

A lust for leanness

By Anne Hollander

ANNE SCOTT BELLER:

Fat and Thin
A Natural History of Obesity.
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The folklore of fatness has had a long history and it shows no signs of diminishing, although it has changed its character. Now that no one believes any longer in the Jolly Fat Man, everyone has instead come to believe with equal conviction in the Miserable Fat Man. Having a fat body has come to seem a spiritual calamity not unlike having a child who commits suicide: something obviously destined to main one's life, both as cause and result of private inward trouble. The extra moral burden carried by the consciousness of fatness adds incalculable weight to the soul inside the heavy body. Gluttony has risen in rank among the seven deadly sins to take a place probably second only to spiritual pride. In our inner lives, we are often much readier to exonerate ourselves for envy or wrath than for the tendency to put on weight. And to the degree that we fail to forgive ourselves, so we punish our fellows.

The obese are penalized by society in ways as severe and subtle as the ones they use to punish themselves. Prejudice against the fat ranges from the bias governing all popular visual imagery, and the humiliating assumptions expressed by the look of manufactured garments in large sizes, to discrimination in college admissions, employment, and marital choice. Conventionally acceptable exotic style in modern life has been so firmly founded upon a lean body for so long — nearly three generations — that the strongest attractions of either sex seem most "naturally" embodied in a spare frame with a minimal adipose layer. Even the extremes of modern taste in feminine gluteal or mammary thrust

seem to demand a slim substructure, and general bodily lushness for both sexes has lost caste with a vengeance.

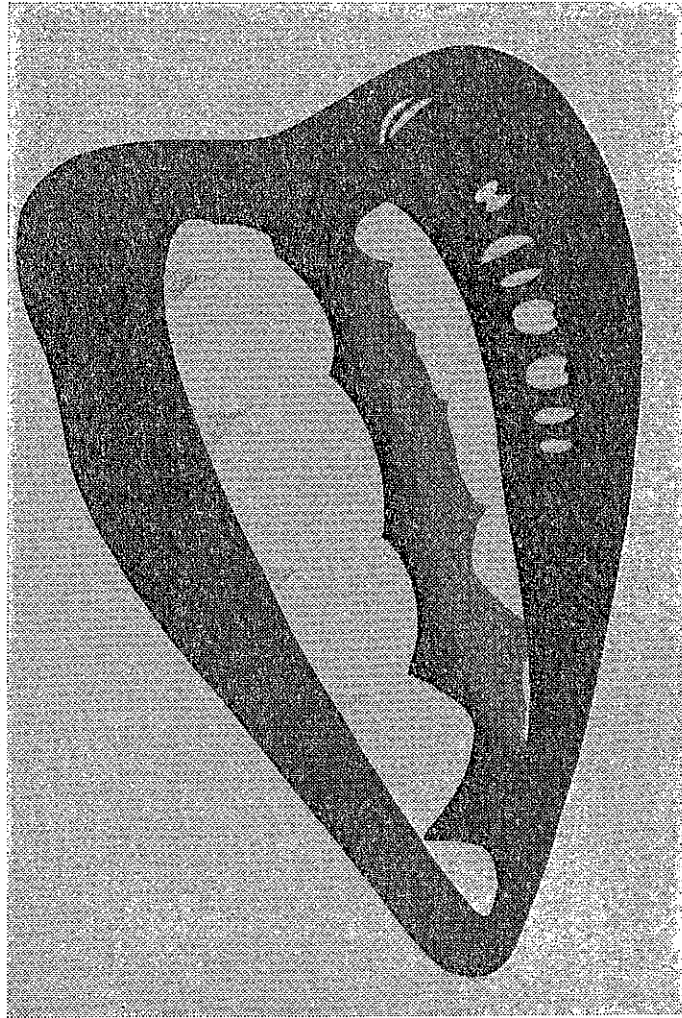
Far from connoting good fortune and an easy temper, corpulence now suggests a repellent impulse toward self-destruction—the very condition of course once associated with hollow cheeks and a sunken chest. Prejudice against fat, unlike prejudice against skin colour, now seems righteous, justified by the established modern morality of the body: thinness might once have seemed a misfortune, but fatness is now perceived as a fault, and getting fat as a moral failure. Stay-

ing fat is thus presumed to indicate a serious defect of character, like deliberately remaining dishonest or cruel.

This state of the modern mind is often attributed to the unprecident abundance lately possible in Western life. The theory goes that when recurrent famine are part of normal circumstances, an ideal vision of the good and peaceable life may seem manifested in a fat body, and so fatness is idealized. By contrast, therefore, when life actually is peaceful and leisured and food is abundant (even excessive, as in mod-

ern America), thinness is idealized. This seems very odd; and it results in the peculiar phenomenon among us that the rich get thin and the poor get fat. This state of things is not the case in the East, where both plenty and famine have existed but where abundance of body has more reasonably maintained its economic and sexual status, and the rich stay fat. What exactly can be the nature of that virtue now so firmly believed by so many rich and comfortable Westerners to dwell in a thin body?

Fear of fat is a recent Western affliction, and the lust for leanness it has engendered has some per-



"Month No 1" by Tom Wesselman; a painting to be sold at Christie's in London, on June 28.

versity at its core. It is a disposition not sufficiently explained by the sane desire for normal good health, although that is the usual reason for it when fear of vanity inhibits a fuller account. For the real intrinsic virtue of modern thinness is visual and subjective: we want to look thin, specifically to see ourselves thin, much more than we enjoy contemplating other thin bodies or even rejoicing in the knowledge of perfect health. The alteration of personal looks to match a compelling visual ideal has always been the deepest motive for distorting and modifying the body.

It seems to be a primal human imaginative need; but during the course of modern civilization the conduct of personal life has been supposed to be best governed by reason and morality. And so, in the case of losing weight to look thin, the rational goal of good health has often been invoked to justify a generally irrational creative visual impulse, the ancient and honourable urge, extolled by Baudelaire, to transcend nature and create an image from the physical self. Reason has demanded reasons for adopting physical habits that have primarily visual importance, partly no doubt in order to mask the too-obvious link between educated modern dietetics and, say, irresponsible Romanics taking small doses of arsenic to induce pallor.

Health, however, does naturally concern every reasonable man. The actuarial tables of statistics indicating a relation between lifespan and weight had an undeniable impact when they were published more than sixty years ago. Later, certain results of research into the effect of fat on the cardio-vascular system were published and further altered the effect of fat on the public mind. Fear of fat was soon firmly associated with fear of death—and, apparently inevitably, with fear of hell-fire. Medical science, on the other hand, has gradually come to understand that good health is only contingently and qualifiedly served by extreme leanness of body, and present-day preoccupations with maintaining a skeletal form cannot be justified by any absolute medical claim. They must finally be understood as yet another twist in the complex history