First published in the UK in 2022 by Head of Zeus Ltd,
part of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library.

ISBN [HB] 9781788547789
ISBN [E] 9781789542028

Designed by Isambard Thomas / CORVO
Colour separation by DawkinsColour
Printed in Italy by L.E.G.O. S.p.A.

Head of Zeus Ltd
First Floor East, 5–8 Hardwick Street, London ECIR 4RG
WWW.HEADOFZEUS.COM

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Library of Congress
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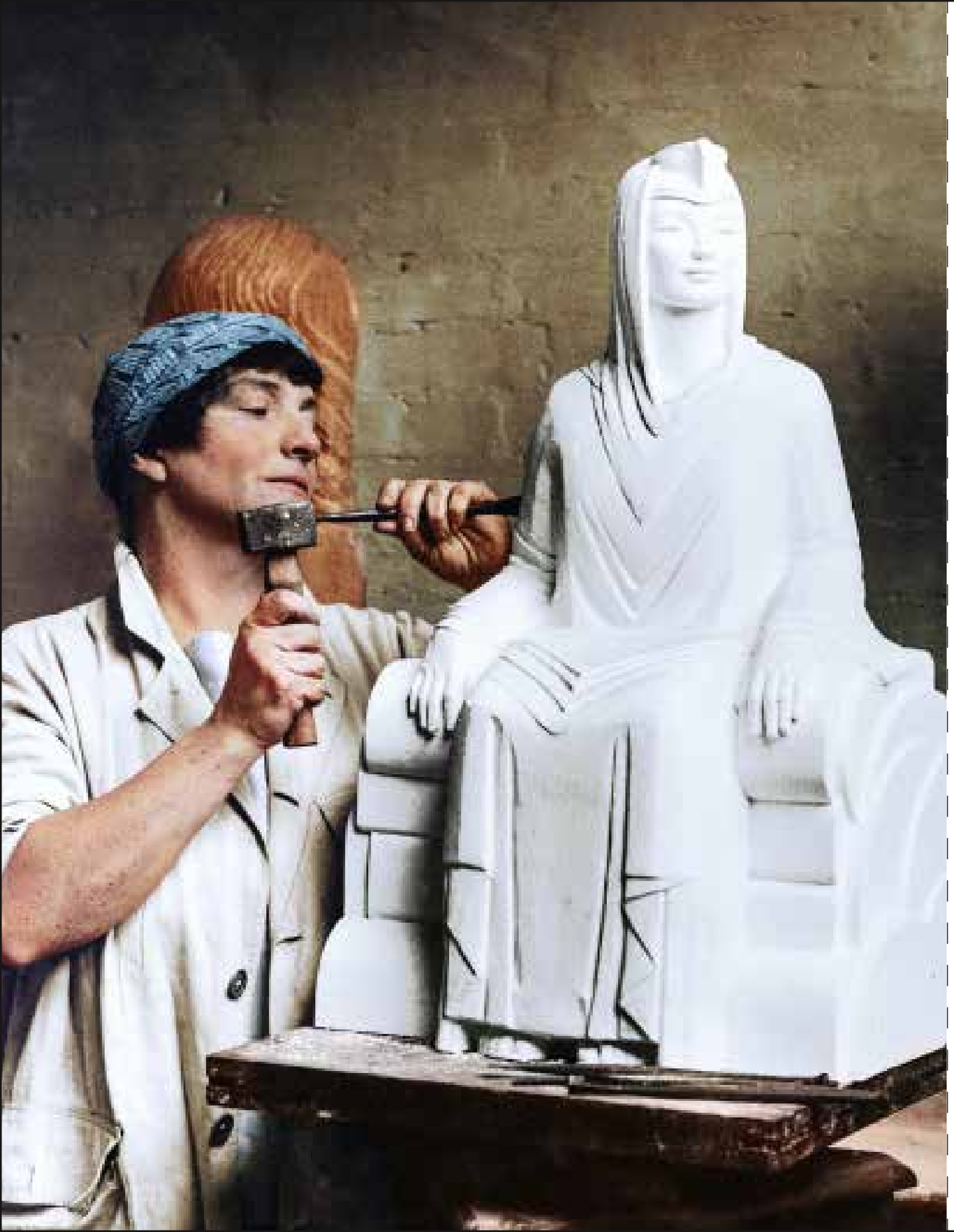
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to thank Raquel Del Monde, Paul Wilson
and the whole team at Head of Zeus,
particularly Georgina Blackwell and Clémence Jacquinet,
for patience and good humour far beyond
the call of duty.



'For most of history, Anonymous was a woman.'
Virginia Woolf

In 2017–18, when we were working on our first book together, *The Colour of Time*, we found ourselves repeating what would, over the months, become a familiar lament. That book, like this one, was a world history told through digitally colourized photographs from the 'black-and-white' era – roughly speaking, 1850–1960.

