

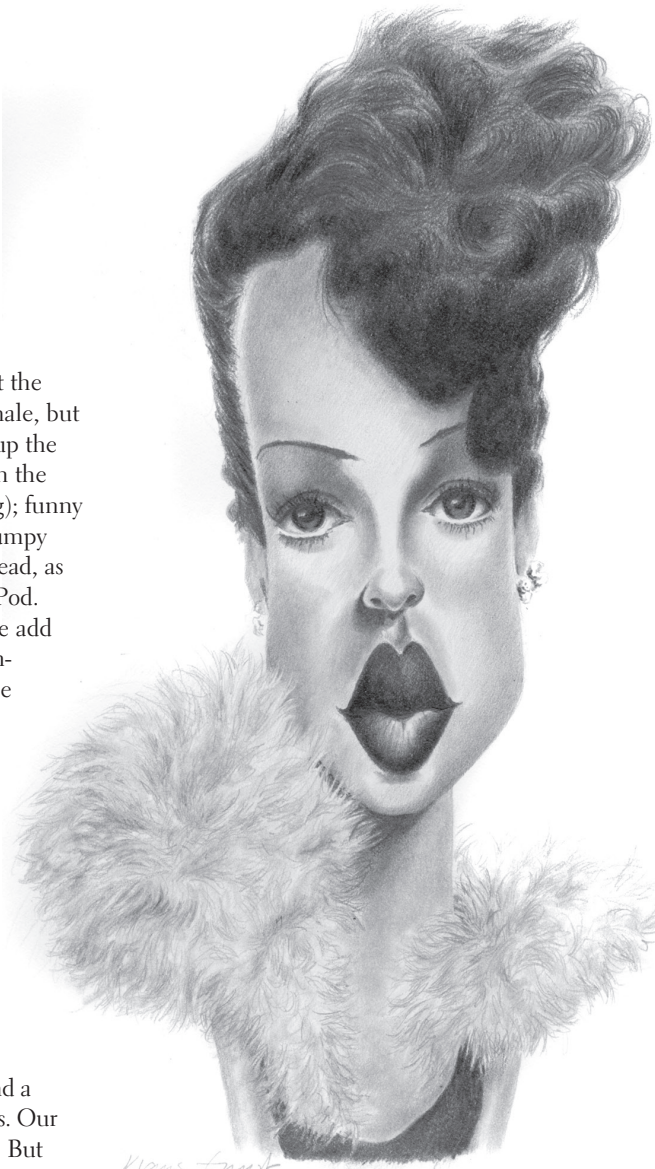
# Take It Off

BETTY SMARTT CARTER

You can say a lot of eloquent things about the relationship of the human male and female, but no amount of poetic drapery can cover up the fact that sex is simply—well, funny. Not funny in the wink-wink nudge-nudge way (that's just irritating); funny in the same way that our ears are funny: those lumpy animal appendages to the streamlined human head, as if Steve Jobs had attached Victrola horns to an iPod. Sex has that same animal weirdness, to which we add our distinctly human tension between exhibitionism and shame, between the push-up bra and the hoopskirt. We flaunt what we ought to cover up while we're ashamed of things as natural as breathing. I'm sure that when Adam and Eve went looking for something to cover their nakedness, they combed the garden for the gaudiest fig leaves available.

One woman famous for not covering her nakedness was Gypsy Rose Lee, the long-legged, big-toothed burlesque star who once outpolled Eleanor Roosevelt as the most popular American female. Gypsy's striptease—down to a couple of polka dot bows and a G-string—wouldn't cause much of a stir nowadays. Our celebrities show more skin in the average PETA ad. But even during Gypsy's heyday in the late 1930s, nudity was barely the point. Her gimmick was ladylike comedy. In

Betty Smartt Carter writes fiction and essays and teaches Latin in Alabama.



her most famous monologue, "Psychology of a Striptease," she feigned high-mindedness:

Have you the faintest idea of the private life of a stripteaser?

