



The Temple of Perfection: A History of the Gym

By Eric Chaline

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The Temple of Perfection: A History of the Gym By Eric Chaline

These days there is only one right answer when someone asks you what you are doing after work. Hitting the gym! With an explosion of apps, clothing, devices, and countless DVDs, fitness has never felt more modern, and the gym is its holy laboratory, alive with machinery, sweat, and dance music. But we are far from the first to pursue bodily perfection—the gymnasium dates back 2,800 years, to the very beginnings of Western civilization. In *The Temple of Perfection*, Eric Chaline offers the first proper consideration of the gym's complex, layered history and the influence it has had on the development of Western individualism, society, education, and politics.

As Chaline shows, how we take care of our bodies has long been based on a complex mix of spiritual beliefs, moral discipline, and aesthetic ideals that are all entangled with political, social, and sexual power. Today, training in a gym is seen primarily as part of the pursuit of individual fulfillment. As he shows, however, the gym has always had a secondary role in creating men and women who are “fit for purpose”—a notion that has meant a lot of different things throughout history. Chaline surveys the gym's many incarnations and the ways the individual, the nation-state, the media, and the corporate world have intersected in its steamy confines, sometimes with unintended consequences. He shows that the gym is far more than a factory for superficiality and self-obsession—it is one of the principle battlefields of humanity's social, sexual, and cultural wars.

Exploring the gym's history from a multitude of perspectives, Chaline concludes by looking toward its future as it struggles to redefine itself in a world in thrall to quick fixes—such as plastic surgery and pharmaceuticals—meant to attain the gym's ultimate promises: physical fitness and beauty.

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