

The gibson girl takes america



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The Gibson Girls were personifications of the feminine ideal in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They represented an optimistic, morally inclined, and traditional society post Victorian Era. From fashion to culture and beyond, much can be taken from the Gibson Girl drawings. These “women” reveal a tremendous amount about the social perceptions of femininity and the place of a woman in Society during the early 20’s. The Gibson Girl was the pen and ink creation of illustrator Charles Dana Gibson.

Gibson started drawing at a very young age as a way to pass the time during a period of illness in his childhood. He got recognition as an esteemed artist when he was only twelve years old, and began his career in art and illustration in his early twenties. He was quickly offered a job with Life Magazine, and within five years into his career, Gibson created the number one female icon of the early 20th century, The Gibson Girl (Kennedy). The Gibson Girl was much like the modern day barbie doll, she influenced women’s behaviors as well as their perceptions of who they were and who they should be.

According to writer Kate Chopin, by crossing societal lines and participating in activities that weren’t common of women at the time, the Gibson Girl was a true trendsetter and revolutionary. She was more advanced than the Victorian woman, and a complete transformation from the more dependent women of Europe. (Chopin) The Gibson Girl represented the idea of the “New American Woman”, which was a woman separated from the traditional ideals of their European predecessors. Females across the country emulated not only her looks but her charismatic and spunky personality as well. She quickly became an icon of modernity and a feminine ideal.

Her alluring characteristics enchanted American society for over twenty years. In order to understand what her impact was on society and why people took to her so well, we must first understand who the Gibson Girl was and what was she all about. The Gibson Girl was the true American beauty post Victorian Era. She was taller than most women in the magazines, she was curvaceous yet narrow waisted, and maintained a perfect shape. The Gibson Girl, or women trying to imitate the Gibson Girl, could often be found sporting tightly bound corsets, keeping their waists pencil thin but their bosoms and bottoms still full.

While it is not entirely proven, the Gibson Girl is said to have been the originator of the “ hourglass figure”, an ideal of beauty that still exists today. Her skin was fair, and her hair always well kept yet curly, her signature locks are frequently referred to as a “ waterfall of curls. ” Her style of beauty has been described as elegant and willowy. (Lively Roots) Her style and look had an “ air” of upperclass aristocracy, but more down to earth and not snobbish. (Chopin) Women began to look and dress like the Gibson Girl, imitating her hair, poise, and style.

In an article on AmericanHeritage. com, writer Agnes Rogers reveals that “ Girls all over the country wanted to be as nearly like her as possible. They dressed like her; they wore their hair like her. ” Women’s clothing companies even capitalized on the Gibson Girl look, as Rogers explains, “ Manufacturers labeled “ Gibson Girl” all manner of women’s clothes– shirtwaists with the “ Gibson pleats” running from shoulder to waist in a tapering line, skirts, hats, riding stocks, etc. ” The Gibson Girl look was something every woman wished to attain.

Her physical attributes were not the only things that build her reputation for being “ every woman’s ideal and every mans dream” (Chopin). Her vibrant yet mysterious personality is what really made the Gibson Girl who she was. The Gibson girl was always laid back yet fashionable, able to maintain well kept hair whilst performing in physical acts such as riding a bike or playing tennis. (Kennedy) This is revealed further when Rogers explains that “ when she went into the water at the seashore, she wore a decorous bathing suit ... But she wore no bathing cap.

Either she never got her head under water, or Gibson couldn’t bear to hide her crowning glory. ” This was a major reason for criticism, many people believed that the effortless beauty that the Gibson Girl embodied was a far stretch from the realities of women at the time, giving girls and women a goal that would be practically impossible to reach. She is known for having a somewhat mischievous and curious persona, which is an aspect of her personality that people see as reflecting the “ American Spirit” (Lively Roots). Despite her apparent mischievousness, she never strayed away from her “ ladylike manners and etiquette”.

