
Obesity in Art – A Brief Overview

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Abstract

This brief overview of obesity in art will look at how fatness has been depicted in Western art and its antecedents from classical times to the present day; what, if anything, this can tell us about how prevalent obesity was in previous centuries, and how the meanings attached to being fat may have altered over the years.

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The earliest sculptural representations of the body all show it as female, large-buttocked, obese even, although the smooth contours of the Venuses of Willendorf (c. 30,000–22,000 BC; fig. 1), and Lespugue (c. 34,000–29,000 BC; fig. 2) contrast with the lumpy obesity of the Venus of Laussel (c. 25,000–20,000 BC; fig. 3). Nigel Spivey, writing about the emphasis on 'fatness and fertility' in primitive art, offers neuroscientist Vilanyur. S. Ramachandran's theory that

'in technical terms these [excessively fleshy] features amount to hypernormal stimuli that activate neuron responses in our brain . . . something that comes naturally to us because our brains are hard-wired to concentrate perceptive focus upon objects with pleasing associations, or those parts of objects that matter most. For palaeolithic people, the female *parts* that mattered most were those required for successful reproduction: the breasts and pelvic girdle. The circuit of the palaeolithic brain, therefore, isolated these parts and *amplified* them' [1].

Spivey argues that the tendency to distort images of the body recurs across many cultures and periods of history. In other words:

'The drift of all popular art is towards the lowest common denominator, and there are more women who look like a potato than the Cnidian Venus. The shape to which the female body tends to return is one which emphasises its biological functions . . .' [2].

Other theorists have denied the element of exaggeration in prehistoric art, pointing instead to the 'relative linearity of warm-dwelling peoples, and the relative globularity of cold-dwelling ones' at least as far back as the Palaeolithic era, so that, even allowing for some artistic licence, the figurines probably bear some credible relation to the models



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Fig. 1. Venus of Willendorf (c. 30,000–22,000 BC). Naturhistorisches Museum, Vienna. © Naturhistorisches Museum, Vienna. Photo: Alice Schumacher. With kind permission.

Fig. 2. Venus of Lespugue (c. 34,000–29,000 BC). Musée de l'Homme, Paris. Reproduced with kind permission from the Musée de l'Homme, Paris.

Fig. 3. Venus of Laussel (c. 25,000–20,000 BC). Musée d'Aquitaine, Bordeaux. © City of Bordeaux. Photo J.M. Arnaud. With kind permission.

who posed for them, and the archaeological evidence can therefore be assumed to establish 'an empirical record as well as a merely aesthetic one'. This is particularly likely in view of the fact that the most globular of the figures were found at sites which must have been the coldest at the time they were sculpted, while the more linear figures have tended to be uncovered at more southerly or warmer sites [3].

Ancient Greek and Roman sculpture and pottery art tended to portray the human body in an idealised though still naturalistic way, a corollary of the ancient concept of anthropomorphism – the belief that deities took human shape – but also perhaps as further evidence of the influence of climate on body shape. However, in the interest of aesthetics it was quite usual to attenuate the limbs, particularly the legs, and to downplay or omit any deformity or sign of ageing or disease, even in portrait sculpture. True obesity, as opposed to bulky muscularity, is notably absent in surviving examples: excessive fat tended to produce a too solid 'line', rather than the more desirable qualities of fluidity and movement.

Because Greek civilisation laid down that pleasure was to be moderated for the civic good, overindulgence, whether in food or other sensual pleasures, was seen as ugly and improper. Hippocrates, father of Greek medicine, viewed fat as a disease [4], and Plato, believing that excessive eating led to illness, recommended what in modern times has become known as the 'Mediterranean diet' of mainly cereals, vegetables, fruits and fish, with strictly limited meat, alcohol and sweet things [5]. Fat people, perceived as flawed, were marginalised by Greek society; the *obesus*, or stock fat character in Greek comedies by Aristophanes and others, was a sponger, drunkard, glutton or idler, far from the contemporary ideal; a figure of mockery with the additional function of flattering the spectator's sense of superiority.

If the Greeks sought to moderate pleasure in eating, Christians sought to extinguish it altogether. Food was seen by some theologians as a distraction from religious duties, as 'external' and polluting; preoccupation with food was viewed as the gateway to worse sins, sloth and lust [6] and so over centuries, the Church evolved a complex set of rules controlling when certain foods and drink could be consumed; Wednesdays, Fridays and the period of Lent became by custom meatless, fasting days, and by the later mediaeval period, it is thought there were between 140 and 160 designated fast days per year [7].

