

Faces Of Feminism:
The Gibson Girl and the Held Flapper In Early Twentieth-Century Mass Culture

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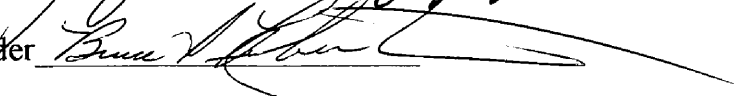



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Surveying the Gibson Girl and the Flapper In the Early Twentieth-Century Women's Movement

Although women like Margaret Fuller and Susan B. Anthony worked to improve the quality of life for American women throughout the 1800's, the cries of the modern feminist movement were only beginning to be heard on the eve of the twentieth century. Suffragettes began to grow more militant in urban centers like New York and Chicago in the 1880's and 1890's, but the majority of the American people initially became acquainted with the women's movement through printed materials. Magazines, which offered low subscription rates to all social classes at the turn of the century, carried the message of the movement to the most remote corners of the country. Due to their widespread distribution, these magazines became the primary conveyor of the new American feminine ideal.¹ Illustrators and advertisers defined beauty and marketed it to a mass audience of young American girls who were eager to emulate the fashionable women in their favorite magazines. Between 1895 and 1925, two particular magazine illustrators sought to redefine the notion of womanhood in America: Charles Dana Gibson and John Held, Jr. Gibson's famous "Gibson Girl" graced the covers of American magazines from the early 1890's until around 1913, when Held's famous "flapper" took her place as the reigning beauty. Although historians today view these two feminine ideals as polar opposites, research indicates that both images reflect the major concerns of the women's movement in the early twentieth century. Some common "feminist"² topics that emerge in the illustrations of Gibson and Held include dress reform, women in the workplace, education, marriage, sexuality, manners, recreation and political power.

Dress reform had been a focus of American feminists ever since Elizabeth Cady

Stanton and Amelia Bloomer had introduced the controversial "bloomer" costume in Seneca Falls in 1851. According to women's historian Lois W. Banner, the bloomer costume was a dismal failure because popular magazines like *Godey's Lady's Book* condemned it as a "typically radical product of western New Yorkers."³ The negativity surrounding the bloomer costume pushed the dress reform movement to the bottom of the feminist agenda, yet a renewed interest in women's fashion would surface between 1895 and 1925. Fashion historian Valerie Steele has attributed the revival of dress reform to "women's expanding social and economic opportunities during the second half of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries."⁴ Gibson and Held both responded to the call for women's dress reform with their individual interpretations of the American feminine ideal. Gibson's illustration entitled *Thirty Years of Progress* survives as a visual representation of the transformations that occurred in women's fashion over a span of thirty years.⁵ The illustration is a direct contrast of the long and flowing Gibson style with the short and sleek look of the Held flapper. While both images were viewed as models of dress reform in their own day, their significance as feminist icons has been debated by modern historians. The Gibson girl, who appears stiff and formal in comparison to the flapper, is often a subject of criticism. Although Banner states that "the blouses and skirts she wore for casual wear seemed in line with the goals of dress reformers, and the many scenes in which she was pictured at sports seemed to validate the aims of the advocates of exercise and athletics,"⁶ she goes on to say that the Gibson girl was "only partly a reform figure."⁷ Banner's analysis seems kind in comparison to the interpretations of critics like Kenneth A. Yellis, who altogether denies the feminist influence of the Gibson girl. Yellis writes:

The Gibson girl was the manikin for the fashionable clothing which testified to her husband's ability to free her from work and on whom he hung the symbols of his prosperity. She was in this sense responsible for the 'good name' of her household, living testimony to its economic as well as its moral respectability; this was her job. For the Gibson girl her grooming itself was her profession; to be her husband's 'prized possession' was her career.⁸

This modern association of the Gibson girl with the "household" and "moral respectability" aligns her more with the traditional nineteenth-century Cult of True Womanhood that, according to Barbara Welter, aimed to keep American women "hostage in the home."⁹ Her restrictive clothing has permanently marred her image as a feminist icon. The flapper, on the other hand, has been widely perceived as the historical emblem of women's dress reform, the very "antithesis of that Edwardian ideal of femininity"¹⁰ that had been popularized in the Gibson drawings. Frederick Lewis Allen's analysis of Held's flapper image best illustrates this point. Allen writes: "these changes in fashion--the short skirt, the boyish form, the straight, long-waisted dresses, the frank use of paint--were signs of a *real* change in the American feminine ideal."¹¹ Even Banner, who maintains that the Gibson girl was a leader in the women's movement, writes: "the appearance of the flapper marked the fruition of a sensual revolution among American women that had begun in the 1890's and that the Gibson girl image could only partly accommodate."¹²

While feminists and historians continue to identify the flapper as the catalyst in the dress reform movement, I propose that the Gibson girl played an equally - if not more -

significant role in bringing about the revolution in women's fashion. The attire of the Gibson girl certainly appears old-fashioned by today's standards, but as Langhorne Gibson Jr. has noted, the heroine in Gibson's drawings "popularized the interchangeable, economical shirtwaist and separate skirt"¹³ that would become the comfortable and affordable costume of the working-class girl at the turn of the century. While the change was subtle, it was accepted by both men and women alike. Though popular in retrospect, I intend to argue that the flapper costume (like the bloomer costume of the 1850's) made a more unfavorable impression on American society and was not widely embraced in its own time. Feminists may continue to salute the flapper as the first truly modern woman in the American mass media, yet they have often overlooked the fact that her appearance sparked the growth of the "girlie magazine" industry that gave rise to pornography in the following decades.¹⁴ I also propose that the flapper's supposedly-liberated appearance enslaved women to the beauty/cosmetics industry that would later pose additional problems for American women.

