees as leering at the model's half-dressed body, his unbuttoned pants signaling what is yet to come as the model eventually strips to his usually nude state in the anatomy class.

Callen's three propositions have merit, the last being the most convincing. But her attempt to draw connections between Stevenson's novella and the painting are not always successful. For instance, the muscularity of the model shares very little with the cultural persona of the monstrous Mr. Hyde, no matter how Callen argues for his body as being that of a laborer or points to his pants as baggy and unkempt. Even she acknowledges there is no direct evidence that Sallé read Stevenson's novella, noting instead "it suggests parallels" (127). Callen's queer reading of the scene certainly illuminates the homosocial nature of the all-male environment and the homoerotic aspects of the gaze therein, but all this is apparent just by *looking at the men* in the painting. The desire on the part of the student in the foreground staring intently at the model is abundantly clear. He may just be an eager student, but the tension in his body and the positioning of his hand, clutching the leather-skin gloves, appropriately placed in proximity to his own genitals, tells the viewer much more.^[4] Surprisingly, Callen misses an opportunity to reinforce her queer argument, ignoring another student in the lower-left foreground whose bodily position mirrors that of the model, leaning backward, his own hands caressing the knob of his phallic cane.^[5]

While chapters one and three relate to close readings of Sallé's painting, which also appears as a detail on the front cover, the remaining chapters approach their topics more thematically. The second chapter considers combat sports, primarily wrestling but also boxing, which Callen argues:

like art and medicine . . . provide a licit space both actual and virtual for looking closely at and representing the naked or semi-naked male body, and hence for constructing or subverting normative ideal physiques and their meanings. Combat sports allow for public performance and a voyeuristic spectacle of the developed male body, of physical skill, violence, brute strength and virility, sweat and blood. Yet under close scrutiny, such images of masculinity often appear so over-determined as to be unstable, almost untenable, at best barely encoding their intended meanings of hygienic control, strength and virile prowess (65).

Hence, Callen is interested not just in the visual culture of combat sports, but how these paintings, prints, and photographs were tied to ideas of improving the health and well-being of the male body, and how this increased emphasis on masculinity and virility also reinforced racial and class hierarchies. Callen offers up for analysis an array of male nude/semi-nude wrestlers in nineteenth-century art, including works by Bazille, Bouguereau, Courbet, Eakins, and others, nuancing their differences but also their cultural contexts. Her exploration of homoeroticism and racial suppression in William Etty's ca. 1840 painting of mixed-race wrestlers is particularly superb. Callen extends her discussion to pugilism (boxing) as well as other sports like swimming and bodybuilding. In a discussion that features

the strongman and showman Eugen Sandow, first mentioned in the introduction and posed nude like a Herculean statue on the back cover, Callen argues that by the end of the century these health and wellness movements sought to produce a vision of perfection for the nation as virile and able-bodied.

The fourth chapter emphasizes studies of body proportions and locomotion among working-class men, with particular attention to the influences of Darwinism and Marxism. Callen's underlying thesis here derives from the scholarship of art historian Michael Hatt, whom she quotes, noting how "class difference gave the bourgeois the license to look. . . . Class difference mobilized desire."^[6] This chapter considers not just artistic and anatomical assessments by the middle classes of the laboring classes, but also how their ability to look incited measuring, comparing, contrasting, and thus apotheosizing the male body, what she interprets as the development of the "human machine" (141). Callen explores the art world's obsession with bodily proportion, including the Canon of Polykleitos, Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*, and the Elgin Marbles. The bulk of this chapter, and its most interesting section, relate to Richer and his anthropometric photographs of bodily forms from the 1890s and afterward.^[7] While this body of work arguably was intended for artists, Richer's close associations with contemporaries doing similar work, such as Alphonse Bertillon with his criminological profiles of body types, and Albert Londe with his chronophotographic studies of locomotion for medical assessments, demonstrates well the intersections between art, medicine, and social science, and how these men equally contributed to new understandings of improving the male physique by determining what was needed to make idealized, healthy, working-class bodies.

