

A MAN-MADE ICON

The Gibson Girl



Figure 2. Jeanne Paquin, French, Paquin Paris ball gown, 1893–96. Gift of Hugh Hitchcock, Class of 1944, through Henry B. Williams; 161.21.18818.

Charles Dana Gibson (1867–1944) was born in Massachusetts to a family of modest means and introduced to illustration at an early age by his father. In 1886, after attending the Art Students League in Manhattan, Gibson sold his first drawing to John Ames Mitchell, the editor of *Life* magazine, for four dollars. With a *Life* contract in hand, Gibson then traveled to England and France, where he became inspired by artist George du Maurier, who was renowned for his drawings of society women. Returning to America, Gibson published the first Gibson Girl in *Life* in 1890, and she would be his ticket to fame and fortune. Gibson’s social

At the turn of the century, the principle vehicle used to represent potential beauty or fashion icons was the quickly reproduced and highly detailed pen-and-ink drawing. Featured in popular magazines and books, these appealing images influenced the American public in the same way that television, movies, and glossy magazines do today. Pictures of the “Gibson Girl,” crafted by Charles Dana Gibson, were the most popular and recognized icons of this period. The Gibson Girl personified the lifestyle and appearance of those socialites then establishing the trends of fashion and popular entertainments, and her independent spirit, obvious in Gibson’s renderings, appealed to women then yearning for change. In short, women wanted to be her and men wanted to marry her—she was the first iconic “American Girl.”

status rose dramatically as well upon his marriage, five years later, to famous Virginia socialite Irene Langhorne, whom many scholars view as one of his early models for the Gibson Girl. Gibson’s work was soon appearing in a host of other major New York publications, including *Harper’s Weekly*, *Collier’s*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *Scribner’s*, and his rates had much improved—for instance, in 1903 *Collier’s* paid him \$1,000 per illustration, (Kitch 5). By the early 1900s the Gibson Girl was gracing a wide array of consumer products, from pillows to tea sets. Easily recognizable by her face alone, her idealized image had become a mass-culture phenomenon.

The Gibson Girl presented viewers—especially female viewers—with new ideals of both physical beauty and social prowess. She was tall, with a small waist, full bust, graceful neck, and beautiful, upturned face whose haughtiness was captivating. It did not seem to matter that her perfection was unnatural. She soon became the world’s first stereotype of the American woman through her pointed display of what was perceived to be a uniquely American liveliness and taste for adventure. Her particular brand of femininity suited the new century—this attractive, spirited, and independent woman could engage in sporting activities out of the home and represent the perfect partner within it as well. She was the ideal compromise between the traditional housewife of the nineteenth century and the increasingly independent “new woman.”

During the period between 1890 and 1910, America’s booming economic growth gave women greater purchasing power, and they became the most voracious print consumers in the nation. Magazines like those featuring the Gibson Girl changed their content to attract this new audience, even courting the early “feminist” then pushing against commonly accepted gender roles in the heretofore male-dominated society. However, it was a rocky road to liberation that included even the condemnation of the president; Theodore Roosevelt voiced his concerns about “race suicide” in 1903 in response to the rising divorce rates and declining birth rates among white, native-born American women (Patterson 38–39). Whatever her value as an empowering role model, the Gibson Girl also acted to partially relieve those concerns as a white woman who endorsed marriage and dedicated the majority of her energy to enticing a husband through her appearance. Historian Martha H. Patterson states: “The Gibson girl certainly attempted to put to rest any fears of the growing masculinities of the American woman; even though her stature connoted formidability, her large bust, cinched waist, and voluminous hair would come to define feminine allure and fecundity” (Patterson 38).

