In Maurice Denis’s *The Game of Badminton* (1900), two women in simple, light-colored garb bat a shuttlecock in an Eden-like wood filled with figures that evoke, through dress and pose, a world that is at once classical and modern (fig. 73). The very nature of the activity which gives the title to this work seems at odds with the timeless Arcadian environment and calm activity of many of the figures in Denis’s painting. Like a number of French artists working in the first decade-and-a-half of the twentieth century, Denis participated in a neoclassical revival in art, but the modernity of these references where the body is concerned has been overlooked in favor of specific political and aesthetic interpretations of the meaning of classicism.

Following the loss of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 and the disastrous internal conflict of the Commune that came on its heels, a crisis of national self-confidence led many in France to fear that the country was in decline and that this state of affairs had real biological roots. The new Republic that came to power in the seventies prided itself on its progressive embrace of science, but in so doing became vulnerable to organic explanations regarding a debilitated nation. Fatalistic thinking, based on the popular Lamarckian model of transgenerational inheritance of characteristics acquired during one’s lifetime, supported an emerging medical model of national degeneration. Even vices like drinking or certain contagious illnesses were thought to be tied up in heredity, and escalating rates of alcoholism, insanity, and syphilis, along with other illnesses, supported the notion that the country was degenerating. Cumulative morbid heredity provided an explanation for what was believed to be the waning strength of the French race. The discourse of weakened bodies and an aging nation was thought to be reflected in a declining birthrate; contributing to this was the growing fear that men were becoming puny and effeminate, and women involved in the suffrage movement that was gaining strength by the 1880s might be too masculine or even infertile. Because conditions resulting from industrialization and urban crowding were often implicated, civilization, with its taxing, unhealthy, and sometimes sensual environment, was thought to exhaust the body and the will, resulting in the physical and moral decay of the French nation.

The urgent call for regeneration, led by hygienists with a patriotic agenda or curists seeking to capitalize on current fears, countered biological decline with promises of restored, robust, and healthy bodies that could resist the artificial and degrading aspects of modern life. The effects of curative health regimes and physical fitness routines had the added benefit of a positive moral dimension. Moreover, Lamarckian hereditary theory in this context would mean passing along positive benefits to the next generation. Sports, gymnastics, active leisure pursuits, and nature cures, all part of a larger movement of medical hygiene, pervaded French culture by the 1880s and flourished after 1900.

In the fin-de-siècle crisis of health, the ancient Greco-Roman ideal of the classical body emerged at the popular level as the authoritative model of restored physique. Embodying nostalgia for things pre-modern, pre-industrial, and anti-urban, the classical body was seen as the “natural”—even
primitive—body. With roots in the Latin past of the French nation, it was patriotic and part of the solid bedrock of the race at its healthiest. The classical body was the ideal of physical culturists who proselytized the benefits of physical fitness to the nation—of the new Olympic athletes, of the expressive dancer Isadora Duncan, popular in France after 1900, and strongmen who performed powerful feats at circuses and on local street corners. For men, the classical body meant virility, courage, and strength; for women it meant fecundity and commitment to the family and nation. For all it meant health.

The neoclassical body itself as a model of individual, national, and moral strength already had a significant history in France. It was appropriated by the revolutionaries of 1789 and again by Napoleon. First popularized in the writings of Winckelmann in the mid-eighteenth century as an ideal of beauty, the Greek male athlete was given a virtuous and "natural" dimension by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau proposed a comparative model between the Greek athlete and the primitive nature dweller, both in terms of the beauty of the body developed in the outdoors and health through the purity of nature. The noble hero, be he of antiquity or from an exotic locale, was opposed to the decaying society of the Western aristocrat. The antique body as a vessel of youth, strength, and virtue and the beautiful body of the pre-civilized nature dweller both had roots in Rousseau's vision.

At the time of the turn-of-the-century classical revival, the Greco-Roman body was the corporeal model of perfection at conservative art ateliers in France, as it had been for decades. Ethereal gods and nympha continued to populate the imagery of dreamy Symbolists as well. However, the solid-bodied bathers, active bacchantes, and bronzed male heroes that appear in the work of avant-garde classicists by the early years of the twentieth century are closer to the ideology of the fitness campaign, with its promotion of the robust antique body as a well-spring of health and vigor. Artists as diverse as Henri-Edmond Cross, Henri Matisse, Maurice Denis, and Pablo Picasso, all of whom worked at some time near the Mediterranean, incorporated the classical body in their work.

The revival of the Greco-Roman body as a model of health was partly the result of a rising tide of nationalism before the First World War which located the roots of la grande nation in its Latin past. However, the classicists were by no means united by a single political agenda. While certain artists, such as Denis or Maillol, spoke openly of their admiration for the politics of the reactionary Charles Maurras and L'Action française, which proselytized a recognition and continuity of the nation's antique heritage, some revivalists were
anarchists and others supported moderate Third-Republic politics. That a virtual wave of neoclassicism occurred among such a wide range of avant-garde artists with differing allegiances is evidence of the broader context of popularized medical hygiene, which attracted a wide following from all areas of the political and social spectrum.

