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Figure skating as a sport is in a league of its own. The very fact that it's a judged sport contributes to this, but there are several sports of that kind. And it does present some similarities with artistic and rhythmic gymnastics, in that physical strength and control must be combined with charm, grace and elegance. And that men and women do essentially similar things. Nonetheless, figure skating, to a much greater extent than gymnastics, is reputed to be a feminine sport, in fact it is widely considered the most feminine of sports, a feature that in some places, especially in North America, discourages young men from participating for fear of appearing effeminate or even regarded as gay. But this particular gender coding is of recent date, figure skating history demonstrates a shift from it being a gentlemen's sport in the 1800s, with women starting to skate towards the end of that century, and it becoming predominantly feminine in the 1930s. This story is told by Mary Louise Adams, in her book *Artistic Impressions: Figure Skating, Masculinity, And The Limits of Sports* (University of Toronto Press). Anna Maria Hellborg, who has written an essay and an [article for idrottsforum.org](http://idrottsforum.org) about figure skating from a gender perspective, has read Adams' book with great interest. She regrets, however, the insufficient theoretical framework surrounding the crucial analyses of masculinity and its relationship to both figure skating and its female practitioners.

Art vs. Sport in Figure Skating

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*Mary Louise Adams***Artistic Impressions: Figure Skating, Masculinity, and the Limits of Sport**

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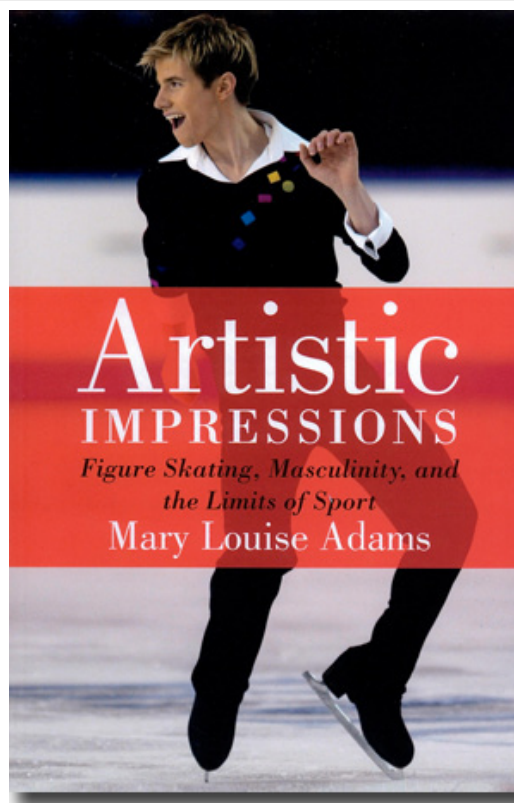
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Figure skating is a sport that requires the athlete to possess qualities like strength and speed together with grace and an aptitude for musical interpretation. These different kinds of qualities have been a source of conflict throughout the history of figure skating, according to Mary Louise Adams, and this conflict is connected to the reason why figure skating is known as a girls' sport today.

Adams' book *Artistic Impressions: Figure Skating, Masculinity, and the Limits of Sport* (2011) is one of only a few texts written about figure skating that takes on a gender analytical approach. Though there are a few articles, the only books are Ellyn Kestnbaum's *Culture On Ice* (2003) and Adams' *Artistic Impressions*. Why there is limited research on figure skating, Adams believe, is because sport science is male dominated and therefore figure skating is not prioritized.

Mary Louise Adams is Associate Professor at Queen's University in Kingston, Canada. Her research includes



investigations of how sport helps to shape social identities, especially gender and sexual identities. Adams' doctoral thesis was *The Trouble with Normal* (1997), which dealt with youths and the production and reproduction of heterosexual norms after the Second World War in Canada. Figure skating is a sport she has been involved with for many years and her motivation for writing *Artistic Impressions* comes from a desire to "encourage more effeminacy in our culture".

In her book *Artistic Impressions* Adams discusses why figure skating is considered to be a girls' sport when originally it was a gentlemen's activity, and why it is considered inappropriate for men to comport their bodies with beauty and grace. She asks: if sport is a place for masculinity, then what shall we think about sports like figure skating, which doesn't seem masculine at all?

The main contribution of *Artistic Impressions* to the field of sport studies is its historical material, which describes a transformation from a gentlemen's art to a sport primarily for girls and effeminate boys. The book begins with the macho era, in the late 1980's to the early 2000, when there was a conscious effort to change the image of men's skating. A few male skaters were prominent, with a more emphasized masculinity portrayed on the ice, or at least that was the interpretation of the media. During that period certain events occurred that can explain this accentuated masculinity in figure skating. A couple of male skaters died of AIDS and men's figure skating needed to move away from the association with gay men. It was also the Reagan-era in the United States, where fierceness, power and courage were preferred. This was mirrored in Hollywood films such as Rambo and Terminator.

