

## Researched Essay

**Laura Fraser**

### *The Inner Corset: A Brief History of Fat in the U.S.*



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**Laura Fraser.** By permission of Cristina Taccone.

Laura Fraser is a freelance journalist and author of the memoirs *An Italian Affair* and *All Over the Map*, as well as an exposé of the weight loss industry, *Losing It: America's Obsession with Weight and the Industry That Feeds on It*, in which she traces how American opinions about female weight have shifted from the nineteenth century to the present. Before 1880, she writes, "a beautiful woman had plump cheeks and arms, [and] full, substantial hips. Women were sexy if they were heavy." Fraser explores how this image of female attractiveness shifted, due in part to economics, immigration, and food availability, between 1880 and 1930, when "American women could never be too thin." The following essay is an excerpt from *Losing It*. (Copyright © 1997 by Laura Fraser. Reprinted with the permission of the author, all rights reserved.)

|| Losing It  
→ America's Obsession  
#

Once upon a time, a man with a thick gold watch swaying from a big, round paunch was the very picture of American prosperity and vigor. Accordingly, a hundred years ago, a beautiful woman had plump cheeks and arms, and she wore a corset and even a bustle to emphasize her full, substantial hips. Women were *sexy* if they were heavy. In those days, Americans knew that a layer of fat was a sign that you could afford to eat well and that you stood a better chance of fighting off infectious diseases than most people. If you were a woman, having that extra adipose blanket also meant that you were probably fertile, and warm to cuddle up next to on chilly nights.

Women were sexy if they were heavy.

before 1880s  
What fat meant socially  
→ prosperity

\*For the purposes of this book, we have edited Fraser's use of sources so that the in-text citations and references list conform to the APA style of documentation. —Eds.

fertile & warm adipose → utility  
→ usefulness  
boasting pop  
creating



→ 1990s

not only to admire thinner figures for a time, but for the next century, culminating in *fin de siècle* extremes of thinness, where women's magazines in the 1990s would print ads featuring gaunt models side-by-side with photo essays on anorexia?

Models → anorexia

“ Why did the fashion for plumpness change so dramatically? ”

prestige

Many things were happening at once, and with dizzying speed. Foremost was a changing economy: In the late 1800s, for the first time, ample amounts of food were available to more and more people who had to do less and less work to eat. The agricultural economy, based on family farms and home workshops, shifted to an industrial one. A huge influx of immigrants—many of them genetically shorter and rounder than the earlier American settlers—fueled the industrial machine. People moved to cities to do factory work and service jobs, stopped growing their own food, and relied more on store-bought goods. Large companies began to process food products, distribute them via railroads, and use refrigeration to keep perishables fresh. Food became more accessible and convenient to all but the poorest families. People who once had too little to eat now had plenty, and those who had a tendency to put on weight began to do so.

economy  
food available  
agriculture  
to economy  
& industry

“ Europeans had long considered slenderness a sign of class distinction. ”

prestige

When it became possible for people of modest means to become plump, being fat no longer was a sign of prestige. Well-to-do Americans of northern European extraction wanted to be able to distinguish themselves, physically and racially, from stockier immigrants. As anthropologist Margaret Mackenzie notes, the status symbols flipped: It became chic to be thin and all too ordinary to be overweight (personal communication, June 12, 1996).

European standard

In this new environment, older cultural undercurrents suspicious of fat began to surface. Europeans had long considered slenderness a sign of class distinction and finer sensibilities, and Americans began to follow suit. In Europe, during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, many artists and writers—the poets John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley, and authors Emily Brontë, Edgar Allan Poe, and Anton Chekhov—had tuberculosis, which made them sickly thin. Members of the upper classes believed that having tuberculosis, and being slender itself, were signs that one possessed a delicate, intellectual, and superior nature. “For snobs and parvenus and social climbers, TB was the one index of being genteel, delicate, [and] sensitive,” writes essayist Susan Sontag in *Illness as Metaphor* (1977, p. 28). “It was glamorous to look sickly.” So interested was the poet Lord Byron in looking as fashionably ill as the other Romantic poets that he embarked on a series of obsessive diets, consuming only biscuits and water, or

What do you see as the relationship between body image and social class in the U.S.?

TB!  
Heroin  
chick

vinegar and  
five feet six  
weighed over  
woman,” her  
salad and  
Schwartz,  
figure that  
tocratic An  
champagne



◀ MAGAZINE COVER  
A 1928 issue of *McCall Quarterly*, featuring the slim styles of the period.

vinegar and potatoes, and succeeded in becoming quite thin. Byron—who, at five feet six inches tall, with a clubfoot that prevented him from walking much, weighed over two hundred pounds in his youth—disdained fat in others. “A woman,” he wrote, “should never be seen eating or drinking, unless it be *lobster salad* and *champagne*, the only truly feminine and becoming viands” (quoted in Schwartz, 1986, p. 38). Aristocratic European women, thrilled with the romantic figure that Byron cut, took his diet advice and despaired of appearing fat. Aristocratic Americans, trying to imitate Europeans, adopted their enthusiasm for champagne and slenderness.