Physical culture, with its emphasis on exercise with weights and development of the muscular system, gymnastics, modern "Greek" dance, competitive sports, and the revival of classical activities like discus throwing, hydrotherapy, swimming, and biking, were among the avenues promoted to attain a healthy body. The success of hygienists in promoting the antique body as a relevant contemporary model of national regeneration was the result of more than the neoclassical figure's iconic position in French culture. Scientific research into the body's sources of energy by physiologists concerned with national fatigue and other social pathologies increasingly focused on the muscular system. The importance of a properly balanced system, symmetrical and evenly developed, was linked to an even flow of internal energy. The smooth envelop of muscles that was within the reach of virtually every French citizen was compared to the example of Greek statuary. In his summary of the prewar physical culture and exercise therapy movement and description of his own program, Dr. Francis Heckel, like many hygienists, repeatedly invoked antique sculpture, which he compared to l'homme normal (normal man): "It seems that this normal man which I would like to see become widespread through the methods I will be recommending here, was really quite common in Greek and Roman times... it is quite possible to make of all men, even those who are physically inferior or deformed, athletes." The result of Heckel's "myotherapy," or muscle therapy through repetitive movements with light weights, could be compared favorably to an antique body (fig. 74, bottom center and right, top left). The antique body was developed naturally like that of the primitive (fig. 74, top center). Hygienists like Heckel relied on the language of physiologists and their work on the function of muscles in the human organism to describe with authority the benefits of exercise programs.

Etienne-Jules Marey was among the most important scientists who contributed to the regeneration movement. His research into muscular physiology and the nervous and electrical actions that both provoked and accompanied movement was a significant contribution to the understanding of the way force is produced and deployed. He found the law of the body's rhythms to be based on the conversion of chemicals into energy, energy into heat, and heat into movement. To arrive at his findings, Marey used top members of gymnastic associations, charting discrete stages of the body's movement through graphic inscription. He employed instruments of his own invention, including a sphygmnoplagraph to measure the pulse, a cardiograph to measure the heartbeat, a pneumograph for respiration, a thermograph for heat, and a myograph with an electrical current for nerves and muscles.

Marey was first funded in 1881 by the French government to establish a physiological laboratory in order to research "muscular energy" in gymnastics and sports. At this laboratory, Marey used chronophotography, which produced a dozen photographic images in the space of a second, to document the body in movement. The reaction time, speed, energy, and duration of the action were all part of the physiological bases taken into consideration. By multiplying the mass of the body by the speed of movement, Marey could accurately assess the energy expended in given acts of locomotion. His goal was to find which movements, produced in what ways, accomplished tasks with the least amount of required energy in order to prolong endurance and lessen fatigue. His descriptions of human movement were the scientific foundation of modern physical training for athletes.

Concerns over physical fitness began in France after 1870, when recuperation of the nation and revanche ("revenge" against the losses of the Franco-Prussian War) were on the minds of many. Numerous gymnastic societies with patriotic names like "Alsace-Lorraine" were established in the seventies and eighties and geared toward paramilitary training. By 1880, gymnastics were mandatory in public boys' schools as preparation for military inscription. However, by the end of the decade, gymnastics began to shift from a largely military orientation to a program geared toward national health; gyms and gymnastic associations began to multiply in French cities. Marey's associate Georges Demeny, instrumental in the popularization of
Fig. 25. — Homo normale, anticae catarrhales, in natura.

Fig. 26. — Homo normale, in natura.

Fig. 27. — Homo normale, after myotherapy.

Fig. 28. — Homo normale, anticae catarrhales, in natura.

Fig. 29. — Homo normale, after cure (myotherapy).

Fig. 30. — Homo normale, after cure (myotherapy).

Fig. 74. F. Heckel, *Culture physique et cures d'exercice* (Paris, 1913), 48, plate 5.
regeneration theory and famous for his revision of the physical education system in France, applied the revelations of physiology to gymnastics; in 1891 he was commissioned by the city of Paris to create a definitive course of physical education. Along with Philippe Tissié, noted for his widely influential studies of fatigue, Démény believed that an understanding of the body's internal rhythms was necessary for effective athletic training. The importance of natural rhythms of the body was extended by some physiologists to the very laws of the universe; the body's movements, in harmony with nature's own energies, would reinforce the model of the "natural" athlete as both primitive and ancient.

Sports became increasingly popular in France in the 1880s and 1890s as the push for national regeneration extended to all levels of society, although hygienists considered athletics far less effective than gymnastics in systematic body conditioning. Cycling was the most popular of all sports and accessible to most levels of society, and to both sexes, by the nineties. In a poster for Sirius bicycles by Pal of 1899, a classical female both strong and swift rides a modern bicycle. The loosely draped antique Greek chiton she wears is an allusion to dress reform, which called for an end to the corset, brought about in part by the cycling craze. Rugby and soccer, both imports from Britain, were also popular by the end of the century. The Union des sociétés françaises de sports athlétiques, founded in 1889, incorporated more than two hundred clubs within a decade; by 1914 this number had grown to sixteen hundred. From the mid-nineties on international sporting events took place regularly in France.8