Then, as now, the historical parameters we set ourselves were broad: we wanted our story to range far and wide, mingling the famous with the unfamiliar and the everyday with the extraordinary, using colourized photography, based on thorough historical research, to tell a big story about a changing world. Yet as we worked, we kept coming back to a single observation.

There aren't enough women in here.

That's not to say there were none. It would have been an old-fashioned history indeed, which told the story of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries without any reference to women's contribution to the world. And we felt we did what we could to bend the arc of our storytelling towards inclusion and representation. We were proud of *The Colour of Time*, and remain so today.

Yet at times during the production of that book – and again during our second, *The World Aflame* – it felt as though we were battling with history itself. No matter how much we willed the past – or, more precisely, the photographic archives – to offer us an equal balance of men and women through whom to tell our story, all too often we would find ourselves surrounded by dudes with bushy beards. The big beasts of history, in their top hats and military uniforms, with their famous names and glorious (or notorious) reputations.

There were just so many of them. And sometimes it felt that all we could do was shrug and say to ourselves: well, that's history for you. It's a man's world.

Except, of course, it's not. The historian blaming her or his sources is no better than the workman blaming their tools. History makes us. But we also make it. And although it is true that for most of human civilization, patriarchy has underpinned most forms of social and political organization, that, today, is no excuse for laziness.

That is why we decided that in this, our third book, we would set ourselves a challenge.

No dudes.
No beards.
No men allowed.

What you hold in your hands today is the result. This book recounts a history of humanity between 1850 and 1960, told through women's pictures, lives and experiences. It is designed to serve as a tribute, a tableau, and, in its way, an example. It is a both a conventional history – arranged chronologically and thematically, with an eye for events and important individuals – and a radical one.

This book is created to show that we can frame our histories just as we frame our photographs: focusing on the things we think are important or arresting or terrifying or beautiful, and cutting out what does not, in the moment we press the shutter, capture our interest.

There are many ways historians can frame this particular age of history. There are many ways to tell an infinitely fascinating story.

This is *A Woman's World*.

*

Between the middle of the nineteenth century and the middle of the twentieth, the world changed almost beyond all recognition.

Telegraph cables, ocean liners, roads and railway lines connected people across vast distances at previously unimaginable speeds. People flew, first in hot air balloons and zeppelins, then in bi-planes and fighter jets, and finally at the speed of sound and into space. European imperial powers laid claim to the lands, labour and resources of other nations and exploited them for all they could, before two World Wars redrew the map of the globe, to reflect the pre-eminence of nuclear-armed superpowers.

Technology brought about a revolution in entertainment: film and television made actors and performers into national and international celebrities. Writers and artists found ever-larger audiences. Sports were codified, organized as mass spectator events and eventually televised.

Meanwhile, scientists began to unravel some of the most fundamental mysteries of the universe, with mindboggling advances in genetics, nuclear physics and computing, as well as in mundane but essential fields like food production and preservation.

In all of these fields and more, women were involved in critical ways.

Women's and men's history are not independent, but they are distinct. Female and male experiences are profoundly shaped and defined by social norms, gendered 'rules', and religious or even 'scientific' beliefs. Yet it is hardly bold to say that historical writing has both absorbed and reflected a view of the past that revolves chiefly around men.

A traditional history of the First World War would typically focus on powerful tanks, bloody battlefields and the stories of men who sacrificed everything they had to fight for their country. But if we look more closely at the Western Front of that war, we will find Marie Curie – the world's leading chemist and physicist – together with her 17-year-old daughter, Irène, driving and operating mobile X-ray machines that saved the lives of thousands of wounded soldiers.

Step back to the Crimean War in the 1850s and we will find the British nurse and social reformer Florence Nightingale transforming field hospitals by emphasizing sanitation, and not only alleviating generalized misery but cutting death rates among the wounded by two-thirds.

Step forward to the 1950s and we will meet Rosalind Franklin – who sits alongside Curie as one of the most important scientists of the twentieth century. Franklin, a research associate at King's College London, headed the team that took what has been dubbed 'the most important photo ever taken', which revealed the double helix structure of the DNA. Her work was of world-changing importance, yet she was cited only briefly at the end of the *Nature* paper published by scientists Francis Crick and James Watson in 1953 as having merely 'stimulated' them. Crick and Watson were awarded a Nobel prize and were eventually recognized as the actual 'discoverers', although they later admitted their formulation 'would have been most unlikely, if not impossible', without Franklin's work.

There are similar stories in almost every field we might care to examine.