A second feminist topic that emerges in the drawings of Gibson and Held is women in the workplace. In their individual attempts to provide the nation with a new vision of American womanhood, neither artist could ignore the growing presence of females in the work force at the turn of the century.¹⁵ Each of them, however, created a different picture of the emerging career girl. Gibson's heroines did pursue work beyond the domestic realm, yet historians and feminists have noted that her professional endeavors were not as revolutionary or as liberating as those of the flapper. The Gibson girl was often restricted to the more gender-appropriate fields of nursing and secretarial work, while the flapper, according to film historian Patricia Erens, could gain employment as "a

manicurist, usherette, waitress, cigarette girl, taxi driver, swimming instructor, [or] salesgirl."¹⁶ Banner has suggested that Gibson's "contemporaries realized that Gibson was providing them with a positive model of the new woman, a kind of woman who had previously emerged among the working classes and the middle classes,"¹⁷ yet the general consensus among critics today is that the Gibson girl fit too snugly inside of the domestic boundaries of the late nineteenth-century. Her pursuits were a true reflection of what historian Sheila M. Rothman has defined as the "virtuous womanhood" that "dominated [women's] lives, closing off opportunities, fostering a sex-stereotyping of jobs, and ruling out options."¹⁸

While Held's illustrations seem to portray women as being more actively involved in the career world, I suggest that such images were born out of Gibson's more subtle presentation of this feminist topic. Indeed, as Rothman suggests, Gibson's working girls were wholly defined by the sex-stereotypes that dominated the world of work at the turn of the century, and, unlike the flapper, the Gibson heroine herself did not openly rebel against such stereotyping. Still, I maintain that Gibson contributed largely to the growing lack of enthusiasm that his generation had for the traditional cult of domesticity that had kept women hidden in the home throughout the nineteenth century. The wealthy, upper-crust domesticates featured in Gibson's drawings rarely offered proof that a woman gained "happiness and power" through her "solemn responsibility ... to uphold the pillars of the temple with her frail white hand."¹⁹ In fact, an examination of these drawings reveals that the Gibson domesticate, however financially secure, often exudes an air of boredom. While it has been widely acknowledged by both admirers and critics of Gibson that neither the illustrator nor his wife were actually committed to the women's movement of the early

twentieth century, historian Martha Banta has suggested the following:

Charles Dana Gibson knew what might happen to the woman limited to love and marriage. She might become "one more victim," or she might be the prey of a scheming mother abetted by a blind clergyman. Gibson believed that young American women could protect society's virtues only if these women were protected from society's vices. He did not know the way out of this impasse. Many of his illustrations give direct evidence that he was aware of the conditions that undercut his hope that the social system could save its own best saviors. Still and all, as Gibson imagined the American Girl, the Girl's dream was to be included -- to stay inside that magic circle where men are men and women are women waiting to be wanted. For the Gibson Girl's nightmare is being ignored, thereby left out.²⁰

Gibson himself may have believed in this less-than-feministic utopia in which women fit happily and comfortably into the cult of domesticity, but his illustrations reflect the reality that the home was no longer a fulfilling environment for the American woman at the turn of the century. A woman confined to the home was, as Banta stated, "left out." I propose that it was the Gibson girl's rejection of nineteenth-century True Womanhood that ultimately opened the doors of the career world to Held's flapper in the decade of the 1920's.

Closely tied to the topic of work is the topic of education. This topic is also

apparent in the Gibson and Held drawings. Critics of Gibson's work have been kinder in their analysis of Gibson's heroine as a leading icon of the women's educational movement in the Progressive era. This may have to do with the fact that the popularity of the Gibson girl coincided with the rise of several prestigious women's colleges, including Vassar and Wellesley. In fact, historian Lynn Gordon of the University of Rochester has even gone so far as to say that "by the turn of the century, women could have both higher education and social approval, symbolized by the connection of college life with the Gibson Girl, an American beauty."²¹ Still, it is widely noted that the college girl represented in Gibson's illustrations was, for the most part, traveling a dead-end road. In spite of her own enthusiasm for the Gibson girl as a revolutionary figure in American women's history, Gordon concludes:

Higher education and campus experiences prepared her to do whatever men did; society permitted her few options. The disjuncture between school and society was particularly unfortunate for women whose educations during an era of reform and feminist agitation had raised their aspirations, but whose culture continued to demand domesticity.²²

By the time the flapper entered the American scene, educational opportunities for women had expanded greatly. Dorothy Brown has noted that "the surge in enrollment was extraordinary," with 198,000 more women enrolled in college than there had been enrolled at the turn of the century.²³ Still, Brown adds, these "educated women worked out ways to integrate their education with their decisions for career and home."²⁴ Although the 1920's saw a growing number of women enrolling in higher education, the flapper, unlike

the Gibson girl, was not known for her reputation as an academic.

