THE LAW OF AVERAGES 1:
NORMMAN & NORMA
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These statues, Normman and Norma, are the 1943 work of artist Abram Belskie and obstetrician-gynecologist Robert Latou Dickinson. Dickinson, a major contributor to the study of female sexuality, former vice-president of Planned Parenthood, and president of the Euthanasia Society from 1946 to his death, was well-known for his interest in depicting female and embryonic anatomy in sculptural form, his typical gynecological examination included anywhere from 5 to 61 drawings of each patient, drawings which were then used to create three-dimensional teaching aids – anatomical mannequins so expressive Dickinson was dubbed the “Rodin of Obstetrics.” Carved of white alabaster, Norma and Normman were based on the measurements of 15,000 men and women between the ages of 21 and 25 compiled from a variety of sources, but decidedly, those of a white racial group. Anthropometric data had long been collected, first by the fields of phrenology, anthropology, and eugenics, and then by the US garment industry (in efforts to nail down standardized sizes), life insurance companies, and the medical establishment. (The first tables corresponding height and weight proportions were published between 1900-1920).

Dickinson intended the sculptures to showcase the improving health of American stock. Norma, whose figure received a disproportionate amount of attention in the press, was purportedly taller, more athletic, thicker-waisted (healthy evidence that she didn’t wear a corset) and had better posture than her grandmother, shorter and more busty than the high fashion models of the day, and had hips slenderer than those of the Venus de Milo.3

All in all, her figure bode well for the future of America, provided she chose a proper mate: “Norma’s Husband Better Be Good. Evolution Outlook Bright if Model Girl Weds Wisely” ran the headline of a 1945 article in the Cleveland Plain Dealer.6

When the Cleveland Health Museum purchased the statues in 1945, the museum decided to sponsor a contest to find an Ohio woman whose body matched the dimensions of Norma. There was no comparable effort to find a Normman. Offering a $100 US War Bond and the dubious title of “Norma, Typical Woman,” the call for entries in the Cleveland Plain Dealer advised women on how to measure their hips, bust, neck width, wrist circumference, etc. Perhaps indicative of the elusive quality of true normality, only a minute percentage of the 3,863 entries approached the “average” dimensions of the statue, although the prize eventually went to a 23-year-old theater cashier.4

4 This article is indebted to David Sorensen and also to Jacqueline Ulanski and Alice C. Sward’s “The Anthropometry of Barbie: Unsettling Ideas of the Feminine Body in Popular Culture,” available in Linda Schriner, ed., Feminism and the Body (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 397-428.

Photos courtesy Cleveland Health Museum.
"Average Man of America on Average Chicago Visit," began the headline of a 22 October 1927 Washington Post story picked up from the Associated Press. Shadowing Roy L. Gray, an Iowa clothier selected by national survey as a representative specimen of the national species, the correspondent chronicled with deadpan sincerity Gray's ordinary activities, desires, and reactions to the sights and sounds of the nation's Second City. This journalistic curio derives from a popular discourse that emerged after Columbia psychologist, Harry Hollingworth, published his "composite portrait" of the average man. But if Roy L. Gray gave the average citizen an appealing, albeit comic, form, Hollingworth's portrait suggested something more alarming. "The Average Man Found By Science," the New York Times exclaimed, "he is shown to be Superstitious, Ill Educated, Conventional and Possessing the Mind of a Boy of 14 Years."

This "Average Man" was first rendered in three dimensions when Jane Davenport, daughter of Charles B. Davenport, American promoter of eugenics and founder of the Station for the Experimental Study of Evolution in Cold Spring Harbor, New York, sculpted a 22-inch plaster composite of 100,000 veterans. The sculpture was based on her father's research for the Surgeon General's Office of the War Department during World War I, which had been disseminated through Carl Brigham's A Study of American Intelligence in 1923 and contributed to Hollingworth's portrait.

It was at the 1932 Third International Congress of Eugenics, held at the American Museum of Natural History [AMNH], that this statue of the "Average Man" occasioned the outrage of New York Times art critic, Edward Alden Jewell. Castigating Davenport's "condensed doughboy" as "that luckless objectified eugenic figment of the brain at the museum," Jewell maintained that man was better represented in the aesthetic cannons of antiquity than by contemporary scientific means; the "masterpiece," he argued, not the "modeled chart."