The most famous aviator before the Moon landings of 1966 was Amelia Earhart, whose disappearance during a voyage across the Pacific in 1937 still fascinates people today. The greatest monarchs of the age included Queen Victoria, Taytu Betul and Empress Dowager Cixi. The greatest athlete was Mildred 'Babe' Didrikson Zaharias. The greatest actor was Sarah Bernhardt. Rosa Parks sat at the forefront of the civil rights movement, while Eleanor Roosevelt codified human rights in a model for the whole world to follow. Only Elvis Presley could challenge Marilyn Monroe for the name of the most famous celebrity of this time. No story of achievement despite physical disability is so well-known or inspirational than that of Helen Keller.

Of course, we have given much space in this book to women who fought for equality, freedom and opportunity during an age where, across the world, women's rights were curtailed and suppressed. That story is told most explicitly in Chapter 2 (Women in School) and Chapter 7 (Women in the Streets). But it is implicit everywhere else, too. The bare truth is that almost every woman we have featured in this book had to do more than a man would have done in her position to achieve the same result. It would be repetitious to point that out on every page, but it would be foolish and historically ignorant to forget it.

One of the most dangerous assumptions about progress is that its path leads inevitably and irreversibly towards the light. This is not true, and never has been. As we finished work on this book, the US Supreme Court was preparing to strike down *Roe v. Wade*, the landmark 1973 ruling that decided the US Constitution protected an American woman's freedom to choose an abortion. If nothing else, this moment should have reminded us all that progress is never guaranteed. Rights and freedoms can be given and they can be taken away. History is never over.

All that being said, while this book is strongly concerned with women's rights, it is *not* primarily an essay on social justice or injustice. The women we have chosen here feature because their stories are interesting and (in the majority of cases) admirable. It is a celebration of their existence and a platform to highlight their stories.

We give you this compilation in the spirit that we first imagined it: as a bright and colourful journey through a great historical age, in the company of some of the most brilliant people who lived in it.

Welcome to *A Woman's World*.

Marina Amaral & Dan Jones
Spring 2022

Women at Play

Historically, female athletes have not only been in competition with one another. They have also had to contend with the dominance of men's professional sport, which has traditionally offered participants more prize money, public attention and prestige. Certain sports have been deemed unsuitable for women, while in others women have been allowed to take part but denied the chance to make a comfortable living. Mildred Burke, pictured here in a photograph taken by *Life* magazine's Myron Davis in 1943, was a prime example of this. Throughout her long career she was the finest wrestler in the world, competing in thousands of matches over more than two decades. Yet after she retired she had to sell her jewellery to pay the rent.

In professional wrestling, many matches are choreographed as much as they are contested, and results are often fixed beforehand. That can lead detractors to scorn its status as a sport. However, the athleticism of wrestlers is very real. Burke was muscular and strong. She wanted to win every match on merit. And whenever she was involved in a 'shoot' match – one where no winner was decided beforehand – she showed what she could really do.

Burke fell into wrestling in 1932 when, aged 17, she saw a wrestling match in Kansas City and fantasized about being in the ring. She was encouraged to follow her dream by Billy Wolfe, a promoter, former wrestler and huckster. By the time she was 19, Wolfe was her husband and manager. Since women's wrestling was outlawed in most US states, Wolfe took Burke on the carnival circuit, offering a prize of $25 to any man who could beat her – or go ten minutes without being pinned. Burke recorded about 200 wins and only one loss, a fluke knock-out from a flying knee.

By 1936, Burke was fighting, and winning, legal matches and Wolfe arranged a shot at the world title. In January 1937, she won the women's world championship from Clara Mortenson. A rematch the following month went, (as pre-arranged), to Mortenson. For the deciding third match, in April, Burke refused to stay on script and the match became a shoot, which Burke won. She remained world champion for the next 17 years.

In 1944, Burke defended her world title in Mexico City in front of 12,000 fans. Four years later, she came sixth in an Associated Press poll for female athlete of the year. At the height of her fame, she was earning as much as a top male baseball player. However, Wolfe siphoned most of her money for himself. He also physically abused her. He and Burke divorced in 1952.

In 1954, having been ostracized from organized women's wrestling by Wolfe, Burke started the World Women's Wrestling Association. She wrestled for the final time in 1956, after which she became a promoter, manager and trainer of female wrestlers at her gym in Encino, California, also known as Mildred Burke's School for Lady Wrestlers. She died in February 1989, a legend of her game. Like the athletes, golfers, cyclists, gymnasts, boxers, dancers and daredevils featured in this chapter, she had changed her sport for good.

Lottie Dod

In the first week of July 1887, at the All England Lawn Tennis Club in Wimbledon, south-west London, a teenager nicknamed 'Little Wonder' won the Ladies' Singles title in handsome fashion. Charlotte 'Lottie' Dod was only 15, but she swept through the small field, defeating the defending champion, Blanche Bingley, in straight sets in the final, dropping only two games in the process.