Women were encouraged to participate in sports, although garden-based games like tennis, croquet, or badminton, as in Denis's *The Game of Badminton* (fig. 73), were deemed particularly appropriate for them. Participation in body culture at the turn of the century, if it did not interfere with domestic duties, was considered not only appropriate, but also important to the health and vitality of French women. Marcel Proust described the fit woman of the early twentieth century in *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* (In the shadow of young girls in flowers) in 1918: "Thanks to the new habits of sport widely influential in certain circles and to physical culture (to which intelligence cannot be named as a contributing factor), a social environ-

One result of the sports movement was the revival of the Olympic Games through the efforts of Pierre de Coubertin, who was key in promoting regeneration and sports in France by the late eighties and nineties.10 The growing cult of antiquity and natural energy found its apotheosis in the Olympic hero. Through de Coubertin's efforts, the first of the modern Olympic games took place in the recently excavated stadium of Herodes Atticus (A.D. 101-77) in Greece in 1896; the second was in Paris in 1900. The ancient events of discus throwing and marathon races were revived, and modern sports like bicycle racing, tennis, and track-and-field events were included as well.

The newly emerging physical culture movement capitalized on the rhetoric of degeneration and exploited the trend toward fitness by promoting individual methods of exercise that promised restored physique. Physical culture was pioneered by Eugen Sandow, a one-time Parisian artist's model, famous in the early twentieth century through his publications and international tours. Sandow claimed the backing of science and emphasized the "cultivation of the whole of the body so that it can be capable of anything that sound organs and perfectly developed muscles can accomplish... The production in short of an absolutely perfect body."11 Sandow claimed that he had originally been inspired in the direction of physical culture by seeing ancient sculptures in Greece. He often included bodybuilders in poses that replicated those of classical statues in his literature.

France's most successful physical culturist was Edmond Desbonnet, who established a string of schools throughout France, beginning in the mid-eighties. Invoking national degeneration in his handbook *L'art de créer le pur-sang humain* (The Art of Creating Human Thoroughbreds), he defined physical culture as "the art of cultivating beauty and strength of the body to the greatest extent possible to improve both the individual and the race."12 He too took the classical body as the model of perfection. Desbonnet founded the popular periodical *La Culture physique* in 1904, referred to
by Picasso during his first neoclassical period in a humorous caricature of exercise enthusiast Apollinaire (fig. 75). Picasso portrays an unevenly developed muscle-bound titan in this and other physical culture drawings of 1905, though Desbonnet's goal was the smooth operation of the body's digestive, circulatory, and respiratory systems through overall balanced musculature. His method included the use of weights and Swedish gymnastic exercises, which encouraged the body's muscles to "massage" the internal organs. Desbonnet credited his "gymnastics of the organs" with curing everything from obesity to rheumatism. Promoting his method to women as well as men, he promised improvements in fertility and physical rejuvenation. Desbonnet was an advocate of abandoning the corset and freeing the body "like the Greeks." In his Pour devenir belle... et le retour, manuel de culture physique (In Order to Be Beautiful and Remain that Way, Manual of Physical Culture) of 1911, which is filled with photographic comparisons of healthy female bodies with Greek statues. One illustration juxtaposes a modern wasp-waisted woman, deformed by a corset, with an antique beauty. The head of the latter is turned in profile with hair done in a chignon; both pose and hairstyle are antique signifiers (fig. 76).

Georges Hébert's Méthode naturelle, another system with wide appeal to the French public, is acknowledged in Heckel's schema of the naturally fit body (fig. 74, top right). Touting the importance of even muscular development to the body's internal systems, Hébert based his method on Rousseau's postulate that activity was a law of nature. In producing the physical ideal, he advocated exercises performed outdoors that replicated the "natural" activities of Greeks or primitives, such as walking, swimming, jumping, and lifting.13

The fame of amazing musclemen on a popular level at the turn of the century was a result of the broad appeal of physical culture. The growing interest in strongman acts at the circus reflects this sub-movement.14 The strongman, often sporting nothing but a leopard skin and sandals, both primitive and Greek, was an emerging masculine ideal after the turn of the century. In his Héraclès Archer of 1909, the work that established his reputation, the classical sculptor Emile Antoine Bourdelle portrayed the ancient Greek's strongman in a superior act of athletics, with all muscles flexed (fig. 77). Bourdelle, drawn to the classical model of strength, worked in an archaizing style that fused the primitive and the classical. Because Herakles was strong enough to defend all of Greece, Bourdelle's work embodies the ideal of physical supremacy that could protect France. Later in his lifetime, the work would be re-exhibited with the title Monument to Sport.

By 1903, Bourdelle's interest in the strength and agility of the Greek body brought him into the orbit of the American dancer Isadora Duncan, who took Greek art as her point of inspiration.15 The foundation for Duncan's system was gymnastic training; her work in turn inspired exercise enthusiasts like Demeny, who created a program of "gymnastic dancing" for girls after studying Duncan's method. Duncan believed that the roots of the body's energy resided not at the base of the spine, as was thought by ballet masters, but in the torso, where the nerves were concentrated; she claimed the solar plexus as the receptor and diffuser of sensations. By understanding this, ecstatic, expressive energy could then be unleashed. For Duncan, developed muscles were not an end in themselves, but a source of vital, kinetic energy. Duncan danced barefoot in costumes based on ancient Greek examples, in the belief that the Greeks had danced with the full body and were inspired in their dances by direct contact with nature. She studied patterned natural movements, such as waves against the shore or trees swaying in a breeze, together with the poses she found on Greek vases, summarizing her thoughts in The Dance and Nature in 1905.