The approaches of Gibson and Held to women's higher education is quite interesting. Through an analysis of their illustrations, I intend to show that Gibson was a more active proponent of the women's educational movement than was Held. While the doors of opportunity may have been closed to the female college graduates of the Progressive era, Gibson's scholarly heroine and her association with prestigious, Ivy-league schools did much to alter the perception of educated women in American culture. While Gordon notes that "the stigma of 'old maid' did not disappear in the late nineteenth century," she goes on to say that educated career women "commanded a certain respect, finding strength in work, political and social activism, and each other."²⁵ Interestingly enough, Gordon credits Gibson's heroine entirely with this social transformation. Held's heroine was not possessed of the same academic vigor. Although the time was right for her to flaunt her intelligence, the flapper lacked a scholarly image. Perhaps such an image would have clashed with the sexual expression achieved in its place. Just the same, I propose that the women's educational movement was hindered as much by Held's flapper as it was helped by the Gibson girl.

A fourth topic that is apparent in the Gibson and Held drawings is marriage. As historian Lynn D. Gordon has written, it is no secret among modern historians and feminists that Gibson's drawings reflect an America "whose culture continued to demand domesticity"²⁶ from young women. Interestingly enough, many of these same historians and feminists have suggested that it was Held's flapper image that eventually freed American women from the traditional burdens of marriage and domesticity. The divorce rate, which rose steadily in the 1920's, has been interpreted as a true indicator of women's

liberation and progress. Frederick Lewis Allen writes:

There was a corresponding decline in the amount of disgrace accompanying divorce. In the urban communities men and women who had been divorced were now socially accepted without question; indeed, there was often about the divorced person just enough of an air of unconventionality, just enough of a touch of scarlet, to be considered rather dashing and desirable. Many young women probably felt as did the New York girl who said, toward the end of the decade, that she was thinking of marrying Henry, although she didn't care very much for him, because even if they didn't get along she could get a divorce and "it would be much more exciting to be a divorcee than to be an old maid."²⁷

Allen's statement is highly representative of the sassy attitude and self-autonomy that Americans have come to associate with Held's flapper image. Unlike the Gibson girl who casually surrendered herself to a life of domesticity, the flapper is remembered as the assertive New Woman who would not allow herself to be enslaved by the institution of marriage.

While the 1920's woman was certainly presented with options that were scarcely imagined within the earlier society of the Gibson girl, I suggest that these options did not dismiss her from the more traditional responsibilities ascribed to her gender. It is certainly true that divorce rates skyrocketed throughout the decade²⁸, yet Dorothy Brown has carefully noted that the rebellious generation of 1920's youth still retained "a remarkable proneness to marriage."²⁹ Interestingly, the rise in divorce accompanied a steady rise in

marriage. The redefining of the marriage institution may have been responsible for getting larger numbers of women to the altar. Society had elevated young married females to the new position of "wife-companion," which, according to Sheila Rothman, simply meant that "the primary relationship in a woman's life was no longer to be with her children but with her husband."³⁰ For many historians, this notion of the "wife-companion" exists as one of the great feminist triumphs of the 1920's New Woman. One thing that is overlooked, however, is the fact that this new role created several new burdens for married women that simply did not exist in the seemingly-genteel days of the Gibson heroine. Together, the shift to romantic marriages and the socially-acceptable possibility of divorce gave married women the added responsibility of keeping the marriage (and herself) exciting and young. The introduction of several new time-saving household appliances and the more liberated views of motherhood took the emphasis away from the traditional cult of domesticity. Although the woman was still expected to be the primary caretaker of the home, she no longer gained social recognition for it. For that, she continued to push her way into the career world, even as her duties at home multiplied. In spite of the enthusiasm that modern historians and feminists continue to express for the 1920's marriage, I maintain that it offered American women a false sense of liberation.

The redefining of marriage in the 1920's gave rise to new views and beliefs about a fifth relevant topic: women's sexuality. Women's sexuality underwent significant changes in the period between 1895 and 1925, and those changes are apparent in the illustrations of Gibson and Held. To many, the individual heroines of these two artists seem to exist at opposite ends of the spectrum. Lois Banner has written that "the Gibson girl was not designed to be a sex object, as [was] the 'vamp' of the 1920's."³¹ Although

she succeeded in attracting the attention and admiration of a nation of young males, the Gibson girl's surface appearance was undeniably "chaste and maidenly."³² Held's flapper, on the other hand, openly symbolized the sexual revolution of the 1920's. Even with her boyish haircut and flat chest, the flapper was representative of a new generation of young and rebellious youth who "seemed to discover not just booze but also sex."³³ Historian James R. McGovern has associated the flapper with the chiming of "sex o' clock in America," citing her fascination with her own sexuality as a sure indicator "that the code of woman's innocence and ignorance crumbled" in the 1920's.³⁴ It is widely believed that the boyish appearance and the open sexuality of Held's flapper went hand in hand with the American woman's assertion of rights and her constant quest for gender equality. Still, at the heart of women's sexuality was a desire to please and perhaps bargain with men. Frederick Lewis Allen best summarizes the 1920's female perception of sexuality:

They wanted to be - or thought men wanted them to be - men's casual and light-hearted companions; not broad-hipped mothers of the race, but irresponsible play-mates. Youth was their pattern, but not youthful innocence: the adolescent whom they imitated was a hard-boiled adolescent, who thought not in terms of romantic love, but in terms of sex, and who made herself desirable not by that sly art which conceals art, but frankly and openly. In effect, the woman of the Post-war Decade said to man, 'You are tired and disillusioned, you do not want the cares of a family or the companionship of mature wisdom, you want exciting play, you want the thrills of sex without their fruition, and I will give them to you.' And to herself she added, 'But I will be free.'³⁵

In essence, then, the flapper viewed her sexuality as a trade-off for liberation, not as a measure of liberation in itself. Historians and feminists applaud this move, associating the sexual revolution of the 1920's with increased independence and freedom for the American woman.