This was not a complete shock – Dod had been winning tennis titles around Britain and Ireland since she was 13. But as Wimbledon's youngest champion, she set a record that has never been bettered. She also launched a spectacular sporting career. During the next two decades, Dod won four more Wimbledon titles. She also won the Ladies' Amateur Golf Championship in 1904, played hockey for England, climbed some of the highest mountains in the Alps, tried figure skating, tobogganed the Cresta Run, cycled around northern Italy and won an Olympic silver medal at archery in 1908.

Dod, pictured here around the age of 20, came from a wealthy, well-educated and prodigiously gifted sporting family; her brother William was also an Olympic archer, while other siblings excelled at billiards and chess. She once put her success at tennis down to her competitors' lack of drive – most women, she said 'are too lazy at tennis'. In truth, Dod's own determination and versatility was almost superhuman. In the history of sport, only Babe Zaharias (see page 37) ever performed at such a high level, across so many sports, for so long.

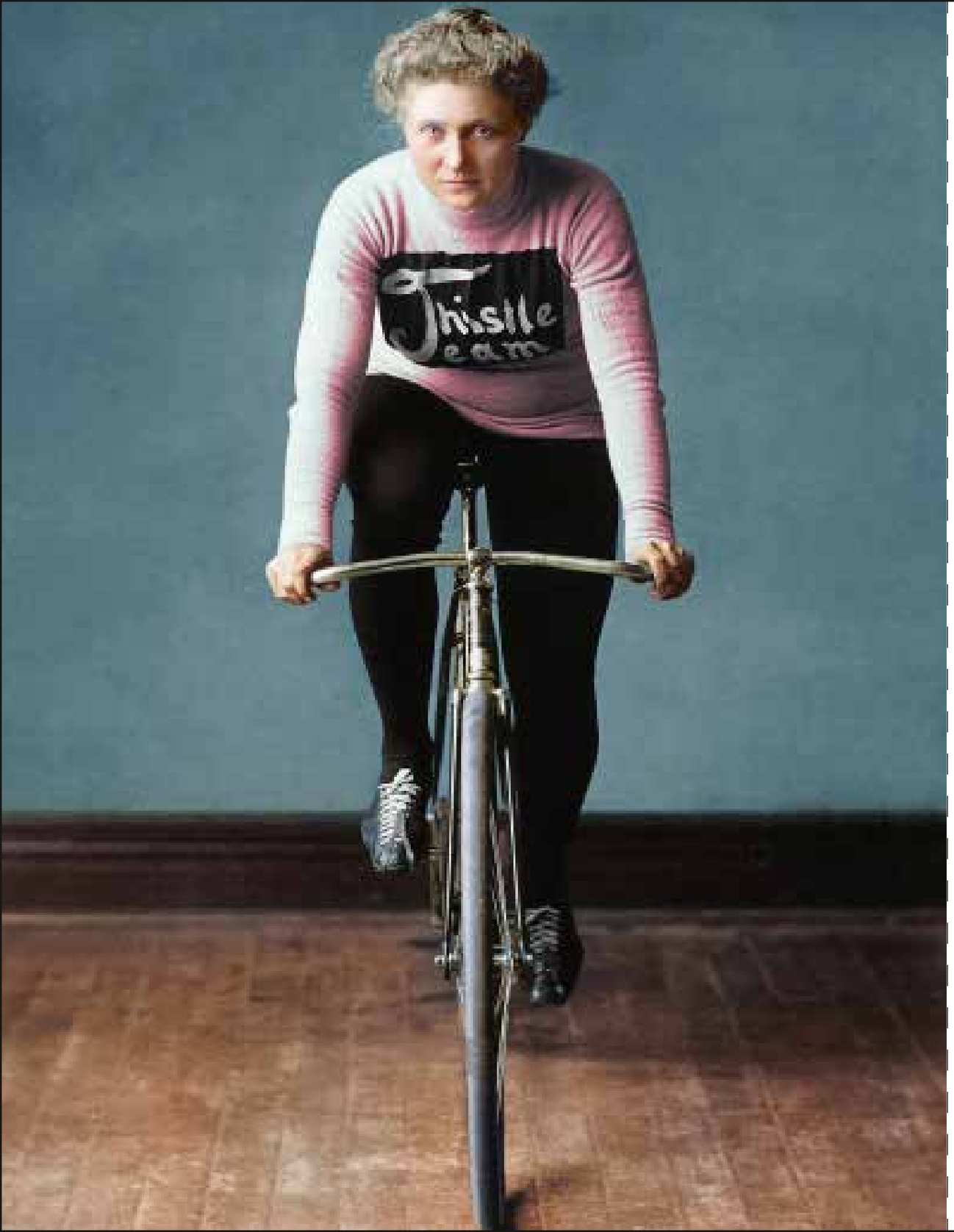
Teeing Off

In 1908, four years after Lottie Dod won the Ladies' Amateur Golf Championship, the competition was held on the world's most prestigious course: the 'Old Course' at St Andrew's, Scotland. This photograph, taken at the first tee, shows a large crowd watching Dorothy Campbell, 25, drive her first shot of a round.