Duncan's conviction that the body's energy systems replicated universal rhythms is close to the beliefs of physiologists like Charles Féré. Following the contemporary trend of conflating the antique with the primitive, Duncan argued that the Greek was an evolved primitive and wrote, "the Greeks were the greatest students of the laws of nature, wherein all is the expression of unending ever increasing evolution."16 On the issue of the "primitive" and "civilized" body, she noted, "the movements of the savage, who lived in freedom in constant touch with nature were unrestricted, natural, and beautiful. Only the movements of the naked body can be perfectly natural. Man, arrived at the end of civilization, will have to return to nakedness, not to the uncon-
Fig. 75. Pablo Picasso, *Portrait of Guillaume Apollinaire*, 1905, pen and india ink on paper. Giraudon/Art Resource, New York
La femme sans corset.

Les déformations osseuses du corps dues au port du corset.

Fig. 76. Illustration from Edmond Desbonnet, *Pour devenir belle... et le rester, manuel de culture physique* (Paris, 1911), 40

scious nakedness of the savage, but to the conscious and acknowledged nakedness of mature man, whose body will be the harmonious expression of his spiritual being. Duncan founded schools of dance for girls in France and Germany in the early decades of the century, encouraging the children to wear as little clothing as possible in order to expose their limbs to health-giving sun and allow them to feel one with nature. On the contribution of dance to health she noted, "It is not only a question of true art, it is a question of race, of the development of the female sex to beauty and health, of the return to the original strength and the natural movement of women's bodies."
Fig. 77. Emile Bourdelle, *Heracles the Archer*, 1909, bronze, private collection. Visual Arts Library/Art Resource, New York
Duncan’s appeal was related in part to the Mediterranean model of health. The popular interest in the antique body at the turn of the century led to a celebration of France’s southern shores as an exemplary environment for physical rejuvenation. Hygienists, often wary of prescribing any single sport as a tonic for an unhealthy body, since only certain muscle groups would be targeted, hastened to point out the overall corporeal effects of swimming. In addition to conditioning muscles, which in turn would aid respiratory, circulatory, and alimentary systems, sea bathing was credited with calming the nervous system and alleviating fatigue. Mediterranean hydrotherapy was linked to the physical constitution of Greeks and Romans and credited with curing everything, from constipation to infertility and cancer. In Dr. Arat’s *La Méditerranée au point de vue hygiénique* (The Mediterranean from a Hygienic Viewpoint) of 1885, the properties of the sea were thought to be of such consequence that Arat advocated vaginal and rectal injections of water from the Mediterranean. While ever more tourists flocked to the Mediterranean shore by the early twentieth century, sea cures were not only for those who could afford the time and investment to be in the south. The hygienist Jacques de Thézac used seaweed wraps, sun therapies, and swimming to alleviate the effects of degeneration on fishermen in Brittany.

“Bathers along the Mediterranean” is one of the most common subjects found in the work of the new classicists. This imagery derives from the academic pastorales of Giorgione, Rubens, and Poussin. Nymphs and bathers were often found in salon imagery of the period, and the subject was integral to the French classical tradition. The fact that many members of the avant-garde took up this theme might be read as a response to the call for a return to traditional values during a period of growing nationalism. However, the recent revival of southern France as a site where the body could be restored to its healthy Latin heritage within the context of the regeneration movement would have given the theme contemporary appeal. The Arcadian nude that embodies the promise of man and nature in reconciliation had a rebirth, backed by the modern hygiene movement. The monumental bathers of Maillol, Cézanne, and even Denis after the turn of the century suggest the material, weighty world of the robust body in fecund nature, quite unlike the charming nymphs of the salon that dwell in a remote world.

By the 1890s, the Neo-Impressionists Paul Signac, Edmond Cross, and Maximilien Luce were painting regularly along the Mediterranean. The anarchist Signac used the setting of Mediterranean shores to suggest a revived healthful Arcadia in his well-known *In Times of Harmony* (fig. 78). Here he envisioned a future utopia where social regeneration was communicated through the harmonious existence of modern man within nature. Unlike the languorous figures and pale or nocturnal tonalities one might find in the overtly classicizing painting of modern Symbolist artists, Signac’s figures are active and bathed in the vibrant light of the sun. While this golden-age subject is updated with figures in modern dress, swimmers and a ring of dancers may be references to classical bathers and bacchantes. The theme of motherhood found here, so common during these years when the Republic stressed the importance of reproduction to national regeneration, would be popular with the classicists.