Frequently, then, the artist presented his Gibson Girl as the magnetic center of male attention, easily overshadowing the other women surrounding her. To reproduce her success, many women sought to imitate

her clothes. Whereas mid- to late-nineteenth-century women’s fashion favored large bustles and wide hoopskirts, the Gibson Girl quickly came to represent modern tastes, including more casual clothing such as a tailored shirtwaist and A-line skirt. Yet she also retained the ability to charm suitors by dressing in elegant attire; the ball gown (fig. 2) designed by Jeanne Paquin in Paris around 1893–96 is similar to those worn in Charles Dana Gibson’s “A Little Story: By a Sleeve,” an illustration in his 1896 book *Pictures of People*, as well as Gibson’s 1895 book poster “Two Women and a Fool” (fig. 1). Both of these images depict an interaction between a woman and a man in which the Gibson Girl is the object of male fascination, and readers would have recognized the message that one’s physical appeal was of principal importance in securing a husband. Even her sporting dress balanced functionality and style; on the cover of *Scribner’s* in June 1896 (fig. 3), she rides a bicycle in bloomers, thereby displaying both independence and mobility. Despite the masculine legwear, she maintains her beautiful appearance and corseted waist, a graceful icon of femininity.

The Gibson Girl saw the end of her heyday during the late teens, when the interests of the American public took a turn after World War I. In the 1920s, the “flapper” became hugely popular—her boyish figure, bobbed hair, and short tube dresses that lacked a waist presented a decidedly different image from that of the Gibson Girl. Nevertheless, she represented a natural expansion of the Gibson Girl’s energy and spirit, and every icon since has had to reckon with the same early principles of the iconic American female.

Sarah Peterson ’10, The Levinson Intern

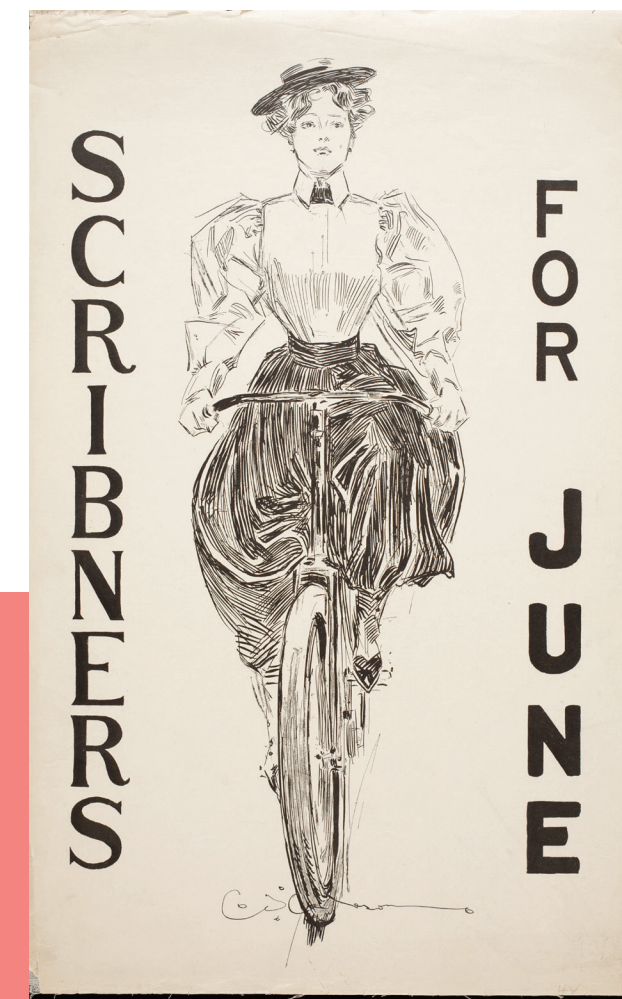


Figure 3. Scribner’s for June, 1896, poster; PS.972.164.

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CHECKLIST

Charles Dana Gibson, American, 1867–1944
“A Little Story: By a Sleeve”
Illustration in *Pictures of People*
(New York: R. H. Russell and Son; London: J. Lane, 1896)
Rauner Special Collections Library; G357pi

Two Women and a Fool, 1895, poster
Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College; PS.972.163

Scribner’s for June, 1896, poster
Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College; PS.972.164

Jeanne Paquin, French, 1869–1936
Paquin Paris ball gown, 1893–96
Skirt: cream colored silk satin, bodice: ecru lace over silk satin, trimming:
apple green silk velvet, pink silk flowers, and rhinestone buckles
Gift of Hugh Hitchcock, Class of 1944, through Henry B. Williams;
161.21.18818

Maker unknown
Brussels lace fan, about 1890
Brussels lace and mother of pearl
Donated by Charles Griffith Class of 1945; 162.10.18992

Artist unknown, American
Golf for Women, about 1904, poster
PS.967.259

A Space for Dialogue, founded with support from the Class of 1948,
is made possible with generous endowments from the Class of 1967,
Bonnie and Richard Reiss Jr. ’66, and Pamela J. Joyner ’79.