My dear, it's New York's second largest industry. Now a stripteaser's education requires years of concentration  
And for the sake of illustration, take a look at me. I began at the age of three, learning ballet at the Royal Imperial School in Moscow. And how I suffered and suffered for my art  
Then, of course, Sweet Briar, oh those dear college days . . .

Reciting those lines in the lisping tones of a spinster librarian, Gypsy removed each patch of clothing in a carefully choreographed order, stopping now and then to drop a pin into a tuba, or let a slip flutter onto the drummer's head. Sometimes she never removed her outer garments at all, but she packed the Minsky brothers' Republic Theater night after night and created a new audience for burlesque among New York intelligentsia. The papers loved to quote her, especially when she ran afoul of Fiorello LaGuardia's decency campaign: "Help, I've been draped!" "I wasn't naked, I was completely covered by a blue spotlight."

Literature on Gypsy Rose Lee has taken predictable paths, using her to comment on the American sexual journey, rating her as a feminist icon, or celebrating her intellect (she wrote several *New Yorker* pieces and two fairly good novels). In *Gypsy, Art of the Tease*, Rachel Shteir argues that Gypsy's sugar-coated account of her upbringing, her "Let

## Gypsy

The Art of the Tease

RACHEL SHTEIR • YALE UNIV. PRESS, 2010 [2009] • 240 PP. • \$15, PAPER

## American Rose

A Nation Laid Bare—The Life and Times of Gypsy Rose Lee

KAREN ABBOT • RANDOM HOUSE, 2010 • 448 PP. • \$26

# The Body Beautiful

CHRISTOPHER BENSON

We have the view which St. Francis expressed by calling his body "Brother Ass." . . . Ass is exquisitely right because no one in his senses can either revere or hate a donkey. It is a useful, sturdy, lazy, obstinate, patient, lovable and infuriating beast; deserving now the stick and now a carrot; both pathetically and absurdly beautiful. So the body. There's no living with it till we recognize that one of its functions in our lives is to play the part of buffoon.

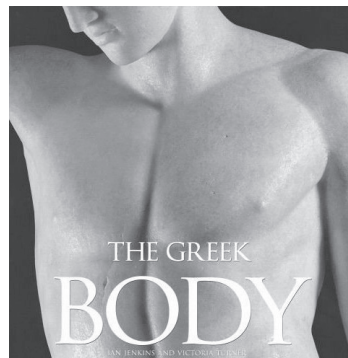
— C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*

It's not hyperbole to say that the ancient Greeks invented the body, at least in art. Sculpting the body was not only an artistic preoccupation but also a moral and social duty. The body didn't belong to the person so much as the polis. Socrates is a curiosity because, even as he admired hard bodies at the gymnasium for their capacity to imitate the forms of Beauty (*kalos*) and Goodness (*agathos*) and regarded obesity as a sign of withdrawal from the public square, he had become fat himself—raising suspicions about his loyalty to Athens and his piety toward the gods. As a bearer of meaning, a plump, scrawny, or ugly body communicated moral defect, effeminacy, political apathy, or divine punishment—perhaps all of the above. A buffed and beautiful body communicated virtuous excellence (*arête*), masculinity, engagement in public affairs, and divine favor.

Christopher Benson is a writer in Denver. His work appears in *CHRISTIANITY TODAY* and *The Weekly Standard*. He blogs at *Bensonian.org*.