While not intended as art, the problem was that Davenport's "American Adonis" did partake of the classical tradition Jewell favored. Standing in contrapposto and molded in white plaster, Davenport's man invoked — if only to disappoint — the numerous plaster casts of Greek and Roman statuary still prevalent in the nation's municipal art museums. Iconic of civilization and self-consciousness (signaled in the purposive stance and arrested movement of the figure), classical sculpture was the dominant representational form of whiteness in scientific illustration as well. As an image of the national body, the "American Adonis" cast the nation in decidedly white and masculine form, but in a degraded state of nature rather than an exalted state of culture. While "inferior races" had long been rendered as "types," whiteness had always been identified with high culture, in particular the Apollo Belvedere, and lifted out of space and time as an ideal rather than a scientific specimen. Jewell's defense of...
humanism against scientific positivism was therefore an anxious response to the degeneracy of white manhood on display at the AMNH.

However, the reception of the sculpture depended less on its formal properties than on the situated meaning of its display. Interestingly, the sculpture had been exhibited once before. Included in the exhibitions accompanying the Second International Congress of Eugenics in 1921 at the AMNH, the sculpture was hardly mentioned in reviews. The reason being that it was exhibited alongside an idealized statue sculpted from the measurements of the "50 strongest men of Harvard." Displayed at opposite ends of the exhibition hall, these two composites embodied the Alpha and Omega of whiteness as it was understood in the 1920s.

Prior to the 1840s, whiteness was codified within a political struggle over slavery, with blacks providing the foil to people of European descent. Afterwards, mass immigration provided the anxious backdrop for the recodification of whiteness as a plural and internally differentiated category. Nativists, who identified predominantly with "Anglo-Saxon" or "Nordic" stock, reacted to the influx of German, Irish, Italian, and Jewish immigrants by placing themselves at the top of a hierarchy of white races in which "Teutons," "Semites," "Celts," and "Mediterraneans" (among others) were deemed inferior in mental and physical ability. This pluralization of whiteness was reflected in the 1921 displays where the Harvard athlete offered a eugenic (read, white native) ideal against which to measure the racial degeneracy of the mongrel body of an insurgent immigrant nation.

In 1932, however, the "Adonis" stood alone as a normative representation of the national (Caucasian) body—the "Average American." This display strategy reflected the changing agendas of eugenists. Between 1921 and 1932, eugenists shifted their attention from the problem of immigration to the problem of domestic reproduction as the Johnson Act of 1924, legislation they had helped to pass, made the "rising tide of color" an absolute concern. The new target of eugenics was not the dysgenic body of the immigrant, but—in the midst of the progressive social reforms of the New Deal—white, middle-class women.*

In both exhibitions, the grotesque body of the "American Adonis" gave visible testimony to the decadence of the national body and the need for eugenic reform, but only in the second exhibition, when the idealized type was entirely replaced with this sculpture of scientific averages, did it mirror, rather than foretell, the physical and racial degeneracy of its audience. Hence, we can better understand the displeasure of Edward Alden Jewett.

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2 The results of this research were published in Albert G. Love and Charles B. Davenport, "Physical Examination of the First Million Draft Recruits: Methods and Results," in War Department Office of the Surgeon General, Bulletin no. 11 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1919).


4 For a discussion of the significance of Greek antithesis to racial science see Kirk Savage, Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, Sex, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century America (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

5 The sculpture is described as such in the Floor Plan of the Exhibition, reproduced in Harry H. Laughlin, The Second International Exhibition of Eugenics (Baltimore: Williams & Wilkins Company, 1923), p. 12.


7 Historian Wendy Kline argues that during the 1930s eugenics was transformed into family planning as the reproduction of white, middle-class women became the focus of eugenic policy and legislation. This shift is evident as well in the exhibitions and papers presented at the Third International Congress of Eugenics, where the "women question" was central to the proceedings. See Wendy Kline, Building a Better Race: Gender, Sexuality, and Eugenics from the Turn of the Century to the Baby Boom (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) and A Decade of Progress in Eugenics: Scientific Papers of the Third International Congress of Eugenics, Held at American Museum of Natural History, New York, August 21-23, 1932 (Baltimore: Williams & Wilkins, 1934), p. 486.
Like most activities with the ambition to influence society, The Average Citizen will attempt to objectively quantify and scientifically document the project’s effect on public opinion. During the course of the project, regular opinion polls will be conducted before and after a view has been introduced to the public, in order to ascertain what specific effect Marianne’s views have had on public opinion. When, for example, one of Marianne’s views was stated in a line of dialogue in one of Sweden’s most popular TV series, it was seen and heard by 28.6 percent of the viewing population in Sweden. A subsequent opinion poll commissioned by the project established that 6.2 percent of the Swedish population had adopted this view as a result, a scientifically documented change in public opinion brought about by Marianne.