In my discussion of these two diverse approaches to women's sexuality, I propose that there are misconceptions surrounding the Gibson and Held images. While the flapper remains an icon of the women's sexual revolution, McGovern mentions that "historians have not carefully investigated the possibility that the true beginnings of American 'New Freedom' in morals occurred prior to 1920."³⁶ Although McGovern made this statement in 1968, it remains a valid one today. Historians would do well to consider the impact of the Gibson girl on her own generation. Looking beyond her straight-laced exterior, some, including Banner herself, have wondered if perhaps there was indeed "a refreshing hint of health, sensuality, and rebellion"³⁷ about the Gibson heroine. Gibson's collections, including *Sketches and Cartoons* (1900) and *A Widow and Her Friends* (1901), certainly suggest that the Gibson girl had a knack for flirtation, which would not have been permissible under the social code of the old Victorian society. I intend to examine the subtle sexuality of the Gibson heroine in further detail. At the same time, I intend to prove that Held's flapper image was not as sexually liberating for women as modern historians and feminists typically make it out to be. Despite her insistence on maintaining a boyish appearance, the raised hemlines and the sexual indiscretions of the 1920's New Woman in the mass media put her at the heart of a growing pornography industry and made her a target for sexual harassment in the workplace. These remain central issues in the American feminist movement today. Very likely, they can be traced back to that heroine

of the 1920's women's movement: John Held's flapper.

The increased focus on women's sexuality in the early twentieth century led to a revolution in manners, which is a sixth topic to be explored in this study. Both Gibson and Held addressed this theme through the use of domestic humor. Through their use of such humor, traditional gender roles were reversed. Women featured in their cartoons were feminine in appearance, yet they asserted their independence and ruled with a tight fist. They contradicted the notion of nineteenth-century True Womanhood, by which a woman's worth was measured against "four cardinal virtues--piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity."³⁸ Carolyn Kitch has credited Gibson with the popularization of domestic humor at the turn of the century. She writes:

The specific motif of large women and little men emerged from the pen of America's most famous magazine illustrator as soon as the construct of a New Woman was first articulated in the popular press, during the 1890's. Charles Dana Gibson, whose work appeared in *Life* and *Collier's*, envisioned the New Woman as beautiful, upper class, and extremely haughty, someone who cowed and frightened men.³⁹

Kitch's statement is certainly validated by Gibson's original collections. Illustrations included in his *Sketches and Cartoons* and *A Widow and Her Friends* offer glimpses of modern women with modern manners. Men exist as secondary, inferior subjects in these drawings; usually, they are at the mercy of the beautifully-wicked Gibson heroine. This domestic humor was later picked up by Held, whose flapper continued to challenge the traditional demands of womanhood. According to Yellis, the flapper's manners and

behaviors "threatened not only traditional morality, but made an assault on the prerogatives of traditional masculinity as well, the final section of the modesty-chastity-morality-masculinity equation."⁴⁰ To historians and feminists alike, the flapper's reputation for drinking, smoking and promiscuity make her, not the Gibson girl, the obvious heroine of the early twentieth-century revolution in manners.

While no one can deny that the flapper played a significant role in the ultimate demise of the "virtuous woman," I propose that the social expectations for women had been redefined long before her appearance in American culture. To this point, only a handful of historians have ventured to examine James McGovern's 1968 claim that it may have been "the Progressive era, more than the 1920's, [that] represents the substantial beginnings of contemporary American civilization."⁴¹ Even fewer have considered the influence of Gibson and Held on the changing nature of women's manners between 1895 and 1925. Interestingly, Kitch has suggested that Held's style of domestic humor "used the big woman - little man motif ... in ways that mimicked the evilness of women in 1910's imagery."⁴² She concludes that Held envisioned the flapper "not as a predator, but as a silly girl who danced the night away."⁴³ I intend to explore this statement in greater detail. As Kitch herself has implied, it may be that the flapper has survived as a superficial emblem of the revolution in women's manners and morals. While the "predator" image of the Gibson girl served a mere comic purpose in turn-of-the-century American culture, it appears to have helped redefine the social and behavioral expectations of American women.