The early mediaeval painters shared the same overall idea of linkage between body shape and moral character that the Greeks did, but with a completely different concept of the value of the body: whereas to the ancients its form had been shared with the gods and was essentially admirable, to Christians the flesh had been seen as a cause of shame and humiliation since the Fall of Man in the Garden of Eden – and therefore as implicitly sinful and not to be flaunted. Individual portraiture as we know it today was unknown; one legacy of the Jewish foundation of Christianity had been the belief that images of the human form could be construed as the breach of the 2nd Commandment (to make no graven images). Rulers were often depicted on a larger scale than ordinary people; saints and lay people all tended to be shown as slim or even emaciated, perhaps reflecting the great emphasis in the Early Church on asceticism, fasting and the overall denial of the flesh or maybe just mirroring a world where consumption was restricted, for the mass of people, and hedged around by religious prescription even for the prosperous few.

By contrast, clerical exemplars of gluttony seem to have been confined to fiction (Friar Tuck in the legend of Robin Hood, and Chaucer's monk, who 'liked a fat swan best, and roasted whole') [8]. As with Classical painters and sculptors, though, it was generally only those at the margins of the painter's vision – working people, such as the wine taster depicted here, the old, the sick and wrong-doers, who were depicted as obese (fig. 4). This resonates with contemporary experience that in the West, it is the lower socio-economic groups, with least disposable income, who are most prone to obesity due to the cheapness of high-calorie foods.

Artistic realism, or at least the beginnings of it, is thought to originate with the work of Jan van Eyck, claimed as the first real portrait painter [9], although the later



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Fig. 4. Giotto, *The Marriage at Cana* (c. 1305–1313). Arena Chapel, Padua. Assessorato ai Musei. Politiche Culturali e Spettacolo del Comune di Padova. With kind permission.

Fig. 5. Robert Campin, *Portrait of a Stout Man, Robert de Masmynes* (c. 1425). Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid. © Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid. With kind permission.

mediaeval convention of enacting great events of religious and secular history only by stylised or idealised physical specimens went on for a long time – perhaps into the mid-19th century [10]. Van Eyck's contemporary, Robert Campin (c. 1375–1444), could paint a realistic head and shoulders portrait of a stout aristocrat, Robert de Masmynes (fig. 5), but such realism was not extended to larger-scale works such as the apocalyptic scenes of Hieronymous Bosch (c. 1450–1510) or the tableaux from peasant life of his artistic heir Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1525–1569), which were intended to portray character types rather than individual personalities.

But in one Bruegel painting, *The Land of Cockaigne* (1567; fig. 6), three plump characters are depicted in a fairyland in which there is food in abundance (although the winter of 1564 had been the coldest of the century, followed by harvest failure in 1565) [11]. Cockaigne or *Luilekkerland*, Dutch for 'lazy-glutton land', was a popular fantasy in an age when food supplies were an obsessive concern. In addition to the stock character of the greedy peasant, a soldier and a clerk have bedded down to sleep after a feast. Beyond, a goose lies ready-cooked on a plate, a pig brings its own carving knife with it, and the fence is made of sausages [12].

Cockaigne apart, there was a real dearth of images of body types at the extremes of normal; shorter life expectancy may have contributed, because gross obesity, or conversely, emaciation, possibly suggesting serious disease states, would have been less



Fig. 6. Peter Bruegel the Elder, *The Land of Cockaigne* (detail), 1576. Alte Pinakothek, Munich. Reproduced with kind permission from the Alte Pinakothek, Munich.

sustainable in earlier times. On the other hand, there may have been less natural variation in body type within localities – perhaps a corollary of restricted population mobility, and greater consanguinity.

Obesity in the context of intermittent but unrelenting famines and plagues might seem unlikely, but perhaps something to do with the repeated switching between restricted and abundant fare, led to rebound weight gain like that observed in ‘yo-yo’ dieting today, especially as Western populations would have been largely of the ‘thrifty genotype’ variety. Also, the ever-present threat of food shortages, coupled with the Church’s alternating seasons of feast and fast, may well have shaped people’s eating habits in ways difficult to imagine in affluent societies today; for instance, socially sanctioned binge eating in times of plenty may have been the general rule, rather than the exception [13]. There would have been an annual cycle of plenty in winter, when the animals were slaughtered, and scarcity in spring and summer in the lead up to the harvest, and people’s eating habits would have mirrored this, with excess at harvest time and Christmas, and frugality during Lent.