Adams continues to describe the progression of skating from the mid 1700's and how skaters even then argued over which type of skating that was preferable. In the 19th century there were two different styles developed: an English and a Continental style. In opposition to the Continental, the English style refused graceful movements with bended knees and arms. But it was the more innovative Continental style that figure skating later was founded on. In the early days of figure skating, it was only members of the upper classes that had the time and opportunity to practice and refine their movements in exclusive clubs. Women were allowed in the clubs if they had a connection to a male member, like a father or a husband. The clubs organised masked balls and carnivals, and these social events made it important also to include women.

” *The remarks about the need for more athleticism in figure skating are only made to get the approval from heterosexual men outside the sport.*

In the early 20th century the gender balance was relatively equal. Women and men skated together, used the same techniques and competed in the same events. But Adams mentions two reasons for the shift to a designated girls' sport. First, the immensely popular champion Sonja Henie, who introduced figure skating to a mass audience through a series of Hollywood films in the 1930's and 1940's, and secondly the fact that women were dominating the sport in the 1920's and early 30's with technically more skilled skaters. After the Second World War skating was repositioned as a girls' activity.

Discourses of class and gender have at different times motivated either a more artistic approach or more technically advanced skating, and both cases have been made in consideration of the reputation of men. The upper class wanted to emphasize the art because that was a gentleman's deportment. Competitions with price money and technical skills at the expense of grace were perceived as unworthy. During the macho era, the prominence of masculinity, where skating programs with war themes and the portrayal of heroic characters, was made to help male figure skating to appear more athletic and draw the attention away from the graceful parts of skating.

In the final chapter Adams considers how anxieties over the reputation of male skaters have affected women's figure skating. Her idea is that these discussions affect the way girls and women are instructed and encouraged to express themselves on the ice. The fear of effeminacy in men limits versatility in the women's event for the reason of preserving the differences between men's and women's figure skating. Adams claims that figure skating has done nothing to shift mainstream representations of athletic female bodies with the obsessive significance given to "female" movements and "girly" music.

Adams offers very interesting discussions concerning the conflict between art and sport. Some male skaters, the ISU (International Skating Union) members, and media claim that athleticism is not compatible with costumes and music, but Adams wonders if a program becomes less difficult or athletic because the skater wears sequins. The criticism continues with the perception that the technical skaters (i.e. the masculine skaters) are disadvantaged in the judging process. Adams points out that even though the artistic part of skating has been seen as easier, it is actually quite the opposite, and the difficulty of a program lies in the complexity of the choreography. The remarks about the need for more athleticism in figure skating are only made to get the approval from heterosexual men outside the sport.


Adams' analysis is intriguing, and in contrast to Kestnbaum her book considers questions such as why masculinity is important and how it always has affected women. She claims, however, that no one had problems with women competing in the same events as men, even when Madge Syers won a silver medal in the world championships 1902. But if this is the case, then why were the rules changed so that women had their own event a few years later? Adams emphasizes that this is not a book about women but she does write quite a lot about women's figure skating

as well. This is perhaps inevitable, since the change in figure skating from a gentlemen's activity to a girls' sport has a lot to do with women and what is perceived as female. The emancipation of women in general probably affected the progression of figure skating, though she doesn't mention this. However, she talks about the way the trials of Oscar Wilde in 1890's affected the perception of homosexual men, and the effect the AIDS era has had on the reluctance to associate with male homosexuality. The historical references are very well integrated.

But Adams is not particularly thorough in her explanation of her analytical tools. She mentions Foucault and his theory on normalization, but that is all. She uses expressions such as 'masculine hegemony' and 'heteronormative' without referring to any theorists or explaining what she means by using those words. It is clearly a text influenced by feminist ideas about gender, but she never really gives the reader her interpretation of those ideas. It's often phrases like "scholars often talk about...", "feminist theorists refer to..." or "sociologists and historians argue..." Thus, the question is if you can call the book a piece of academic research on gender. As mentioned above, the book's main contribution is the historical material, in spite of its title. Since her research area includes gender identity, it is surprising that she doesn't at least explain what her analysis is based on.

These critical notes notwithstanding, this is a book that gives an interesting perspective on figure skating and that also criticizes the sport for not having the courage to be what it is: an alternative sport for those who want to express themselves artistically, even if that makes the sport queer.

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