



## OBESITY

From ancient Egyptian times onwards the appearance of being well nourished, extending to what we would call overweight, has been a sign of power and wealth. Through gargantuan feats at the table such kings as Louis VI of France and Henry VIII of England turned themselves into mountains of flesh. By contrast thinness tended to connote poverty or neurasthenia. In the nineteenth century, as food supplies became more regular and plentiful, poor people could become fat, and in consequence the rich began to prize thinness. Standards of ideal weight are therefore culturally conditioned.

In our society women are bombarded with advertising and exhortations to maintain their attractiveness by keeping thin, and fashions are designed to suit those who succeed. Predictably, some overdo it and become anorexic. While men too are enjoined to keep trim, many fail to achieve the ideal. Gay men are more successful in this struggle than straight men, and the styles they favor tend to show off slender bodies. Yet even within the overall "thinist" aesthetic there are variations. In the 1960s and early '70s an almost emaciated look prevailed, promoted by the **counterculture** and no doubt conditioned by appetite-suppressing drugs. With the increasing popularity of **gymnasia**, however, gay men began to admire a more hefty look, though one characterized by muscle rather than fat.

At the turn of the century some researchers believed that homosexual men, being in their view a third sex, tended to have broad hips. This assumption has not been statistically confirmed. More generally the German psychiatrist Ernst Kret-

schmer (1888–1964) believed that a person's temperamental reaction patterns reflected physiological type, with heavy-set persons behaving in one way and slender ones another. These theories too have not found general acceptance.

On average gay men tend to be more prejudiced against obesity in their sexual partners than women, whether straight or lesbian. The sexual advertisements of gay papers teem with the admonition: "no fats." Still, there are a few individuals, known as chubby chasers, who admire what most reject, typically preferring partners who are over 300 pounds. People of these two complementary persuasions, the chubbies and their chasers, join Girth and Mirth clubs. In Japan travelers find that "well padded" older men are in considerably greater demand among homosexuals than in Western countries, a difference that tends to confirm the culturally determined character of the preference.

Wayne R. Dynes

## OBJECTIFICATION, SEXUAL

This expression, which became popular only in the 1970s, denotes an attitude of treating others as mere vehicles for sensual or ego gratification—or simply as sexual partners—rather than as full human beings deserving of equality of respect. An individual who is so treated is a *sex object*. These terms were spread by adherents of the women's movement, who sometimes refer the phenomenon to a mental pattern which they term *objectivism*, the unwarranted assumption that male (or patriarchal) values are simply

objective reality, rather than cultural constructs imposed upon it.

However this may be, the concept has been adopted by some sectors of the gay movement as a tool for internal criticism. In bars and other places where encounters are intended to lead to sexual contact, the treatment of other individuals as sex objects may be said to be reasonable and expected. But where this procedure passes over into business or political activity, to the point that articulate and persuasive individuals who do not happen to be goodlooking are ignored or passed over in favor of men who are "cute," this seems a waste of human resources as well as a source of unhappiness to those who are the victims of it. Some critics of the pattern have proposed the alternative term *looksism* as a more convenient descriptor. A similar phenomenon, known as *ageism*, works to the disadvantage of older gay people. This overemphasis on sexual attractiveness is to some extent explainable by the fact that gays as a group are united only by their sexual preference, and by the fact that they have been stigmatized by the host society because of it. Still, to the degree that it is prevalent in gay male circles—less so in lesbian ones—it may serve to bolster stereotypes that gay people are superficial and frivolous.

The concept of sexual objectification has been traced to the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1726–1804), who in his *Lectures on Ethics* presented the sexual act as the mere manipulation of an object by a subject, in effect masturbation *à deux*—unless the relationship is redeemed by the altruism of marriage. In the twentieth century, the notion of objectification has been widely diffused by Freudian psychoanalysis, where *object* may be defined in three ways: (1) the goal toward which the organism's instincts or drives are directed, be it a person, a thing, or a fantasy; (2) the focus of love or hate; and (3) that which the subject perceives and knows, in keeping with the traditional philosophy of knowledge. This analysis

has the advantage of showing that confusion has been caused by conflating the neutral sense (3)—from which it follows that the very process of cognition continually and inescapably enmeshes one in subject-object relations, without thereby imposing any distorting or reductive effect—with (1) and (2), which entail a charge of emotion suffusing the object so as to enhance or demean it. Moreover, the everyday sense of the word object suggests a tendency to turn persons into things, though this is in no way required by sense (3).

While the existing terminology is not ideal, it must be conceded that the psychosocial phenomenon of sexual objectification exists, and that when it is allowed to intrude into all sorts of spheres of human activity where it is in fact dysfunctional, it may stifle the personal development of those who are subjected to it. At the same time, it is necessary to recognize that sexual selection is indeed selection, and human beings are unlikely to free themselves from this component of their phylogenetic legacy, or the ongoing physiological processes that underlie such selection. Thus the ideal of treating human beings in terms of equality of respect, discarding inappropriate sexual objectification, should be inculcated and promoted, but one should harbor no illusions about the immanence of its universal realization. This tension is one of the many complications of civilization itself.

Wayne R. Dynes

### O'HARA, FRANK (1926–1966)

American poet and art critic. Raised in Worcester, Massachusetts, O'Hara served in the Navy from 1944 to 1946, and then attended Harvard and Michigan Universities. The most important experiences during his college years were probably his visits to New York, where he met a number of poets, as well as painters of the rising Abstract Expression-