Sculptors visualized the contrast of values. A marble statuette from the Hellenistic Greek or Roman period depicts Socrates as possessing "the balding, snub-nosed, chubby-cheeked, pug-faced, and pot-bellied face and body of a satyr, the debauched follower of Dionysos, the god of wine," as art historians Ian Jenkins and Victoria Turner observe in *The Greek Body*. The 4th-century *doryphoros* or "spear bearer," a masterpiece of bronze worker Polycleitus, typifies the idealization of the male body that Socrates praised, if not ogled. It's not the clothes that make the man but his naked body. The *doryphoros* struts the kind of body that's the envy of every man, the kind featured on the cover of *Men's Fitness* magazine: a six-pack stomach and etched pectorals, an iliac crest on the torso, firm buttocks, powerful thighs, and sharply defined calves. His beardless face signifies youthful vigor and his small penis sexual restraint. Above all, the *doryphoros* satisfies the canon of beauty developed by Polycleitus. Influenced by the Greek cosmologists and physicians who emphasized a balance of opposites, sculptors tried to achieve perfect harmony. Jenkins and Turner claim the *doryphoros* "relied for its effect upon an arrangement of limbs and muscles into a biochemical system of weight bearing and weight free, engaged and disengaged, stretched and contracted, tense and relaxed, raised and lowered parts."

The Greeks had a punning saying—*Bíos, Bíos*—that meant "Life is a bow." The tension of binary opposites must be preserved like a drawn bow; otherwise, the fragile



cosmos would be at risk. Where the sculpted athlete, warrior, or god showed off the divine mathematics of beauty, the sculpted hermaphrodite, centaur, or old nurse threw off the symmetry, leaving the salient impression that only virile twentysomething males can aspire to beauty. (Aristotle described the woman as "a natural deformity," clumsily approximating Beauty as embodied by man.)

*The Greek Body* is a handsome volume of photographs and commentary, featuring Greek and Greco-Roman sculpture in marble, bronze, and terra cotta from the collection at the British Museum. Jenkins and Turner skillfully narrate the conceptualization and representation of the human body from the idealized male and female (when women were admitted to the club) to the later fascination with diversity and realism—a development that can be construed as the politics of recognition, in which the North African slave, Persian foreigner, grotesque hunchback, and flabby prostitute are given due attention in an increasingly cosmopolitan society, or as the decline of Greek heroism and superiority. Call it a perverse pleasure, but I relish the authors' art talk because it entertains while educating: "The small-is-beautiful aesthetic is endorsed in art by those exceptional instances where male genitals are unnaturally large. In representations, for example, of the comic theatre, actors wear skimpy tunics with vast phallos dangling down below the hem. Failure to control these wayward pendula is a hilarious sign of social dysfunction."

Here's a penetrating insight about the relation between art and the spectator from classicist Simon Goldhill's book *Love, Sex, and Tragedy: How the Ancient World Shapes Our Lives*:

## The Greek Body

IAN JENKINS AND VICTORIA TURNER • GETTY, 2010 • 144 PP. • \$29.95

me tell you about my madcap childhood!" story that started as a memoir and transmogrified into a Broadway musical, is ultimately more interesting than the bleaker story that emerges from research and family interviews. "Whether or not she is telling the truth," Shteir writes, "Gypsy . . . is a complex and ravishing creature whose act and life reveal self-invention, poignancy, and streets marts."

Well, maybe Shteir's chosen readers enjoy being ravished, like the audience at some postmodern burlesque show. But for those of us who like to investigate what lies behind other people's self-invention (pretty much anyone who would read a biography), Karen Abbot's *American Rose: A Nation Laid Bare*, is the better choice. Abbot writes like a novelist, skipping around in time, trying to capture not only the psychology of her subject but a concrete sense of the culture that produced vaudeville and burlesque. A large part of the book is a history of the Minsky brothers, wayward grandsons of a rabbi, who championed American striptease as a kind of patriotic achievement, the inevitable victory of "self-revelation" (as Shteir puts it) over Puritanism. Love them or hate them, there's no denying that history has mostly taken the Minskys' side; their story is a creepy twist on the American dream.