Unpredictable food supplies may not have been the only stressor; long, cold winters, and, for most people, extended periods of hard physical work with little time for rest at harvest time, may have edged the population towards excess weight gain related to relative sleep deprivation, which has recently been linked to up-regulation of orexigenic ghrelin and down-regulation of anorexigenic leptin [14, 15].

Fig. 7. Antonio Moro, *Catherine of Austria, Queen of Portugal* (c. 1552). Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid. All rights reserved. © Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid. With kind permission.

Fig. 8. Frans Hals, *The Banquet of the Officers of the St George Militia of Haarlem*, 1616. Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem. (Nicolaes van der Meer is shown in the centre foreground.) Reproduced with kind permission from the Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem.

Fig. 9. Frans Hals, *Nicolaes van der Meer*, 1631. Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem. Reproduced with kind permission from the Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem.



Women's body shape might have been more vulnerable to the prevailing conditions than men's, especially as women generally entered adulthood with a higher percentage of body fat than men. Menarche could be delayed if food supplies were sparse, resulting, potentially, in fewer births before the menopause occurred. Again, in theory, multiparous women would tend to lay down more body fat over the course of their fertile lives (pregnancy itself being an obesogenic process) than the childless, presumably leading to a greater difference in BMI, all other factors being equal, between young, unmarried women, and older mothers, than between groups of men of comparable ages. Social historian Peter Laslett has estimated the average number of children per pre-1700 marriage in England as 5, or up to 8 provided that maternal death did not supervene [16]. If the rich and powerful did become obese, though, they could choose to disguise it with flattering clothing or flaunt it as a privilege of rank, as in the many 'swagger' portraits of Henry VIII [17]. Antonio Moro's painting of Catherine of Austria, Queen of Portugal (fig. 7), though, is an example of the Renaissance tradition of pregnancy portraiture, rather than a depiction of an obese woman. Pregnancy portraits like these served both as a commemoration of the important occasion of pregnancy and a visual 'insurance policy' in case the mother did not survive: at the time of painting, Catherine of Austria was 45 years old, and as a very elderly mother-to-be was probably at far greater risk from childbirth than a younger woman.



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During the later mediaeval period, the introduction of calorie-dense food crops from the New World, most importantly rice, maize and the potato [18], innovations in the preservation of meat and fish by salting, and the weakening of religious embargos on consumption, led to an enrichment of the common diet. At the same time, the upheaval of the Reformation, urbanisation and the beginnings of capitalism, led to big changes in who commissioned works of art and why. Church patronage of art continued, but increasing numbers of lay people with the funds to engage artists often chose from a wider range of secular and religious themes: the body ceased to be a focus of shame, to be depicted modestly, in a stylised way, and started to be a marketable commodity, to be promoted by the sitter or the artist, depending on who held the real power in the transaction.

By the early 17th century, Amsterdam had overtaken Antwerp as the great international port of the north and the chief banking centre of Europe, and it was here, in the Dutch Republic, that there was a great boom in portraiture, and evidence in these pictures of the results of a more stable food supply and better diet. Art historian Kenneth Clark wrote that we know more about what the 17th-century Dutch looked like than we do about any other society, except perhaps the 1st-century Romans, and he singled out Frans Hals' work as the exemplification of this [19]. Interestingly, there is at least one occasion where Hals (1582–1666) painted the same individual more than once, enabling us to see his figure bulking up over the years: Nicolaes van der Meer, a

This picture is available at
<http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk>.

Fig. 10. Emmanuel de Witte,
*Adriana van Heusden and Her
Daughter at the New
Fishmarket in Amsterdam*,
1661–1663. The National
Gallery, London. Photo
© The National Gallery,
London. With kind permission.



Fig. 11. Peter Paul Rubens,
Drunken Silenus and Satyrs,
1616–1617. Alte Pinakothek,
Munich. Reproduced with
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Alte Pinakothek, Munich.

wealthy Haarlem brewer and burgomaster, depicted first, aged about 42 in 1616, in a large group portrait, *Banquet of the Officers of the St George Militia* (fig. 8), and subsequently in a portrait of 1631 when he would have been around 57 years of age (fig. 9).