Callen notes at the end of the fourth chapter that the idea of the human as a machine, the progenitor to the cyborg and A.I. (once just the realm of science fiction), carries within it the notion that the machine might fail or degenerate. The fifth chapter explores this in detail. Callen offers what is arguably her most intuitive assessment of the artistic and anatomical by considering the fragmented body and its decimation, her critical source being Linda Nochlin's work on the fragmented body in nineteenth-century art.^[8] Callen begins with an astute assessment of Géricault's paintings of severed heads and limbs. These paintings have been interpreted in relation to the guillotine and Reign of Terror by Nina Athanassoglou-Kallmyer, but Callen reconsiders them as related to the Gothic-like anatomical and dissection prints of the brothers and artist-anatomists John and Charles Bell.^[9] The visual comparison of John Bell's 1794 print showing severed heads laid on a sheet to Géricault's well-known oil study of a similar composition is noteworthy. Callen extends this discussion to consider Géricault's work in light of contemporaneous explorations of vivisection and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). Moving forward a century, Callen considers the drive for male perfection and its aftermath in the form of maimed and wounded soldiers in World War I. She considers closely the pastel drawings of British artist-anatomist Henry Tonks in his studies of fragmented, malformed heads, which were appreciated by doctors over their own photographs because of how Tonks was able to successfully convey not just the reality of the injury but its impact on the psyche of the soldier. Callen's knowledge as a practicing artist and a scholar who has studied pastels helps her convey well how Tonks's choice of particular pastels and paper impacted the success of his fragmented, anatomical art.^[10]

Looking at Men discusses so wide an array of facts and practices, as well as of art works and examples of material culture, from the mid-1700s to today (*RoboCop* epitomizes Callen's human machine), that it is nearly impossible to convey everything her book elucidates in this review. The promotional material and jacket suggest the book is about nineteenth-century art, but in truth it focuses on the period from about 1870 to World War I. As a result, Neoclassicism is largely ignored in favor of the "modern male body," as Callen's subtitle states, a position that reiterates the tired trope of classicism as anti-modern. Callen references Abigail Solomon-Godeau's work on the ephebic male at times, suggesting this latter research has covered Neoclassical male bodies and does not need further nuancing.^[11] In fact, it would have been helpful for Callen to make more direct comparisons and contrasts between depictions of the male nude (ephebic or heroic) and teachings at the École about the body from the early nineteenth century and the Third Republic. Similarly, although sculpture is illustrated and referenced in the form of *écorchés*, ancient statues, and references to modern works by Hamo Thornycroft and others, there are no close readings of the sculptures themselves. Canova's *Perseus* and Rodin's *The Age of Bronze*—two canonical nineteenth-century male nude sculptures—are surprisingly absent. This lack of sculptural analysis seems odd considering the male body in three-dimensional form would be an appropriate and definitive way to foreground how artists viewed it in the contexts of anatomy and modernity, even if only as part of an introductory chapter.

These lacunae, though significant, do not detract from Callen's superb assessment of how the disciplines of art and anatomy intersect in various examples of nineteenth-century art and visual culture. Her readings of individual works are thought-provoking, and I often found myself considering their applicability to other examples. Callen's knowledge of the primary and secondary literature on her topic is also impressive. Having emphasized in the latter chapters the drive of artist-anatomists to build and fortify the human machine, and visually documenting its successes and failures, *Looking at Men* seems as if it will conclude with a discussion of the eugenic programs associated with Nazism and World War II, which Callen alludes to and references in other parts of the book. Instead, she leaps forward to today:

Looking back from the present, and towards an uncertain future, adds further troubling dimensions to the complex question of ideal masculinity—especially in the light of the rise of macho tyrant heads of state from Putin to Trump to Erdoğan and Kim Jong-un. With testosterone-driven politics, we are now witnessing global male posturing on a dangerously megalomaniac scale . . . man and machine now are increasingly (con)fused, not just in the cultural imaginary but in real warfare developments, notably in the United States . . . Male perfectability, here pushing to extend the limits of bodily endurance for the purposes of war, remains very much a goal among the dominant global ideologues (223–24).

Callen's intent, then, is to warn us of the dangers of the obsessive search for male perfection, calling to mind that we seem not to have learned our lessons from the past. This is a bold statement to make in three pages of an epilogue, but it stands well as a concluding message to remind readers that nineteenth-century art—presumably innocuous, creative, and educational—in fact is always tied to the sciences and, as she argues, global politics, even today.