What makes Abbot's book worth reading, though, is the emotional content that arises from her in-depth interviews with June Havoc, Gypsy's younger sister, whom Shteir dismisses as self-righteous and vengeful. To be sure, the relationship between the two women was complex and competitive. Most of the blame lay with their mother, Rose, who, when not occupied with blackmail and outright murder, pimped her children onto the vaudeville stage and then worked them to the point of bloody toes



and nervous breakdowns—all the while chanting "Look what I've done for you!"

"Baby June," who had learned to dance on her toes as a toddler, became fed up by the age of 15 and ran off with one of the boys in the act. Big sister Louise, who until that point had been the lumpish bookworm of the family (she liked to quote Voltaire and Marx), was now the only person her mother could turn to; the hitch was that she had no actual talent. One night at a burlesque theater in Kansas City, Louise decided (probably at her mother's greedy urging) that it was time to show a little skin. When she walked onstage, the manager introduced her by the name she'd made up for herself: Gypsy Rose Lee.

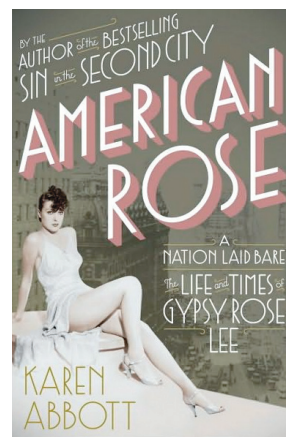
According to June, who turned up a few months later to see the act, Gypsy's original striptease wasn't the tame thing it became when she worked for the Minsky brothers. June was mortified as she watched her sister strip down to nothing for a bunch of heavy-breathing strangers. To Gypsy, June was a moralizing snob—forever the talented "baby," expecting the world to fall at her feet. The fact that June became a successful Hollywood actress only intensified the competition between the two, whose real affection for each other was obscured by a bitter match of egos. The musical *Gypsy* guaranteed that the contest would go on after their deaths; it caricatures June as their mother's bratty darling while idealizing Louise as a shy, sweet tomboy who realizes she's pretty just before she takes the stage for the first time to strip.

There's no denying that Gypsy Rose Lee was a certain kind of comic genius. Where other people saw sex, she saw irony at work—animal lust mocking human

aspirations. Her world was more conservative than ours, but that only gave her endless ways to exploit the tension between exhibitionism and shame. Gypsy knew instinctively that the guiltier people feel about being naked, the more clothes they wear, and the more clothes they wear, the longer it takes to remove them. She took about seven minutes per glove; only in libertine Europe did anybody find it boring.

Abbot's book also shows what a truly wounded soul Gypsy was, and we shouldn't be so fooled by the laughtrack as to forget that. Onstage, she doled out bits of herself in carefully controlled portions, but in real life, she kept her feelings under wraps—especially the painful ones. "It wasn't hilarious and funny at all, when you got back to the dressing room," said June. "[S]he would come home and cry because she would go on an interview and all they wanted her to do was take off her gloves, slowly. They wanted to leer. It made her sick, and nobody ever knew that."

Because Gypsy Rose Lee turned the tables on her audience and made a joke out of sex, nobody (except her sister) seemed to consider her a victim of anything. But her story isn't that different from the stories of many vulnerable people who take off their clothes for money. What we now call the sex trade is one of the world's largest industries. But the vast majority of the human beings who constitute its labor force don't learn sexual politics in a feminist studies class (or at Sweet Briar); they don't take up exotic dancing as a means of self-expression, or become prostitutes in order to exercise power over weak men. For the most part, they sell their bodies because they're forced to—often by an abuser in their own families—and because they have no other way to survive. And there's nothing funny about that. **B&C**



'Art' allows the spectator to stare at what would otherwise be unacceptable, but it also polices the gaze carefully. The sculpted or painted body treads a fine line between the desired idealism and a worrying realism. If the image of the body becomes too redolent of dirt, or the messiness of actual sexual activity, it becomes disgusting. When a viewer looks, any awareness of his or her own body—and thus of his or her own sexuality, morality, mortality—needs constant regulation: society always worries about images of the body.