The well-fleshed appearance of people from all social strata in Holland reflected the absence of the severe famines experienced elsewhere in Europe during this period [20] and gives an air of bustling prosperity to genre paintings such as the market scene by Emmanuel de Witte (c. 1616–1691/1692) (fig. 10). Allegedly it is with 17th-century Dutch portraiture that breasts are seen as attractive for the first time: previously, unobtrusive, small breasts were to be preferred; large breasts being linked with moral laxity and even witchcraft [21]: this novel voluptuousness gives another clue to Holland's being a well-nourished society.

A handful of prominent Flemish and Dutch artists stand out as advocates of the larger body. Among the best known, Rubens (1577–1640) and Rembrandt (1606–1669) both dwelt on the texture of flesh, but whereas Rubens concentrated on allegorical portraits or tableaux featuring the legendary or the lusciously nubile (fig. 11, 12), Rembrandt, chronicler of life's misfortunes, depicted all conditions of men and women, and was accused in his day of seeking out the gratuitously unappealing (fig. 13). Later, Degas (1834–1917) used a similarly wide range of (mainly female) subjects as Rembrandt for his mainstream work, but it is in his less well-known brothel monotypes that he explores a very different kind of nude: squat, short-necked (fig. 14) and very far from his pastel studies of ballet dancers (fig. 15). Renoir's (1841–1919) women 'massive, ruddy ... with the weight and unity of great sculpture' (fig. 16) [22] continue in the tradition of Rubens, rather than emulating Degas' realism. However, in both instances there was an emphasis on fleshiness, either as a mark of sensuality or as a reflection of moral turpitude.

Heaviness and obesity had now been synonymous with wealth, success and elevated social status, for centuries, but the link was soon to be put into reverse by a complex blend of economic and social developments: by the later 19th century, advances in agricultural methods, food processing and transportation, had brought a varied, calorie-rich diet within the reach of all but the poorest, across much of Europe and North America, opening up the possibility of fatness as a life 'choice' for the many, for the first time ever. However, for the elites,

'Slimness, together with speed, productivity and efficiency, were beginning to be advocated as a new aesthetic and cultural model. A new Puritanism, which shared obvious traits with traditional Christian penitence, re-launched the image of a lean, slender and productive body; the bourgeois body which 'sacrifices itself' to the production of goods and wealth' [23].

For the privileged minority, eating to excess as a way of displaying wealth and privilege was gradually being replaced by other forms of conspicuous consumption: the concept of overweight being a hindrance to living a newer, more fluid kind of 'good life' dawned first with those at the top of society, and diffused downwards [24].

In the early stages of this transformation, slimness would have been seen as a novelty (just as obesity had once been) for the majority of people. Fleshiness was still linked to prosperity in the collective mind, and thinness was often associated with tuberculosis



Fig. 12. Peter Paul Rubens, *The Three Graces*, 1636–1638. Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid. All rights reserved. © Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid. With kind permission.



Fig. 13. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Seated Female Nude* (c. 1631). British Museum, London. © The Trustees of the British Museum, London. With kind permission.

and chronic ill health [25]. It was only at the very end of the 19th century that slimness, rather than obesity, began to be seen (first in the United States) as a desirable standard for all, heralded by a dramatic increase in the numbers of advertisements for diets, and editorials in the popular and medical press on the dangers of excess weight [26].

Suggested reasons for why disapproval of obesity gained ground so quickly have included deliberate manipulation by an emergent diet industry, an increased middle-class interest in athleticism (manifested by the bicycle craze of the 1880s and 1890s), both perhaps springing from accelerating industrialisation and urbanisation, and an overall speeding up of the pace of life for everyone. Now, to aspire to slimness meant to stand out from the crowd, just at a time when most people had managed to achieve the requisite standard of living to be plump. In addition, photographic portraiture was becoming increasingly accessible and revealing to its subjects their true, three-dimensional shape for the first time. More reliable methods of contraception were becoming generally available; women could more easily limit family size, and so reduce the amount of weight they put on during their fertile years. In this new 'machine age', carrying excess weight might become a hindrance to 'staying ahead' [27].

Once the connection between slimness and social advantage had been formed, it was just a short step to obesity becoming socially undesirable, stigmatising even: by the early 20th century, this had been reinforced by insurance companies' promoting ideal body weight to height tables [28], showing that the medical establishment was now 'on board' also.