A seventh topic that emerges in an analysis of the Gibson and Held illustrations is the changing nature of women's leisure and recreation in the early years of the twentieth

century. This transformation was largely a reaction to the professional and educational opportunities that brought American women out of the home. Kathy Peiss, author of *Cheap Amusements*, has written that the "New Woman" of this period "relished personal autonomy and activity in the public arena and challenged the boundaries of domesticity and female self-sacrifice."⁴⁴ Indeed, the recreational pursuits of both the Gibson girl and the flapper indicate the expansion of women's leisure. Still, as in most cases, modern historians and feminists have measured the impact of both images differently. The Gibson girl, who asserted her independence by participating in golf, tennis, and football, is usually not recognized for her involvement in such recreational pursuits. While Banner does claim that "contemporary feminists often saw her as a prototype of the 'new woman,' " she argues that most believe "the independence of the Gibson girl did not go much beyond playing sports, wearing comfortable clothing, and looking self-reliant."⁴⁵ In fact, very few have been willing to applaud Gibson's attempts to place his heroine in the traditionally-masculine world of athletics. Banner continues:

Even when drawing the Gibson girl at sports, Gibson had difficulty rendering her as fully natural. Gibson would not draw women bicyclists in bloomers, for example, because he thought the attire unbecoming. The real Gibson prototype, wrote New York socialite and Gibson model Carisse Crosby, was her mother and aunts, who wore shirtwaist blouses to play the new sports, but who modified them to meet the restrictive demands of fashion. Moreover, in drawings depicting the Gibson girl in sports attire, her waist is often so small that

tight lacing is clearly indicated, as it is also when she invariably dons fashionable garb for evenings.⁴⁶

In contrast, the recreational endeavors of the flapper have gained the wider approval of modern feminists. According to Kenneth A. Yellis, her "modern clothing was defended as lighter, more flexible, better suited for busy, athletic women."⁴⁷ This, he continues, was a significant "change from the Gibson girl, who kept herself busy only with her need to appear decorous and reputable, and who had not engaged in active sport."⁴⁸

Such statements can be misleading. In my assessment of the Gibson girl and the Held flapper, I propose that historians and feminists have consistently discredited the Gibson heroine as a significant forerunner of the women's recreational movement. Likewise, the flapper appears to be the subject of undue praise. As Yellis suggests, her clothing may have been lighter and less restrictive than that of the Gibson girl, yet the flapper still maintained a sense of fashion-consciousness in her recreational pursuits. These pursuits, which were usually limited to the more gender-appropriate dancing and motoring, actually gave the flapper the opportunity to flaunt herself as a fashion icon. Unlike the Gibson girl, the flapper was seldom engaged in sporting activities with members of the opposite sex. Instead, she sought those social situations in which she might mingle with men, not compete with them. Peiss notes: "Public halls, picnic grounds, pleasure clubs, and street corners were social spaces in which gender relations were 'played out,' where notions of sexuality, courtship, male power, female dependency, and autonomy were expressed and legitimized."⁴⁹ I suggest that this desire to be a male companion had less of an impact on the women's recreational movement than the Gibson girl's desire to compete in the traditionally male-dominated world of athletics.

An eighth and final topic reflects perhaps the most significant development in early twentieth-century America: the political liberation of the American woman. While neither Gibson nor Held intended that their drawings be used as propaganda pieces in the women's suffrage movement, both artists' representations of the New Woman had a profound impact on the national perception of femininity. Although Gibson's biographer, Fairfax Downey, has noted that Gibson himself "disliked the violent and vandalistic activities of the early suffragettes and owned misgivings as to the coarsening effect of politics on femininity,"⁵⁰ the artist's famous heroine was often pictured in the midst of the political arena. Still, the extent of her involvement is historically overshadowed by the more realistic political limitations that women faced at the height of Gibson's popularity. The problem of political inequality appeared to be resolved with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. Because this achievement came during the reign of Held's flapper, she is often viewed by historians and feminists as the more politically-liberated of the two ideals. As the widely-recognized heroine of a young generation of female voters, the flapper appears to have single-handedly contradicted the political cause of the outdated Gibson girl who, according to Banner, "was not, and was not meant to be, a radical figure - either in politics or in personal style."⁵¹

This study will aim to uncover the political significance of both the Gibson girl and the Held flapper. While the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment was truly a milestone in the history of American women, I propose that it negatively impacted their representation in the mass media. No where is this more apparent than in the drawings of Gibson and Held. Although Frederick Lewis Allen acknowledges that the triumph of women's suffrage "consolidated woman's position as man's equal,"⁵² he claims that it

also had a devastating effect on the American female:

She won the suffrage in 1920. She seemed, it is true, to be very little interested in it once she had it; she voted, but mostly as the unregenerate men about her did, despite the efforts of women's clubs and the League of Women Voters to awaken her to womanhood's civic opportunity; feminine candidates for office were few, and some of them - such as Governor Ma Ferguson of Texas - scarcely seemed to represent the starry-eyed spiritual influence which, it had been promised, would presently ennoble public life. Few of the younger women could rouse themselves to even a passing interest in politics: to them it was a sordid and futile business, without flavor and without hope.⁵³

The Held flapper appears to illustrate the dying enthusiasm for politics among women in the 1920's.⁵⁴ Unlike the Gibson girl, who put herself in direct competition with males both on the playing field and in the political arena, the Held flapper was determined to become the flashy and flirty comrade of American men. In retrospect, her presence in the media seems to have been something of a death blow to the ardent feminists who had aimed to increase women's involvement in political affairs. I propose that the appeal of the Gibson suffragette and ambassador was snuffed out by the Held flapper, who, interestingly enough, was more concerned with fashion and cosmetics than running for office.