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Notes

[1] *Nackte Männer: von 1800 bis heute (Nude Men: From 1800 to the Present Day)* ran from October 19, 2012 to March 4, 2013 at the Leopold Museum, Vienna, and then traveled in a modified version to the Musée d'Orsay, Paris, where it drew heavily on that museum's permanent collection, opening as *Masculin/Masculin: L'homme nu dans l'art de 1800 à nos jours (Masculine/Masculine: The Nude Man in Art from 1800 to the Present Day)* from September 24, 2013 to January 12, 2014. For the exhibition catalog of the Leopold show, see Tobias G. Natter and Elisabeth Leopold, eds., *Nude Men: From 1800 to the Present Day*, English ed. (Vienna: Leopold Museum; Munich, Hirmer, 2012). For selected English-language reviews in the press, some of which include details of the censorship, see Doreen Carvajal, "Centuries of Men Baring It All," *The New York Times*, October 11, 2013, <https://nyti.ms/GRp5IE>; David Ng, "Nude Men' Art Exhibition in Austria Sparks Conversation," *Los Angeles Times*, October 18, 2012, <https://www.latimes.com/>; and Henry Samuel, "Risqué Exhibition on Male Nude Opens at Musée d'Orsay," *The Telegraph*, September 24, 2013, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/>.

[2] The emphasis on "mute" is hers, and her references to "loquacious" and "plurisensorial" derive from Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, 1973, trans. A. M. Sheridan (New York; London: Routledge, 2003).

[3] Aspects of chapters one and three previously appeared as "The Body and Difference: Anatomy Training at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris in the Later Nineteenth Century," *Art History* 20, no. 1 (March 1997): 23–60, and "Doubles and Desire: Anatomies of Masculinity in the Later Nineteenth Century," *Art History* 26, no. 5 (November 2003): 669–99. Parts of chapter four appeared in "Muscularity and Masculinity: Dr. Paul Richer and Modern Manhood," *Paragraph* 26, nos. 1–2, special issue *Men's Bodies*, ed. Judith Still (March and July 2003): 17–41, and in the book co-edited with Fae Brauer, *Art, Sex and Eugenics: Corpus Delecti* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2008).

[4] Callen credits art historian Alan Krell for his homoerotic interpretation of Sallé's painting in an exhibition catalogue published simultaneously to her own 1997 article on the same painting (see note 3). Callen, *Looking at Men*, 242n93 and 107. See Alan Krell, "Fearful Desires: 'Embodiments' in Late Nineteenth-Century French Painting," in *Body*, ed. Anthony Bond (Melbourne, Australia: Bookman Schwartz; Sydney, Australia: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1997), 125–28.

[5] My critique of Callen's use of Stevenson's novella is less about whether her argument on the homosocial and homoerotic is correct, than as a critique about how some queer theoretical approaches on historical art can stray from the perception that the homosexual gaze contrasts with the heterosexual gaze. They are different, and to declare an all-male environment as homosocial and homoerotic essentializes the body of men as all sharing the same views and feelings. It is unfortunate that Callen misses out on opportunities elsewhere in her text to explore this idea of the homosexual gaze further with regard to the male nude. For instance, she feminizes the presentation of the men in a painting depicting the studio of Frédéric Bazille (in contrast to that of the manly reenactments in Horace Vernet's studio), and mentions that the pianist was probably Bazille's lover, but then never discusses how Bazille's homoerotic view (as a homosexual) might have impacted his presentation of all the male nude and semi-nude figures in paintings such as his *Summer Scene (Bathers)*, 1869–70, beyond the wrestlers which she mentions in passing. Callen also notes that artists such as Georges Paul Leroux, Simeon Solomon, and Henry Scott Tuke all were homosexuals or "queer aesthetes," but goes no further in discussing or nuancing this. See Callen, *Looking at Men*, respectively 74n34, 95, and 71.

[6] Michael Hatt, "Near and Far: Hamo Thornycroft's *Mower* and the Homoerotics of Labor," *Art History* 26, no. 1 (December 2003): 39.

[7] See, for instance, Paul Richer, *L'Anatomie dans l'art: proportions du corps humain, canons artistiques et canon scientifiques* (Paris, 1893), and Paul Richer, *Nouvelle Anatomie artistique du corps*

humain: cours pratique et élémentaire (Paris, 1906). Callen provides a complete list of his artistic anatomy publications in her bibliography.

[8] Linda Nochlin, *The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1994).

[9] See Nina Athanassoglou-Kallmyer, "Géricault's Severed Heads and Limbs: The Politics and Aesthetics of the Scaffold," *Art Bulletin* 74, no. 4 (December 1992): 599–618.

[10] See Anthea Callen, *The Spectacular Body: Science, Method and Meaning in the Work of Degas* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1995).

[11] Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Male Trouble: A Crisis in Representation* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1997).