Golf was already a game with a long pedigree. The first secure historical record of female players comes from the eighteenth century, although women were probably striding down fairways as long ago as medieval times. However, the ladies' championship was only founded in 1893, so when this photograph was taken, it was a relative novelty.

Campbell, however, was on her way to golfing stardom. She had been playing since she was a toddler, and won her first Scottish Ladies' title on her home course at Berwick in 1905. In 1908 she finished second at St Andrew's (the title was won by Maud Titterton), but she won the competition the following year, and again in 1911. Campbell also won elite tournaments in the US and Canada; her last major title came in 1924, when she was 41. She credited several of her finest wins to a lucky club nicknamed 'Thomas'.

Despite the dazzling success of players like Campbell, golf has never been entirely receptive to female players. This photograph shows the famous backdrop to the Old Course's first tee: the Royal & Ancient Clubhouse. Women were only permitted to join R&A and enter this clubhouse in 2014.



‘Tillie rides a Thistle’

Like golf and tennis, cycling produced outstanding female champions around the turn of the twentieth century. Bicycles became wildly popular in the Victorian era, with formal road races held from the 1860s. In the 1890s, race organizers in the US built fast, steeply banked tracks around which competitors would fly at speeds in excess of 25mph, in contests featuring six consecutive days of racing. One of the most famous and successful cyclists this brave new sporting world produced was the woman pictured here: Tillie Anderson.

Anderson was born in Sweden and moved to Chicago in 1891, where she worked as a seamstress. When she started cycling and racing a few years later, she made an immediate impact. Travelling from city to city, she won more than 100 races and thousands of dollars in prize money before she retired in 1902. Anderson’s bike of choice was a model known as a Thistle – on which she is photographed here. One newspaper writer who saw her racing a bicycle like this on the track said Anderson ‘flashed around the turns like an unchained meteor’.

For many women in this era, bicycles and cycling were a symbol of freedom and emancipation. While Anderson was winning races, in 1894–5 Annie Cohen Kopchovsky, aka ‘Annie Londonderry’, became the first woman to cycle all the way around the globe. The civil rights leader Susan B. Anthony once said bicycles had ‘done more to emancipate women than any one thing in the world’.

New Olympians

The modern Olympics were first organized in Athens in 1896, with no women competing. However, the 1900 Games in Paris featured female contests in sailing, equestrianism, golf, tennis and croquet. At subsequent Games, a few more women’s disciplines were added, including archery and figure skating. By the time of the 1912 Stockholm Games – the last before the outbreak of the First World War – women could take part in swimming and diving, although events like athletics, rowing, shooting and cycling were still restricted to men.

One grey area, however, was gymnastics. This photograph was taken at the Stockholm Olympic Stadium at around midday on Monday 8 July 1912 and shows a display of gymnastics by a team of Norwegian women. Although the official report of the Games recorded that their routine was ‘beautiful as a whole’, there were no medals at stake for the 22 female gymnasts on the team. They were simply performing – along with teams from Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland and Hungary – as part of a programme of entertainment to amuse spectators.

For most of the early years of the modern Olympics, only a handful of women took part in full competitions at each Games. At Stockholm 1912, nearly 2,500 athletes, representing 28 nations, competed for honours. Just 48 of them were female. It was 1928 before women were allowed to compete for medals in gymnastics – the same year that women’s athletics was also added to the roster.

‘The Mascot’

Competing in sports in the early twentieth century was possible for women, even if it was not equal. Owning a sports franchise was different. But that changed in 1911, when the owner of the National League Baseball team the St Louis Cardinals died, leaving his controlling stake to his niece, Helene Robison Britton. A baseball fan, Britton decided she would run the Cardinals herself, despite jeers from journalists, who thought a wife and mother had no place in charge of a men’s sporting outfit.

The problems that faced Britton (photographed here in December 1911) were those familiar to team owners throughout the modern age: fluctuating results, unhappy players and the pressure to improve facilities at the Cardinals’ ground, Robison Park. Britton found these exacerbated by deep-rooted sexism. She fired Cardinals’ manager Roger Bresnahan after he informed her that ‘no woman can tell me how to run a ball game’. She also removed her husband, Schuyler Britton, as club president, when the couple divorced acrimoniously in 1917.

Britton – nicknamed ‘The Mascot’ by fans – controlled the Cardinals for seven years. During that time, she resisted pressure from other franchise owners to sell up, and tried to attract more women to baseball, sometimes allowing female fans into Robison Park for free. She finally sold in 1918, on her own terms and for a lot of money – $350,000 – although later in life she lamented her decision. Today, there are scarcely any more female team owners than in her time.