The eight topics described in this survey -- dress reform, career opportunity, education, marriage, sexuality, manners, recreation and power -- are essential to understanding the transformation of the American feminine ideal between 1895 and 1925.

The changes that occurred in each of these areas were sparked by several national events. The suffrage movement, the Columbian Exposition of 1893, the advertising revolution, and the First World War each contributed to the evolution of American womanhood in unique ways. These events, and their role in the shaping of the New Woman, will also be discussed in this study. Still, I maintain that the best expressions of the feminine experience during these years are the illustrations of Charles Dana Gibson and John Held Jr. Their unique, mass-produced versions of the New Woman have existed as powerful mediums, but it is important to reassess the influence of these images and their impact on American culture. Through this analysis, some very key questions emerge: How did the popular images of the Gibson girl and the Held flapper promote the cause of the women's movement in the early years of twentieth century? How did they hinder it? Was the subtle rebellion of the Gibson girl more influential, in retrospect, than the open rebellion of the flapper? How did each image blend the traditional Cult of True Womanhood with a more liberated and acceptable view of femininity? Also, was the supposed liberation of either the Gibson girl or the flapper a potential threat to the representation of American women in mass culture? In my exploration of these questions, I hope to offer a unique statement on the role of these two feminine ideals in early twentieth-century mass culture. Indeed, it may be that modern feminists and historians have underestimated the significance of the Gibson girl to the same degree that they have overestimated the significance of the flapper in the history of the American women's movement.

Notes

1. The need for a new feminine ideal during this period can be attributed to several factors. Some might say that the "New Woman" of the period emerged in response to the waning enthusiasm for the Victorian model that prevailed earlier in the nineteenth century. Others believe that the new feminine iconology was a product of the advertising and marketing revolutions, which were highly dependent on such feminine models to promote the sale of beauty and health products. It might also be argued that feminine images were used to reflect the changing status of women in American society.

2. Although the term "feminism" has a broad definition, it is not being used in a modern political or legal sense here. Rather, it is used in reference to a more aesthetic approach to femininity that existed in early twentieth-century mass media. This work will examine the visual component of the women's movement in the period between 1890-1925, which may not have been "feminist" in the sense that it alone changed the political status of women, but certainly challenged the more traditional notions of womanhood that existed under the nineteenth-century Cult of Domesticity. The "feminists" referred to in this study (i.e. Edith Wharton, Irene Langhorne Gibson) may not have endorsed suffrage or been active proponents of the women's liberation movement as it existed during these years, yet their unique, artistic contributions might, in retrospect, be considered beneficial to the cause.

3. Lois W. Banner, American Beauty (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), 95.

4. Valerie Steele, Fashion and Eroticism: Ideals of Feminine Beauty from the Victorian era to the Jazz Age (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 96.

5. Langhorne Gibson, Jr., The Gibson Girl: Portrait of a Southern Belle (Richmond: The Commodore Press, 1997), 92-93.

6. Banner, 156.

7. Ibid.

8. Kenneth A. Yellis, "Prosperity's Child: Some Thoughts on the Flapper," American Quarterly 21 (Spring 1969), 52-53.

9. Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," American Quarterly 18 (1966), 151.

10. Shelley Armitage, John Held Jr: Illustrator of the Jazz Age (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1987), 65.

11. Frederick Lewis Allen, Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920's, First Perennial Classics edition (New York: Harper Collins, Inc., 2000), 93.

12. Banner, 166.
13. Gibson, 129.
14. Joanne Meyerowitz, "Women, Cheesecake, and Borderline Material: Responses to Girlie Pictures in the Mid-Twentieth Century US," Journal of Women's History 8 (2001), 4.
15. see page 4 of Gibson chapter.
16. Carolyn Kitch, "Destructive Women and Little Men: Masculinity, the New Woman, and Power in 1910's Popular Media," Journal of Magazine & New Media Research (Fall 2000), 9.
17. Banner, 165.
18. Sheila M. Rothman, Woman's Proper Place: A History of Changing Ideals and Practices, 1870 to the present (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1978), 14.
19. Welter, 152.
20. Martha Banta, Imaging American Women: Idea and Ideals In Cultural History (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 261.
21. Lynn D. Gordon, "The Gibson Girl Goes to College: Popular Culture and Women's Higher Education in the Progressive era, 1890-1920," American Quarterly 39 (Summer 1987), 211.
22. *Ibid.*, 226.
23. Dorothy M. Brown, Setting a Course: American Women in the 1920's (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987), 133.
24. *Ibid.*, 163.
25. Gordon, 223.
26. *Ibid.*, 226.
27. Allen, 100.
28. see page 12 of Held chapter.
29. Brown, 102.
30. Rothman, 177.

31. Lois W. Banner, Women In Modern America: A Brief History (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1974), 20.

32. Ibid, 22.

33. Dorothy and John Tarrant, "It was the Jazz Age and John Held Jr. drew it and lived it," Smithsonian 17 (September 1986), 98.

34. James R. McGovern, "The American Woman's Pre-World War I Freedom in Manners and Morals," Journal of American History 55 (September 1968), 316-317.