Laura Fraser, *The Inner Corset: A Brief History of Fat in the U.S.*

moralities → good morals  
- sloth  
- gluttony  
- lust (pleasure)  
- puritanism

Americans believed that it was not only a sign of class to be thin, but also a sign of morality. There was a long tradition in American culture that suggested that indulging the body and its appetites was immoral, and that denying the flesh was a sure way to become closer to God. Puritans such as the minister Cotton Mather frequently fasted to prove their worthiness and to cleanse themselves of their sins. Benjamin Franklin, in his *Poor Richard's Almanack*, chided his readers to eat lightly not only to please God, but also a new divinity, Reason: "Wouldst thou enjoy a long life, a healthy Body, and a Vigorous Mind, and be acquainted also with the wonderful works of God? Labour in the first place to bring thy Appetite into Subjection to Reason" (Franklin, 1970, p. 238). Franklin's attitude toward food not only reveals a puritanical distrust of appetite as overly sensual, but also presaged diets that would attempt to bring eating in line with rational, scientific calculations. "The Difficulty lies, in finding out an exact Measure;" he wrote, "but eat for Necessity, not Pleasure, for Lust knows not where Necessity ends" (p. 238).

Do you agree that thinness is "a peculiarly American preoccupation"? Why or why not?

lust??

weighing scales; calories

thinness = nervous disorders

eat for necessity not pleasure

At the end of the nineteenth century, as Hutchinson observed, science was also helping to shape the new slender ideal. Physicians came to believe that they were able to arrive at an exact measure of human beings; they could count calories, weigh people on scales, calculate their "ideal" weights, and advise those who deviated from that ideal that they could change themselves. Physicians were both following and encouraging the trend for thinness. In the 1870s, after all, when plumpness was in vogue, physicians had encouraged people to gain weight. Two of the most distinguished doctors of the day, George Beard and S. Weir Mitchell, believed that excessive thinness caused American women to succumb to a wide variety of nervous disorders, and that a large number of fat cells was absolutely necessary to achieve a balanced personality (Banner, 1983, p. 113). But when the plump figure fell from favor, physicians found new theories to support the fashion. They hastily developed treatments—such as thyroid, arsenic, and strychnine—to prescribe to their increasing numbers of weight loss patients, many of whom were not exactly corpulent, but who were more than willing to part with their pennies along with their pounds.

What trends and values regarding the body have come and gone over time?

weight loss

As the twentieth century got underway, other cultural changes made slenderness seem desirable. When many women ventured out of their homes and away from their strict roles as mothers, they left behind the plump and reproductive physique, which began to seem old-fashioned next to a thinner, freer, more modern body. The new consumer culture encouraged the trend toward thinness with fashion illustrations and ads featuring slim models; advertisers learned early to

offer women an unattainable dream of thinness and beauty to sell more products. In short, a cultural obsession with weight became firmly established in the United States when several disparate factors that favored a desire for thinness—economic status symbols, morality, medicine, modernity, changing women's roles, and consumerism—all collided at once.

→ all elements @ once for thinness

Thinness is, at its heart, a peculiarly American preoccupation. Europeans admire slenderness, but without our Puritanism they have more relaxed and moderate attitudes about food, eating, and body size (the British are most like us in being heavy and fixated with weight loss schemes). In countries where people do not have quite enough to eat, and where women remain in traditional roles, plumpness is still widely admired. Other westernized countries have developed a slender ideal, but for the most part they have imported it from the United States. No other culture suffers from the same wild anxieties about weight, dieting, and exercise as we do because they do not share our history.

“Thinness is, at its heart, a peculiarly American preoccupation.”

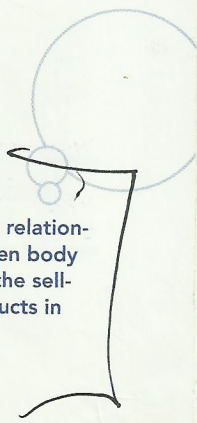
Puritanism

thin ideal

The thin ideal that developed in the United States from the 1880s to the 1920s was not just a momentary shift in fashion; it was a monumental turning point in the way that women's bodies were appraised by men and experienced by women. The change can be traced through the evolution of three ideal types: the plump Victorian woman, the athletic but curvaceous Gibson Girl, and the boyishly straight-bodied flapper. By 1930, American women knew how very important it was for them to be thin. From then on, despite moments when voluptuousness was admired again (e.g., Marilyn Monroe), more American women could never be too thin.

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What is the relationship between body ideals and the selling of products in America?