Annie Newton

At the 1904 Olympic Games, women's boxing featured as a demonstration sport. This was not outrageous: it had a long history dating back to the seventeenth century and nothing barred women from taking part. While no female boxer in the early twentieth century had a profile to match that of the first official world heavyweight champion Jack Dempsey, the ring was a place women could earn recognition and money – if they were tough and skilful enough.

Annie Newton, pictured here in the mid-1920s when she was around 30, was certainly tough and skilful. A North London girl, she was taught to box by her uncle, 'Professor' Andrew Newton, one of Britain's finest trainers. Annie was known on the London music-hall scene as a member of the Professor's performing troupe 'the Newton Midgets'. She also took part in exhibitions where she fought men over three rounds and showed off her punching power and dexterity.

In 1926, however, a plan for Newton to fight another well-regarded London boxer, Madge Baker, gained enough public attention to cause a flurry of moral panic, led by priggish social reformers and the tabloid press. The *Daily Express* called for women's boxing to be banned by law. Britain's home secretary declined to legislate but agreed the planned Newton-Baker bout was an 'outrage'. So the fight was called off – much to Newton's irritation. Not every woman was fit enough to box, she said. 'But neither are some men.'

‘Queen of the Waves’

In the 1920s, women’s swimming enjoyed a golden age, led by American swimmers such as Gertrude Ederle, pictured here during a training session in 1926. When this photograph was taken, Ederle was already a world-record holder and multiple Olympic champion, having won a gold and two bronze medals at the 1924 Paris Games. Since then, she had set her sights on an even greater challenge: becoming the first woman to swim the English Channel.

After a failed attempt in 1925 – stymied when her trainer pulled her out midway through the attempt – Ederle set off from the French coast on 6 August 1926. She was followed by tugboats carrying reporters from American newspapers that were paying for the rights to her story; the press nicknamed her ‘Queen of the Waves’. She swam front crawl (then a recently developed stroke), wearing motorbike goggles sealed with paraffin to keep out the salt water.

After a fast swim in deteriorating sea conditions, Ederle walked out of the sea in Kent a little over 14 and a half hours later. This was the fastest crossing then recorded by nearly two hours, as well as the first by a woman. She was just 20 years old.

Arriving home in the US, Ederle was greeted as a celebrity, with a ticker-tape parade and a meeting with President Calvin Coolidge. She made a guest appearance in a silent movie about her Channel crossing, and in 1965 she was inducted into the International Swimming Hall of Fame.

Kinue Hitomi

In 1867, Japan emerged from a long period of isolation under the Tokugawa shogunate. Participation in international sports events like the Olympic Games was part of the process of re-entering the global fray. And one of Japan's most successful early Olympians was Kinue Hitomi, pictured here around 1925, when she was in her late teens.

Hitomi was a track and field athlete who set Japanese and world records at long jump, triple jump, shot put, 100m, 200m and 400m. After starring in several international sports meets, including the 1926 Women's World Games, she was selected for the Japanese Olympic team at the 1928 Amsterdam Games – the first to include women's track and field events in the programme. No woman had ever represented Japan at the Olympics before.

Hitomi had a strange Games. She was knocked out of the 100m in the semi-finals and failed to make a mark in the high jump or discus. But she won a silver medal in the 800m – an event she had never raced before. Two years later she starred again at the Women's World Games in Prague, taking medals in the long jump, javelin and 60m.

Despite her success, which inspired many other Japanese women to take up athletics, Hitomi had to endure media sniping about her appearance and weight. Critics suggested her athletic build was too 'Western'. Although she ignored the barbs, in 1931 her health failed. Hitomi died of pneumonia in hospital. She was just 24 years old.

The 'Vera Menchik Club'

The first Women's World Chess Championship was held in London in the summer of 1927. Its star was Vera Menchik, a 21-year-old English-Czechoslovakian woman who was born in Moscow but had settled in Hastings, in Kent. At this time, Menchik had only been playing chess for four years. But she was a natural, and she would go on to become one of the most formidable chess players of her generation.

In this picture, taken at a Christmas tournament in Hastings in 1937, Menchik is playing Sir George Thomas, who had tied for first place in the same event two years previously. Menchik was particularly adept at showing up those who doubted her talent. When she entered a mixed tournament in 1929 one participating chess master suggested that anyone who lost to her could consider themselves a member of the 'Vera Menchik Club'. He lost to her.

Having won her first world title in 1927, Menchik defended it five times, playing at a level far beyond any other woman in the field. She was world champion for 17 unbroken years, a record that still stands. She was still the reigning champion in 1944 when her house in South London was hit by a German doodlebug during the Second World War, killing Menchik, her mother and her sister. Today, the trophy awarded to the winning women's team in the international Chess Olympiad is called the Vera Menchik Cup.