35. Allen, 94.

36. McGovern, 317.

37. Banner, Women In Modern America, 22.

38. Welter, 152.

39. Kitch, 4.

40. Yellis, 46.

41. McGovern, 333.

42. Kitch, 10.

43. Ibid.

44. Kathy L. Peiss, Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 185.

45. Banner, American Beauty, 156-157.

46. Ibid.

47. Yellis, 47.

48. Ibid.

49. Peiss, 4.

50. Fairfax Downey, Portrait of an Era, as drawn by Charles Dana Gibson (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936), 265.

51. Banner, American Beauty, 169.

52. Allen, 83.

53. *Ibid.*

54. According to Gordon, younger women in the 1920's refrained from political involvement and did not actively pursue liberation in a legal sense. She notes (pp.226): "In the early 1920's attacks on unmarried women, especially college-educated social reformers, combined with Americans' growing political conservatism, became particularly vicious."

Chapter One:
Ladies Remembered: The Visualization of American Womanhood, 1890-1925

"... Remember the ladies, and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors."

--Abigail Adams to her husband John,
March 1776

When Abigail Adams, future first lady, gently suggested to her husband in Philadelphia that the new government would do well to "remember the ladies," she was speaking on behalf of a nation of women who occupied an important, yet invisible position in American society. These women had been ready and willing to take up the cause of democracy alongside their husbands, and their contributions to the war effort helped to bring about an American victory in the colonies. Still, as Abigail herself may have feared, the men in power restricted the role of women in the new government. As a reward for their commitment to the revolutionary cause, women inherited what was to become the backbone of American society : the home. The torch of opposition would be passed from Abigail Adams in the late eighteenth century to more ardent feminists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony and Lucretia Mott in the nineteenth century, but as these women would come to understand, the road to equality presented obstacles of an immense size. In spite of their efforts at Seneca Falls in 1848, the women's movement simply failed to attract the interest and support of a nation that was more concerned with issues of slavery and states' rights. America had indeed forgotten its ladies. Still, women's activists and reformers pressed forward, and an interesting phenomenon occurred at the close of the nineteenth century: women suddenly became a highly visible component of

American culture. Between 1890 and 1925, American women emerged from the boundaries of the home and captured the national spotlight. How, after more than a century of domestic confinement, were women able to move to the forefront of the American scene? This amazing transformation occurred as a direct result of six specific events that transpired over the course of three decades: The Columbian Exposition of 1893, the rise of the advertising and magazine industries, the new visibility of the suffrage movement through art and parades, the First World War, and the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment.

When thousands of Americans met at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 to celebrate their heritage and view the fruits of their national labor, few could have realized the extent to which the occasion would impact the future of American womanhood. In the earliest stages of planning and development, the men behind the organization of this great event were concerned only with the involvement of radical feminist groups and organizations. Historian Jeanne Madeline Weimann writes: "Privately these influential citizens had already agreed that 'those suffrage women should have nothing to do with the World's Fair.'"¹ They feared that the very presence of these vocal suffragettes would put a damper on the celebration of American progress, and they looked to the example of the Philadelphia Centennial Celebration of 1876 to justify their exclusion. Although Elizabeth Duane Gillespie, the great-granddaughter of Benjamin Franklin, had led some of the nation's leading suffragettes in a national campaign to raise money for a women's exhibit at the Centennial, women's historian Catherine Clinton reveals that "their jubilation was short-lived when the Centennial Commission informed them that the space intended for the women's exhibits had been allocated instead to

foreign countries."² The women behind this campaign eventually found a new site for their exhibit, but, as Clinton notes, "they were cheated by their male co-workers, rewarded with exclusion and marginal recognition."³ Still, these women had learned a valuable lesson. Two decades later, they went into the Columbian Exposition with little tolerance for the kind of gender discrimination that they had experienced at the Centennial. In spite of continued male efforts to keep the suffragettes out of the event, Weimann notes: "It was these 'New Women' who were to demand representation at Chicago's fair."⁴ Through their perseverance and dedication, they transformed the Columbian Exposition of 1893 into a turning point for American women.

Suffragettes had been campaigning and giving speeches in support of women's rights well before 1893, but the Columbian Exposition was important because it offered them a chance to dust off the image of the domesticated female and put a "New Woman" on display before the entire nation. It was to be their greatest challenge up until that point, and the women involved embraced the opportunity. Weimann describes their chief concern:

Those who had seen the exhibits at the Centennial Woman's Pavilion, or at Julia Ward Howe's Woman's Department at the New Orleans World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial in 1884, knew that the work of women could appear to be trivial, to say the least. Women's labor on farms and in factories was important, but it could rarely be separated from men's work; if it were not somehow separated, it would not be noticed.⁵

In response to this dilemma, the female delegates came up with a proposal for the erection of a woman's building that would showcase the achievements of women in North

America since the arrival of Christopher Columbus. It was a brilliant plan, put into effect immediately. The Woman's Building, which officially opened on May 1, 1893, invited fair guests into the hidden domestic sphere that had been inhabited by women for four centuries. When the fair closed later in the year, the delegates had succeeded in their mission. The nation had finally taken some notice of the female contribution to America's celebrated progress.