How, then, did the Greeks police the gaze? Judging by the exquisite photographs in *The Greek Body*, the 4th-century sculptures that feature the ideal male body steer the eye away from our mortal coil and toward an existence fitting of the Elysian Fields, where aging, infirmity, and death never touch the flesh. Because human life was snuffed out prematurely by war and disease, Greeks worried about their extinction like few of us do when peace and longevity prevail. They enshrined glorious manhood in the eternity of stone or metal, bracketing the side of man that Blaise Pascal called "feeble earthworm," "sink of uncertainty and error," and "refuse of the universe" while concentrating *only* on his side that is "judge of all things," "depository of truth," and pride of the universe.

Is it any wonder, in light of all this, that Hellenism animated the 19th-century cult of the body in Germany, where the Aryan race was ideologically linked to the Greeks because they were perceived as the taproot of human greatness? Friedrich Nietzsche maintained, "We are growing more Greek by the day; at first, as is only fair, in concepts and evaluation, as Hellenizing ghosts, as it were; but one day, let us hope, also in our *bodies!*" The German aspiration to become Greek in their bodies manifested itself in the Romantic love of nature, the modern reinvention of the Olympic Games, and, horrifyingly, in the Nazi war-machine.

We Christians might sniffily dismiss this aspiration

as neo-pagan nonsense, but we should be more circumspect than censorious, recognizing, first, how beholden we ourselves are to the Greek body-image and, second, how our historical efforts to imagine the Christian body have often been inadequate, even deeply flawed. When a distinguished scholar like Goldhill summarily claims that the Christian tradition "despises the body as sinful, and longs for a spiritual, non-materialistic life," the temptation is to fault him for being naïve or mistaken. I propose instead that Christians take an inventory of our tradition and confess that the inversion of Greco-Roman culture went too far, resulting in an unbiblical view of the body that motivated the theologian Origen to subdue his erections through the irreversible act of castration and the ascetic Simeon Stylites to extinguish bodily enjoyment by standing on a sixty-foot pillar in Syria for thirty years, refusing, as much as possible, food, drink, and sleep; in turn, his eyesight disappeared, his vertebrae dislocated, and his feet split open, emitting a putrid smell and attracting maggots. While these examples are extreme, they reveal a wrong turn in thinking Christianly about the body. Mortification of the flesh became just as much of a competition to Christians as glorification of the flesh was to Greeks. Neither attitude toward the body gets it right.

Christians should begin by remembering that "two great figures, Adam and Christ, overshadow the whole of human history," as Reformed theologian David VanDrunen posits. "The fate of every other individual depends



on the two of them." Aesthetically and theologically, we can put Adam and Christ into a dialectical relationship. Adam's *fallen* body has the appearance of vigor and beauty, but it's vulnerable to sickness, enervation, and death, not to mention shot through with sin. Lest we become athletes of suffering like Simeon Stylites, we ought to affirm that Adam's body was created by God and pronounced "very good." Even in its fallen condition, it *still* bears the divine imprint. Christ's *resurrected* body, by contrast, may bear the markings of his torture but is healed and glorified, free of the world's weariness and the flesh's iniquities. Where the Greek submitted his body to the *polis*, a Christian should submit his body to the *ekklesia*, consecrating it as the temple of the Holy Spirit.

The Christian body resembles the first Adam, but it's slowly being conformed to the image of the second and last Adam. "Behold! I tell you a mystery," the apostle Paul teaches. "We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality" (1 Cor. 15:51–53, ESV). Adam's body dies. So, too, our aesthetic works will pass away; it's foolish to load them with an eschatological burden, as if the world-to-come depends on what we do rather than what Christ has *already* done and will do. Just as we're instructed to glorify God with our body, we would do well to also glorify him in our artistic renderings of man (and woman), delicately keeping that Pascalian paradox. **B&C**