Hitler's Fencer

In 1936, the German fencer Helene Mayer was one of the most skilful athletes in the world. She was also in a terrible moral quandary. As the daughter of a Jewish father and a Christian mother, she was defined as part-Jewish by Hitler's Nazi regime: her civil rights heavily circumscribed and her life at risk. She was selected for the German team at the 1936 Berlin Olympics, yet she was there as a 'token Jew', to cover for persecutions already being committed by the Nazi regime and see off threats of an American boycott of the Games. Despite having been one of the most famous sportswomen in Germany before the Nazis' rise to power, newspapers were forbidden to print her name or cover her career.

Mayer fenced beautifully at the Games – as she had eight years earlier at the Amsterdam Games, when she won the gold medal. But she was defeated in the final, and when she took her position in second place on the podium, she gave the obligatory Nazi salute – an action that would dog her for the rest of her days.

This photograph of Mayer was taken in 1936 by the pioneering American photographer Imogen Cunningham. And it was in America that Mayer settled once the Second World War broke out. She returned to Germany shortly before her death at the age of 42 in 1953, but did not speak publicly about her experiences in Berlin – the morality of which still animates historians today.

Dance Until You Drop

In 1935, during the Great Depression, the American author Horace McCoy published a dark existential novel, *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?*, in which much of the action was set at a gruelling dance marathon in California. This type of event was a well-known phenomenon at the time, as this picture, taken in Chicago in 1931, illustrates.

Dance marathons were usually organized as open competitions, which couples entered in the hope of winning a cash prize. Paying spectators watched as the entrants danced for hours on end, taking only short breaks and often sleeping at the venue, clocking up hundreds of hours on the dance floor across the course of several weeks until only one couple remained on their feet.

The dancers pictured here are Marie Micholowsky and her brother Frank. Marie appears to have passed out due to the exertion of the contest – although since the advertisement visible by her feet is for a souvenir photo-postcard company near Chicago's waterfront, it is possible that the picture was staged. Besides monetary gain (and the free food provided to entrants), dance marathons attracted contestants who thought they might become famous if they performed well.

However, the toll these competitions took on entrants was real. In McCoy's novel, various of the dancers lose their minds. This was no flight of fancy. Dance marathoners often collapsed and occasionally even died on the dance floor. Unsurprisingly, religious organizations, social reformers and city governments often took a dim view of the craze.

‘Babe’ Didrikson Zaharias

Texas-born Mildred Ella Didrikson was around 20 when this photograph was taken, and had already earned her nickname ‘Babe’, supposedly thanks to her childhood prowess at baseball; her friends likened her to the legendary Babe Ruth. Now, she was at the peak of her athletic talent. She was employed by an insurance organization, Employers Casualty Company, and starred for their amateur basketball team, the Golden Cyclones.

‘Babe’ was a good basketball player, but a supremely gifted athlete. Representing her company’s team (here, she is wearing their liveried uniform), she went to the 1932 Amateur Athletics Union Championships and won the team contest despite being the only member of her team. Qualifying for the 1932 Olympics, she won gold in javelin and hurdles and silver in high jump, and set four world records. Had she been allowed to enter more events, she would almost certainly have taken even more medals.

After the Olympics she took up golf, learning from scratch, practising for ten hours a day until her hands bled, and beginning a glittering career that eventually returned 17 major championship titles, dozens of amateur titles and a husband – wrestler George Zaharias, with whom she was paired at a tournament in 1938. She was one of the greatest golfers in history, winning tournaments even as she struggled with the cancer that would eventually kill her. As a teenager, she said she wanted to be ‘the greatest athlete who ever lived’. She gave it a very good shot.

‘The Flying Housewife’

The Second World War forced a 12-year hiatus in the Olympics, but when the sporting calendar began its return to normality, at the London Games in 1948, Dutch athlete Fanny Blankers-Koen was the star. She entered four of the nine women’s events (the maximum allowed under competition rules) and took gold in each, winning the 100m, 200m, 4x100m relay and 80m hurdles, a race she is leading in this picture, and which she won on a photo-finish.

Among the nicknames given to Blankers-Koen in 1948 was ‘the flying housewife’, a reference to the fact that she was 30 years old and married to the Dutch coach Jan Blankers, with whom she had two children (she was in fact pregnant with her third during the Games). This was unusual for the time, and Blankers-Koen had received hate mail in the Netherlands for competing rather than staying home with her children. Yet she showed the world conclusively that marriage and motherhood had no bearing on athletic brilliance. By the end of the Games, it was said that she was as well known to spectators as King George VI of England himself.

In addition to her Olympic titles, Blankers-Koen won European gold medals in 1946 and 1950, and for nearly eight years held simultaneous world records in the 80m hurdles, 100m, high jump and long jump. In 1999 she was voted by the International Athletics Federation as the greatest female athlete of the twentieth century.