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A SPACE *for* DIALOGUE

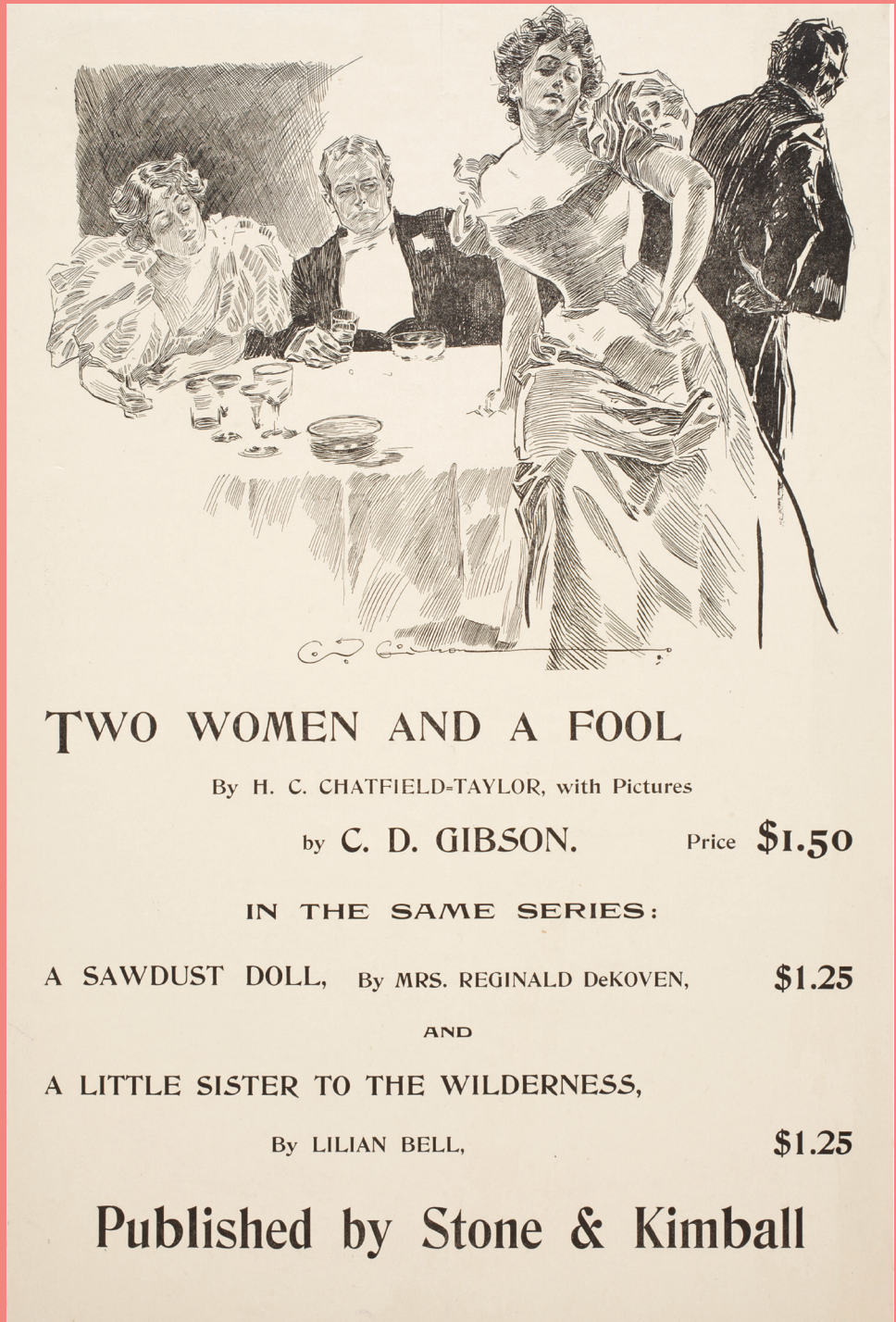


Figure 1. Charles Dana Gibson, “Two Women and a Fool,” poster, 1896.
Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College; PS.972.163