It is the Neo-Impressionist Cross, however, who participated most closely in the classical revival. Cross’s sojourns to the Mediterranean were at first the result of taking nature cures for crippling rheumatism beginning in 1885. Like Signac, he had established himself permanently in the south by the early nineties, and after 1892 he rarely left the small town of Saint-Clair on the Mediterranean. Chronic illness would leave Cross with a limp and partial blindness, yet in times of better health, he often turned to the theme of bathers beside the sea. Seen in the context of the *fin-de-siècle* health movement, a work like *The Shaded Beach* is a timely mix of references to the robust classical body and sun-and-sea cures (fig. 79). His females, formally integrated into sea, sand, and foliage, suggest the rootedness of the Latin south and the healthy woman who reproduces the race. Both Signac and Cross found an immediate forefather in Puvis de Chavannes, whose utopian murals of man’s harmonious existence in nature united the classical tradition with images of fecund France. Puvis’s work located national identity in its Latin history in images that transmitted current national concerns. As early as the 1880s, his representations of female bathers
favor archaizing yet muscular figures; the landscapes in these works often feature the Mediterranean as a backdrop for French locales. The fact that female, rather than male, bathers appear more often in the work of contemporary classicists bespeaks a conservative and lengthy tradition dating from Aristotle, whereby women were understood to be most closely linked with nature, indeed to be an extension of nature. For the classicists, women were no longer the agents of dissolution that the Symbolists had found them to be, but the passive and fecund bearers of life, able at their best to reconstitute the French race. Like Cross’s women beside the sea, Maillol’s well-known sculpture The Mediterranean (1905) (fig. 80) is at once a bather, a neoclassical figure, and a personification of natural Latin France. Neither voluptuous nor soft-bodied, her well-balanced figure is as beautifully fit as any one of the nude “living sculptures” found in the health manuals of the period.

Maillol used as models the peasant women who lived in his native Banyuls-sur-mer, on the Mediterranean basin. For him, these solid, strong women represented continuity with the classical past. As critic and historian Octave Mirbeau wrote of Maillol’s female figures, “This type is taken from among us, entirely from our race, from our healthy race, from the people, who constitute the living museum in which the purity of the ethnic form is still preserved—she conveys the idea of strength, of the plentitude of flesh, because she is life.”

Like Bourdelle, Maillol was attracted to the more archaic aspects of Greek art, preferring the more “primitive” severe-style art of Olympia to the better
known classical work of the fifth century B.C. Having worked earlier under the influence of Gauguin, his figures also bear a kinship with the latter’s earthy, placid nudes. This fusion of primitive and classical, as in the work of Bourdelle, suggests the youthful strength and potential of the ancient Latin race.

Maillol had originally been a member of the Nabi group, a number of whom also turned to themes that fused antiquity with contemporary concerns. Felix Vallotton, who joined the Nabis in 1892, took up the theme of bathing and health in his *The Mistress and the Servant* (1896) (fig. 81). In this work, he parodies Mirbeau’s “woman of the people”; robust and solidly planted in the shallows of the sea, the servant lends a hand to a jaundiced neurasthenic from the upper class. After the turn of the century, Vallotton often turned to the subject of monumental nudes.

The former Nabi, Maurice Denis, was the principal theorist of the new classicism. He had always been interested in values of the past, and his earlier Symbolist work contained images from classical mythology. However, the artist’s growing conviction in the message of classicism reached a final resolution in 1896 after spending time in Rome with the writer André Gide. Gide may well have played an important role in Denis’s celebration of the sporting classical body and of the healthful benefits of active life lived outdoors. One year after
his travels with Denis, Gide published *Les Nourritures terrestres* (Fruits of the Earth). Of this celebration of life in nature, Gide would explain that it revealed the poetic exaltation of someone to whom life is precious because he had been on the verge of losing it. In fact Gide, who nearly died of tuberculosis several years earlier, recuperated along the Mediterranean. The *culte de la vie* (cult of life) spirit of *Les Nourritures terrestres* was related to Naturism, a literary movement that Gide was close to. The Naturists reacted against Symbolist morbidity and decadence, engaging in a joie de vivre embrace of life. For them, nature was a real source of health and rejuvenation; the movement was linked to nature cures, including the healthful benefits of nude sunbathing. Like Denis and the neoclassicists, writers like Gide celebrated the Mediterranean environment. Naturist writings are full of references to exaggerated vegetation and bright sunlight of the Mediterranean shores.

In 1896, Denis wrote the essay "Le Art à Rome ou la méthode classique" (Art in Rome or the Classical Method), in which he discussed the importance of order, equilibrium, and an endur-
ing art. In his *De Gauguin et de Van Gogh au classicisme* (From Gauguin and Van Gogh to Neo-classicism) of 1909, Denis attempted to establish classicism as a natural successor to Symbolism. Denis’s works after 1900 are often of bathers, dancing nymphs, and sporting figures along the Mediterranean that easily alternate between the classical and the modern, or mix references to both. These works include depictions of modern games, frolicking nudes, and mothers nursing infants. Like Maillol’s *Mediterranean*, they symbolize the eternal fecundity of the Mediterranean and the vital heritage of the Latin past. Denis also depicted classical males in works that convey the message of health, regeneration, and the legacy of antiquity. The Nabis had always been interested in subjects from bourgeois life; thus, the expansion of themes into the area of sports and physical hygiene, particularly after 1900, is in keeping with their interest in popular taste.