She was more independent than women of the past, and was often personified as having attended college (Gordon). This is especially important because her attendance in college was a firm statement about Women’s “ place” in Academics during a time where this was still very controversial. While she was loved for her grace and beauty, it was also through her actions that deeper aspects of American culture were revealed. She participated in activities that were previously forbidden to women, such as playing sports, riding bikes, and playing musical instruments (Chopin).

As explained in 'The undimmed appeal of The Gibson Girl', "As early as the (eighteen) nineties we see her on the tennis court, on the golf links, on a bicycle and even driving a motor car." It is because of this that Gibson Girl is so revolutionary. She was an idol and an inspiration to many women across the nation. Through her "Women began to realize their value and potential was so much greater than the limitations society placed on them" (Chopin) It is also through her that "women began to ascertain an awareness of their power over men".

She was a master at courtship and the game of love, she is often depicted as somewhat of a "tease", which gives the impression that she is in control of the man's emotions. Despite her playfulness when it comes to "the game of love", The Gibson Girl is moral, modest, and a woman who marries for love. Interestingly enough, while the Gibson Girl is famous for her independence and her "equality" in relation to men, she understood her position in society and rarely questioned it; she always remained ladylike and polite.

In a book titled, *Unruly tongue: identity and voice in American women's writing, 1850-1930*, writer Martha J. Cutter describes the Gibson Girl as "pure, noble, and passive- defensible but not a defender... although she may have the voice of the New Woman, she does not use it to break with a historically constrained vision of women's speech". This idea is supported once more by Martha Kennedy as she reveals that the Gibson Girl never "seriously challenged the patriarchal tradition...".

Even Charles Gibson himself made this evident, as the title of one of his Gibson Girl Illustrations, shown below, is "Not Worrying About Her Rights".

The Gibson Girl believes and supports her rights, but does nothing to defend them. This piece of the Gibson personality gives insight to the apparent ideal female personality of the time; beautiful, intelligent, and informed... but undeniably passive and un-feminist.

As stated in an article on associatedcontent. com, The Gibson Girl “ would never be as bold as to be a part of the suffrage movement... She was “ progressive in that she was allowed to think, but she was not allowed to act upon her thoughts or lobby for social change” (Roach). There is more to the style of the Gibson Girl than just fashion and looks, it reveals a lot about her utility as well. Because her clothing is so unfit to actually do anything, and her hair so prim and proper at all times, it can easily be concluded that she was not a woman of the working world. She might have been rich, intelligent, and independent... but she didn’t work for what she had.

What a person wears is a direct reflection of what they want other people to know about them and the Gibson Girl evidently wants people to know that she is beautiful, fashionable, and American. The Gibson Girl looks pampered and well taken care of, something that not many women in America could actually make claim to at this point in History. The Gibson Girl is a superstar and a revolutionary in that her image was plastered across many popular publications and other forms of media across the nation. She was tall, beautiful, curvaceous, independent, intelligent and informed... whilst still being submissive to the patriarchy.

Through her, the ideal of femininity during the early 1920s is portrayed. The Gibson Girl represents a hopeful, moral, and optimistic time in America

before WWI. She was innocent, modest, and an advocate for “ the game of love”. It is because of this that she was unable to maintain her identity post WWI. The death of the Gibson Girl came with the creation of Flappers. The curvy, hourglass shape was no longer the ideal as a thin, boyish body with long legs was now the ideal. After WWI, soldiers came home with different desires than before.

Crime and moral decline became more prevalent, along with the prohibition... and men wanted a “ looser” woman. They wanted someone who would drink, smoke, and listen to jazz with them. They also wanted a woman who would hopefully get into bed with them without any courtship involved, and the Gibson Girl was just not that woman. The Gibson Girl could not compete with the sexual allure of the Flappers, and with the end of the war, they “ died out”. However, many lessons can be taken from the Gibson Girls and much can be learned about the early 1900’s through their actions, dress, and personality.