During the century since then, the desirability of slimness over heaviness has been accepted more or less unchallenged by Western societies: its cachet has increased as the average Western citizen has become fatter and the population profile has aged – slimness now being associated with youth. 'Super-sizing' of the human body in art has continued, but has been reserved for monumental sculpture such as the socialist realist statuary of countries of the former Soviet bloc, for surrealist interpreters of the human form or for artists with agendas involving humour, social comment, or a voyeuristic take on the outsized.

Lucien Freud (b. 1922), speaking about his model for *Benefits Supervisor Resting*, admitted that he 'had perhaps a predilection towards people of unusual or strange proportions' and had become aware of 'all kinds of spectacular things to do with her size, like amazing craters and things one's never seen before' [29]. (Indeed, one art historian found her body proportions to be identical to those of the Willendorf Venus [30]).

Jenny Saville (b. 1970) was well-known for her massive, uncompromising canvases of naked, obese women even before the controversial 1997 'Sensation' exhibition at the Royal Academy, where she shared billing with others similarly engaged with mutilated and abnormal forms. She started painting in the 1980s when 'everyone was obsessed with the body – it was all about dieting, the gym, the body beautiful. Pornography and AIDS were the big debates' [31]. Her huge images were always female, 'massive as the Eiger', 'daunting' and 'confrontational' [32]. Sponsored by Charles Saatchi, she spent part of 1994 in New York observing and photographing

plastic surgery procedures, subsequently expanding her repertoire with studies of liposuction, bariatric surgery, and transgendered bodies (fig. 17).

James Gillray (1756–1815) and Thomas Rowlandson (1756–1827; fig. 18), popular and successful satirists, underlined the foibles of British society by means of exaggerated body types for stock characters such as the obese country squire or rector, the skinny doctor and the plump young woman ‘on the make’, and it was usually the fat characters who were the most comical and lampooned. This was especially true for Gillray, whose political cartoons made much of ‘Prinny’s’ (the future King George IV’s) corpulence, and linked this with his supposed moral and intellectual torpor. Napoleon was similarly dismissed in his cartoons as a quarrelsome, squat dwarf. Beryl Cook (b. 1926) has continued the humorous tradition, depicting benevolent endomorphs in a style blending surreal and naive. Comparisons have been made with Gillray, Hogarth and Pieter Bruegel. Cook admits to going out to clubs, bars and other likely settings for her paintings and covertly making sketches to work from – she has described herself as being an introvert – not as at all as her characters appear – and so her pictures involve a sometimes voyeuristic, but never sleazy, take on everyday pleasures. Her figures are invariably rotund and so she may be the artist who best represents the recent upward trend in BMI. In fact, this could be one factor in her popularity.

Fernando Botero’s characters share the same pneumatic body type as Beryl Cook’s, but his subject matter is wider ranging, encompassing religious and political themes and still life as well as genre scenes. Botero (b. 1932) emigrated from South America to Europe, studying the old masters before arriving at his now familiar style by the mid-1960s: figurative, but not realistic; inflated, balloon-like figures against backdrops of similarly voluminous objects. Perhaps influenced by growing up in Colombia during a time of civil unrest, some of his pictures show a critical awareness of political realities. In Botero’s *Official Portrait of the Military Junta* the implicit menace and violence of the military subjects depicted are here at variance with the style of their depiction, as plump, sometimes childlike figures. Unfortunately, the image can not be reproduced here, on the grounds that ‘Mr Botero objects to any usage of his work in connection with health or weight issues. This is not the message that his work is designed to send’ [33].

Mariana Hanstein, writing about Botero’s style explained it thus:

‘Whatever theme he takes up, his eccentrically expansive style robs it of harshness, viciousness, extremism . . . his exaggerated volumes are precisely the magic wand with which he transforms life and the world and transports them into a floating unreality [34].

Others have seen his subject matter as ‘tamed to death’ representing a created world ‘enormously fat and complacent’ [35], although Botero himself has explained his use of obese forms as ‘the expression of abundance’ and claimed that ‘in art, as long as you have ideas and think, you are bound to deform nature. Art is deformation’.