Denis was instrumental in interpreting Cézanne as a classical painter to the avant-garde. While classical qualities like order, reason, and geometric construction were emphasized over content in Denis’s writings, Cézanne’s work often incorporated antique motifs, such as Mont Sainte-Victoire in Provence, the location of a Roman victory over the Teutons. Cézanne’s interest in the classical heritage of the south may well have been influenced by a contemporary Provencal cultural movement.

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Fig. 81. Félix Valloton, *The Mistress and the Servant*, 1896, oil on board, Schweizerisches Institut für Kunstwissenschaft, Zürich
which stressed the Mediterranean heritage of the past. He was close to the writer Joachim Gasquet and his circle, who actively promoted these local traditions and was associated with the Félibrige literary movement. Gasquet regarded Cézanne as a regionalist painter whose principal guide was the classical past. 

Cézanne's most ambitious series, dominating his oeuvre after 1900, was of bathers. He seriously began to work on this theme in the mid-seventies, depicting both female and male bathers, for the most part treated separately. As Theodore Reff notes, Cézanne's paintings of male bathers often show active figures in open compositional formats, while those of female bathers include more indolent figures. His bathing women are frequently enclosed by trees or rocky outcroppings or form themselves into calm, triangular groupings, which embody the solidity and constancy of the local landscape. The very subject of bathers in Cézanne's work may be related to an aspect of restorative health with antique associations which gained importance in the south of France from the 1870s on—the revival of Roman spas. Aix-en-Provence, where Cézanne grew up and lived for the last twenty years of his life, was originally settled by the Romans, who were interested in the local warm mineral springs which they claimed had curative properties. Aix-en-Provence was one of the southern villes d'eaux (towns with mineral springs) experiencing a hydrotherapy revival when Cézanne was painting his many compositions of bathers. Cézanne rarely placed his bathers beside the open sea; rather, they appear in grottoes or near narrow rivers that are, in some cases, little more than streams, a possible allusion to contemporary local springs. French spa culture experienced its golden age at the fin-de-siècle, when medicinal spring waters came to be thought of as places of rejuvenation with a classical heritage—veritable fountains of youth. Indeed, among the many bather paintings one could find at the French salon were those of beautiful women, whose source of health, strength, and renewal were fountains of youth, depicted as magical medicinal waterfalls or streams.

Cézanne's paintings of female bathers influenced a younger generation of artists emerging after 1900, among whom was Henri Matisse. In 1899, while watching a group of bathers in the Garonne River in Toulouse, the then virtually unknown young painter was reminded of a painting of bathers by Cézanne that he then decided to buy. He later claimed the painting to be at the very source of his art, but it would be five years before the pastoral subject of female nudes in nature began to appear in Matisse's work. The initiative to treat this theme was encouraged by Matisse's friendship with Cross, with whom he worked in the south of France during the summer of 1904. Under his influence, Matisse even adopted for a time the Neo-Impressionist style with its luminous colors and, like other classicists, conjoined modern and antique references in bathing scenes. Matisse's experiments culminated with the seminal Arcadian painting Bonheur de Vivre (1905–6) (fig. 82). The brilliant lemon-yellows and radiant oranges of the painting suggest the heat and euphoria of a sun-drenched landscape, a paradise somewhere between Gauguin's tropics and Greek Arcadia. Human figures, including an embracing couple, lounge in the foreground. A reclining nude in the center-middle ground of the work rests entirely upon the land, her left leg disappearing into the soil, while her twin who mirrors her from waist to toe, stirs and comes to life, beginning to rise from the earth. At the far left is a voluptuous nude with a necklace of ivy, her arm bent back in the classical pose so often found in salon imagery of temptresses or Venus fresh from the sea. Her legs terminate in the rounded, seed-like backside of another nude who stoops to pluck a tuft of grass. The latter figure's left leg is little more than an arabesque, like those that form abbreviated tree trunks and branches above her; both figures suggest fecundity and rootedness in nature. Two musicians play aloi (ancient flutes), while a fifth pair of figures gestures toward an exuberant ring of nudes dancing in communal harmony beside the Mediterranean. The curvilinear outlines of the largely female bodies are echoed in the canopy of trees above. Borrowing from elements of Art Nouveau, the arabesques of Bonheur de vivre convey the sense of life force coursing through nature; Leo Steinberg likened them to a circulatory system, where "stoppage at any point implies a pathologi­cal system." Reading the work from bottom to top, the three figures in the foreground, all contained within a dark lavender wedge, suggest the hidden beginning of life stirring beneath the soil, the figures in the middle ground the opening up
of the living form, and the dancers the final triumphal "bloom" of life.