Althea Gibson

The 23-year-old American tennis player Althea Gibson posed for this photograph while participating in a tournament at Beckenham, Kent, in 1951. The image appeared in *Picture Post* magazine, in a feature entitled 'The Different Gibson Girl'. A Gibson Girl was once a slang term for a 'classical' American beauty – fair-skinned, swan-necked, willowy, slightly fragile and fussily dressed. Althea Gibson could not have been more different – and her rise towards sporting stardom suggested that times were changing.

That same summer, Gibson played at Wimbledon. She was one of the first Black women ever to do so, and although she was knocked out in the third round, she had begun a career that would break both racial barriers and sporting records. Five years after her Wimbledon debut she reached her sporting peak, and in three glittering seasons between 1956 and 1958 she won eleven Grand Slam titles: the Wimbledon singles tournament twice and doubles three times, along with trophies in the French, US and Australian Championships. She then retired and took up a career in professional golf, with occasional forays into music and acting.

For any sportsperson, these would have been stellar accomplishments. For a Black woman in the 1950s, during a time of widespread racial prejudice and segregation, particularly in the US, it was nothing short of triumphant. Not until 1999 would another Black woman win Wimbledon: Serena Williams, who later said that Gibson 'paved the way for all women of color in sport'.

Sara Christian

Motor racing in the mid-twentieth century was not an easy sport for a woman to break into. But in 1949 the newly formed NASCAR company launched a series of stock-car races, held at tracks in the eastern US. At its inaugural meet, held at the Charlotte Speedway in North Carolina, the pool of 33 drivers included three women. One of them was Sara Christian, photographed here behind the wheel of her husband Frank's Ford.

Stock-car racing was an exciting spectacle, whose origins were said to lie in America's Prohibition Era, when alcohol bootleggers modified their cars to outrun police. By the time Christian was racing, it had developed its sporting essentials: drivers tore around an oval-shaped track for 200 laps in cars that were driven *without* mechanical enhancements. It was therefore supposed to be a strict measure of a driver's ability. Christian showed she had plenty of that.

Although she did not finish the first race – her team pulled her out when another driver's car overheated – in the second meet of the season, Christian crossed the line eighteenth. Later in the season she recorded sixth and fifth places, and at the end of the year, she was declared the USA Drivers Association Woman Driver of the Year. After this she barely raced again, but she had made her mark on a sport that still attracts millions of ardent fans every year.

RACEND
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‘The Tornado’

In childhood, Wilma Rudolph was an unlikely candidate for the role of fastest woman in the world: a bout of scarlet fever weakened her left leg so badly she walked with a brace until about the age of 12. However, by high school she had been fully rehabilitated, and began to shine at basketball and track athletics. Aged just 16, she qualified for the 1956 Olympic Games and won a bronze medal on the 4x100m relay team.

Four years later, at the 1960 Olympics in Rome, Rudolph was back. Still a college student, albeit at Tennessee State, which produced a glut of superb female athletes, she was the star of the Games. In stifling heat, Rudolph won gold in the 100m, 200m and 4x100m – the first American ever to do so. One of her many media nicknames was ‘the Tornado’. But like a tornado, she was not around for long. In 1962 Rudolph retired from athletics, as Olympic champion and world record holder in all three distances. Of her last race, she said, ‘That was it, I knew it… time to retire, with a sweet taste.’

Both during her sporting career and in her retirement, Rudolph used her fame to advocate for civil rights, particularly racial integration in her home state of Tennessee. Like Muhammad Ali, the boxer whom she briefly dated, Rudolph grasped that sporting celebrity was a powerful vehicle for giving voice to social protest. This lesson has not been lost on sports stars today.

Nurse Pilates

‘Contrology’ was not a competitive sport. But an athletic system invented in the early twentieth century garnered millions of eager participants. Its founding father and most famous teacher were Joseph and Clara Pilates, photographed here at their studio in Hell’s Kitchen, New York City, in 1951. (Clara is standing, leftmost of the group pictured.)

Clara, a nurse, met Joseph on a transatlantic ocean liner in 1926 when they were emigrating separately from Germany to the United States. By this stage, Joseph had developed most of the principles of his ‘contrology’, drawing on aspects of gymnastics, martial arts, bodybuilding, wrestling, yoga and anatomical biology. Clara was persuaded of its benefits and, after arriving in New York, the two married. Together they founded the studio, known as the Joseph H. Pilates Universal Gymnasium, and began teaching the new method to the city’s beautiful and well-heeled inhabitants.

Early adopters of the Pilates system included musicians, ballet dancers and entertainers, including the actress Lauren Bacall. The figure being worked over in the foreground of this photograph is the singer Roberta Peters, a famous soprano who had recently made her debut with New York’s Metropolitan Opera, and would go on to sing with the company for 35 years. She already had formidable core strength – during her training with the couple that day she was able to balance Joseph Pilates on her stomach by clenching her powerful abs.