Returning to the question of whether obesity was more or less prevalent compared with our own times, it is of course, impossible to be sure. Moderate and extreme

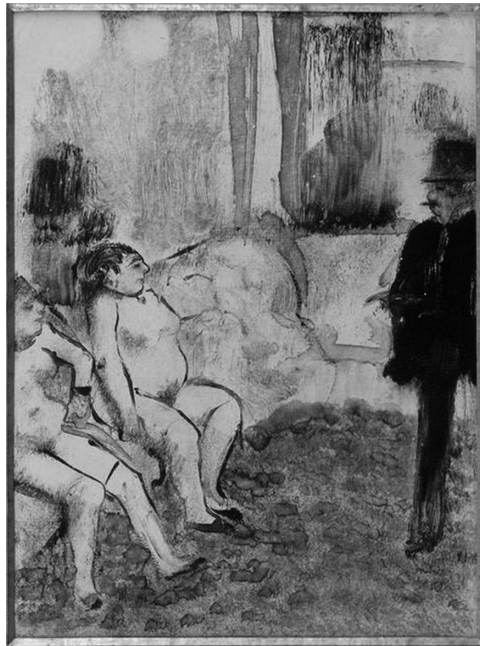


Fig. 14. Edgar Degas, *The Customer*, 1876–1877. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Reproduced with kind permission from the Musée d'Orsay, Paris.



Fig. 15. Edgar Degas, *Dance Lesson*, 1872. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Reproduced with kind permission from the Musée d'Orsay, Paris.



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Fig. 16. Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *The Great Bathers (The Nymphs)*, 1918–1919. Musée d’Orsay, Paris. Reproduced with kind permission from the Musée d’Orsay, Paris.

Fig. 17. Jenny Saville, *Plan*, 1993. Gagosian Gallery, New York, N.Y. © Jenny Saville. Courtesy of Gagosian Gallery, New York, N.Y. Photograph by Robert McKeever.

obesity as we understand it today in industrialised societies, whether at first hand, or via the media, seems much less prevalent in the artworks of previous centuries, whatever type of person is being represented, across all social strata. But it is always difficult to determine how far paintings and sculpture revealed the painter’s aspirations for his sitters (and the sitters’ for themselves) rather than how things actually were in reality. (Kenneth Clark has commented that in art, the instinctive desire is ‘not to imitate but to perfect’ [36]). Imagery is culturally determined and these images should be read, not as straightforward documents, but within a framework of contemporary artistic practices.

Certainly, gender differences in how obesity was depicted run through the whole history of Western art: women were depicted nude more often than men, and hence it is much easier to assess the amount of fat they carry. Anne Hollander, costume historian, has written that the naked body is rendered in art as if it retains the imprint of its dress – that though clothing has been removed, the nude body has been cast in its mould [37]. Fashion has probably always influenced how the body was represented: what was currently unfashionable at any time may have been simply ‘edited out’.

It does seem likely, though, that once being fat had ceased to be a life-saving tactic for the mass of people, there came to be an innate sense of what was acceptable for the body in terms of size – a ‘happy medium’ where the body had enough padding for warmth and protection, but not sufficient to get in the way of everyday



Fig. 18. Thomas Rowlandson, *A Little Tigher*, 1791. British Museum, London. © The Trustees of the British Museum, London. With kind permission.

activities [38]. In other words, once the daily business of survival ceased to be a struggle, conspicuous markers of success other than extreme obesity would have been sought. Even so, from the evidence, the ideal weights for both men and women would probably have been heavier than present day ones for most of the period under consideration.

The trim, athletic body proportions of classical art were feasible in the context of stable, prosperous, mercantile societies with good and varied food supplies and a warm climate, but when, subsequently, contentious northern European civilisations operating in colder climates became pre-eminent, the depicted ideal was replaced by a stockier, less elegant model. From early modern times until just over a century ago, excess weight had positive associations with wealth, success, physical strength and health, and none of its current negative associations with sudden death, chronic disease, shorter life expectancy and 'loser' social status. Intimations that excess weight might have drawbacks coincided with a 'democratisation' of obesity, as a high-calorie diet came within the reach of the majority, and led to slimness soon replacing heaviness as a mark of social distinction, initially just for women, but subsequently for men as well.

Fat in art could no longer be so 'mainstream', once the body ideal had shifted, but still remained as an important theme in painting, particularly in naive art. The paradox now is that while thinness has become ever more valued, in real life and in the media, the prevalence of obesity in society has soared, and even Saville and Freud nudes no longer outscale everyone around them.

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