While we have seen how classicists expressed the ideology of the healthy woman as natural through her physique and intimate relationship with nature, Matisse seems more concerned with the very life force of the organic world, human and flora alike. The comparison of the vitality of nude figures that come to life beneath the sun and nature’s own growth that rises and expands toward the skies is not merely a poetic point of comparison. Popular medicine of this period often invoked physiology to draw parallels between the effect of the sunshine on the body and on plants, thus applying science to nature cults like nude sunbathing. The body was described by some scientists as an open system, interacting with the surrounding environment. Somewhat akin to the action of leaves unfurling and rising to the sun or condensation forming on a plant's surface, the skin was considered to be open to the air and able to "breathe"; capillaries would contract and dilate beneath the sun, and the body’s energies rise to the surface. At the same time, the nervous system would be soothed by the action of the sun.32 Matisse’s paradise conveys health through nature and the natural flow of energy, familiar concepts to a French audience at a time when hygienists’ appeal to the public was at its height. His exuberant celebration of life as part of an elemental paradise is also close to the concerns of the Naturists.

The ecstatic dancers in the background of Le Bonheur de vivre, which completely release the energy building up through the imagery in the painting, seem to suggest a bacchanale. They may have been influenced by Duncan’s barefoot, unin-
hibited, nature-inspired Greek dances. In Notes of a Painter (1908), Matisse emphasized the importance of contact with nature and the sensations and feelings it evoked. Like Duncan, his figures respond to the rhythms of nature. Matisse would no doubt have been aware of Duncan’s celebrated performance at the Trocadero in 1904, which made her famous in France and which included a rondo and a bacchanaele. An avid reader of Nietzsche, whom she listed along with Rousseau as her mentor, Duncan embraced the Dionysian ideal.

Also related to the restoration of the body was the very goal Matisse claimed for his paintings. In his Notes of a Painter, Matisse wrote, “What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity and serenity, devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter, an art which could be for every mental worker, for the business man as well as for the man of letters, for example, a soothing, calming influence on the mind, something like a good armchair which provides relaxation from physical fatigue.”

In bringing up the mental and physical fatigue among the bourgeois and the restful potential of his work, Matisse suggests a formula for soothing incipient neurasthenia or nerve deterioration, the first stage of degeneration. 1905, the year in which Bonheur de Vivre was begun, marked a transition in France toward greater conservatism; nationalism now dominated public life. The Moroccan Crisis of that year was the first of many events that would lead France into the First World War, and the “return to order” sentiment accompanied a fresh wave of patriotism that furthered the cult of Mediterranean classicism.

Picasso began to show an interest in classical subject matter around this time. Living in France, his classicism was influenced both by its revival in that country and in his native Spain, which was experiencing its own Mediterraneanism. In 1905, he had begun to frequent a circle of intellectuals in Paris that included Jean Moréas, founder of the École Romane, a group of mostly French writers that upheld classical ideas and the Latin heritage of France. Months before Picasso began to work on specifically classical themes, a host of acrobats and strongmen populated his drawings and paintings. Although he rarely represented them in performance, these figures do occur at a time when public spectacles of athletic feats were at their height. As classical subject matter came to preoccupy him, occasionally Greek figures mingle with athletes in his work. In Saltimbanques: conversation, toilet and rehearsal with horse (1905, Musée Picasso), for example, a sturdy Greek figure in a chiton stops to chat with several acrobats. While this may seem a curious conjoining of disparate themes, it is in keeping with the classical model of health and aspects of body culture at the turn of the century. The rosé tonalities of the figures in 1905 and the bronze of the classical bodies of 1906 suggest health in the outdoors, in direct opposition to the airless canvases of the urban degenerates of Picasso’s blue period. The terracotta color of classical figures in works like Young Boy Leading a Horse (fig. 83) also suggest the very soil of the Mediterranean world they seem to inhabit. They convey at once stability, eternal youth, and ancient history, often in poses that conjure up ancient sculpture. The fact that Picasso’s neoclassical males are, for the most part, adolescents, may be a reference to the importance of sports to the youth of France after 1905. The generation that was coming of age at that time represented for many the potential for redeeming the country. In a widely discussed survey of youth conducted in 1912, it was noted that “this generation is more energetic, sport-oriented, and less intellectual than the last, and demonstrate an interest in optimism, nationalism, the cult of heroism, morality, order, clarity, equilibrium, and health.”

The influence of Gauguin can be detected as well in Picasso’s horseback riders and youths of the same years; thus, here too the unification of the primitive and the classical are models of reconstituted strength and health. However, the unpolluted timeless world to which this Spanish national would escape would be neither Gauguin’s tropical paradise nor Matisse’s Mediterranean shores, but the mountains of Catalonia.

During the summer of 1906, Picasso spent several months in the ancient village of Gósol, where he created some of his strongest neoclassical works. As with Maillol, local women were his models. Peasant women carrying jugs of water would be transformed into classical women with pots; local boys into slim, strong Greek athletes. Picasso’s companion Fernande, her pink skin suggesting the glow of health, was depicted as a stylized Venus pudica in Standing Nude (Fernande) (fig. 84). Painted in 1906, she keeps company with the many robust, monumental classicizing nudes of that date beginning with Maillol and Denis, and culminating in the grand compositions of bathers by Cézanne.
The classical paradise of turn-of-the-century painting, be it Picasso's sober vision of young male heroes or Matisse's enthusiastic homage to the Arcadian pastorale, populated with vital female nudes or male athletes, demonstrates an awareness of major cultural and social issues from nationalism to medical hygiene. As such, contemporary concerns were represented through an active language of classicism that would have been readily understood by the French public. The Mediterranean as a site of health interfaced with ideas on national longevity and vitality with roots in France's Roman heritage. Artists were influenced by the widespread health campaign on popular and national levels which found, in the classical body, a common locus to symbolize the restoration of individual bodies as well as that of the state.

Notes

1. Degeneration was applied to family lines as early as mid-century. Prosper Lucas and B. A. Morel were two influential early theorists of degeneration. After 1870, the concept of degeneration was extended to the nation itself; see Sharon Hirsh, "Codes of Consumption: Tuberculosis and Body Image at the Fin-de-siècle" in this book. During the seventies and eighties a number of new books on heredity and degeneration were published, among them, Henri Legrand du Saulle, La Folie héréditaire (Paris, 1873) and J. Dejerine, L'Hérédité dans les maladies des système nerveux (Paris, 1886). On the social implications of degeneration theory during the Third Republic, see Robert A. Nye, Crime, Madness, & Politics in Modern France: The Medical Concept of National Decline (Princeton, 1984).

2. For an introduction to the eighteenth-century interpretation of the classical body, see Hugh Honour, Neo-Classicism (Harmondsworth, 1968), 59-82.

3. Dr. Francis Heckel, Culture physique et cures d'exercice (Paris, 1913), 67.

4. The literature on the physical culture movement is vast. See Gilbert Andrieu, L'homme et la forêt (Joinville-le-Pont, 1988); Gilbert Andrieu et al., Accord à corps: Edmond Desbonnet et la culture physique (Paris, 1994); Pierre Arnaud, Le Corps en mouvement (Toulouse, 1981); Michael Anton Budd, The Sculpture Machine: Physical Culture and Body Politics in the Age of Empire (New York, 1997); and Mary Lynn Stewart, Physical Culture for Frenchwomen, 1880s–1930s (Baltimore, 1997).

5. Marey popularized the language of "body mechanics." The energies that governed the body came to be likened to those of physics thus, the forces that operated in the inorganic world, like electricity and heat, were thought to be not unlike those that operated in the organic world. Generated into nervous agency and muscular power, they affect activities like growth, development, and movement of the body. With the convergence of physiology and physics as comparative operational systems, a mechanical landscape of the body gradually emerged. For a contemporary influential treatise on the "human machine," see Fernand Lagrange, Physiologie des exercices du corps (1888; reprint, Paris, 1995).


9. A la recherche du temps perdu (Paris, 1999), 791. Proust's father, a prominent physician, was among those devoted to the issue of national degeneration. He wrote the most important textbook on another modern urban malady, neurasthenia; Dr. Achille Proust, L'Hygiène du neurasthénique (Paris, 1897).

10. As an anglophile promoter of sports, Coubertin's emphasis was different from that of Marey or Tissié, who promoted rational gymnastics. Coubertin was originally motivated by the goal of introducing sports and athletics into secondary schools. He organized the first international congress for the promotion of physical education held in conjunction with the universal exposition of 1889; see Pierre de Coubertin, La Culture physique et l'éducation; une campagne de vingt-et-un ans, 1887–1908 (Paris, 1909).

11. E. Sandow, Strength and How to Obtain It: With Anatomical Chart Illustrating the Exercises for Physical Development (London, 1897), 14.


15. Both Bourdelle and Maurice Denis would use Duncan as their model for works destined for the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées.


17. Ibid., 17.

18. Ibid., 21.

19. Bathing and swimming were perceived as related activities in fin-de-siècle France. See, for example, P. Christmann, La...
Natation et les bains (Paris, 1905) and the work of Thierry Terret, especially his Naissance et diffusion de la natation sportive (Paris, 1994).


21. The painting’s subtitle, “The golden age is not a thing of the past, but of the future,” is from the anarchist theoretician Charles Malato.


23. See, for example, É. Desbonnet, Pour devenir belle... et le reste; manuel de culture physique (Paris, 1911).


28. Ibid., 38-44.

29. Aix was originally named Aquae Sextiae. The mineral waters of Aix contained magnesium, lithium, and calcium, thought to be beneficial for rheumatism, circulation problems, and, in particular, diseases that affected the legs.


32. See, for example, Dr. A. Monteuuis, L’Usage chez soi des Bains d’air, de lumière et de soleil dans le traitement des maladies chronique (Paris, 1904); and A. Rickli, Médecine naturelle et bains de soleil (Lausanne, 1905).

33. Duncan had her most successful season to date in Paris in 1909, the year Matisse created a ring of dancers as a single theme in The Dance (New York, Museum of Modern Art).

34. Quoted in Jack Flam, Matisse on Art (New York, 1979), 34.

35. Neurasthenia was thought especially to effect professionals and intellectuals. This taint too could be carried on to the next generation. See Emile Laurent, La neurasthénie et son traitement (Paris, 1895) and Annette Stott, “Neurasthenia and the New Woman: Thomas Eakins’s Portrait of Amelia van Buren” in this book.