While the Columbian Exposition served to familiarize the average American with the growing women's movement, it also inducted the nation into an exciting and glitzy new era of advertising. The Advertising Revolution, as it would come to be known, was another significant turn-of-the-century transformation that brought women to the center of the American cultural scene. In his discussion of the trends that occurred in consumerism and advertising between the years 1876 and 1915, historian Thomas J. Schlereth notes:

Briefly put, more people (middle class and working class) had more money and more time to purchase more goods, mass-produced more cheaply and advertised more widely. Annual earnings per working person rose in the period and the work week declined -- for factory workers, from approximately sixty-six hours in 1850 to sixty by 1890, and then to fifty-five in 1914. Simultaneously, the sheer variety and amount of goods increased.⁶

Those who attended the Columbian Exposition witnessed this increase in goods and services firsthand. Schlereth adds that, among other things, "Chicago in 1893 also introduced Americans to Cream of Wheat cereal, Aunt Jemima pancake mix, Postum,

Juicy Fruit gum, Shredded Wheat, and Pabst Blue Ribbon (the fair's award-winning beer)."⁷ Advertisers of products such as these were looking for clever marketing schemes to promote the sale of their goods. For many, the answer was simple. They need only to look to the American woman, whose reign over the domestic sphere elevated her to the role of the nation's ideal consumer.

The presence of females in advertising had an undeniable impact on the women's movement of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. While the Columbian Exposition had turned heads toward the suffrage cause, the growing advertising industry was able to reach people on an even grander scale. Certainly, the techniques employed by the industry forever altered the national perception of womanhood. Women's historian Kathy L. Peiss suggests that "the self-conscious identification of women with consumerism after 1890 was distinctive, linked to the growing sense that consumption involved not only the purchase of goods but an entire way of life."⁸ The colorful posters and the ever-popular trading cards distributed by leading advertisers put a face on the American woman and recognized the significance of her purchasing power to the well-being of the national economy. Marketing researchers Michael F. Jacobsen and Laurie Anne Mazur have noted the long-term success of this advertising formula: "Women's faces and bodies adorned Coca-Cola calendars back in the 1890's and have been employed to sell virtually everything since."⁹ The use of women as marketing tools has caused a great deal of controversy since it was employed, of course, but one thing remains true: the Advertising Revolution brought the American woman out from behind closed doors and placed her in the very midst of a growing mass culture.¹⁰ Consequently, the nation was introduced to the concept of the mass-produced feminine ideal.

Although the advertising revolution increased the visibility of women in American culture, it must be noted that it created a very narrow and limited vision of womanhood. Who was the fresh, new creature that had emerged from sitting-rooms and parlors all across America? Not surprisingly, she originally embodied the four cardinal virtues that Barbara Welter has associated with traditional nineteenth-century femininity: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.¹¹ In addition to these attributes, a physical standard also existed. The "perfect" American woman was, of course, young and attractive, and it was not long before these qualities overtook the traditional character traits in the world of advertising. The media's new feminine ideal was also lily-white. This is not to say that women of color did not appear in advertisements of the period. The role of minority women in this cultural development has been thoroughly investigated by historian Marilyn Maness Mehaffy, who suggests that "in the imagery of highly popular late nineteenth-century illustrated advertising cards, African-American women and girls figure prominently in the construction of an ideal white female consumer."¹² Her work offers evidence of minority women being used to bolster white women and reaffirm their position of consumer superiority. One particular trading card for Clark's O.N.T. thread (see figure 1) contrasts a middle-class white owner of a new sewing machine with a Southern black woman picking cotton in a field. While the card, printed around 1880, presents a modernized view of the white woman as a consumer, it maintains the pre-Civil War perception of the black woman. Another advertisement (see figure 2), produced closer to the turn of the century, reveals the social consequences of allowing black women to occupy the same position as their white sisters. In this series of four trading cards, a genteel white man seeks to capture the attention of an "ideal" woman sitting on a bench.

The woman, who has her back to him in the first three cards, finally turns and reveals the blackness of her skin. The gentleman, properly horrified, turns his eyes toward heaven in shock and disbelief. The caption reads: "Damnation." Certainly, these advertising techniques served as a major hindrance to African-American women in an era when their white counterparts appeared to be gaining ground. The cultural impact of late-nineteenth-century trading cards must not be underestimated. Mehaffy concludes: "Small enough to fit into a child's hand or box of newly brand-named soap, the trade card's size, novelty, and humor would trivialize and normalize the impact of its framing visual epistemologies of race, gender, and national self-identity."¹³

Largely misrepresentative of the nation's actual female population, the advertising industry's new face of womanhood fit comfortably into the pages of America's leading magazines. In fact, magazine publishers were highly dependent upon the pre-packaged femininity that was being cranked out by the nation's top advertisers. Magazine historian Mary Ellen Zuckerman describes the relationship between the two industries as a "marriage of convenience," stating that "national advertising played a crucial role in the growth of the magazine industry, while mass market publications offered manufacturers of nationally distributed goods attractive promotional vehicles."¹⁴ The relationship was most apparent, of course, in popular leading women's magazines like *Good Housekeeping*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Woman's Home Companion*, *McCall's*, *Delineator*, and *Pictorial Review*. Advertisers utilized these publications as a means to peddle convenience food, cosmetics, clothing and dress patterns, and household appliances. Peiss attributes their success to the psychology used in the layout of popular magazines:

Magazine layout itself reinforced the woman reader's identity as a consumer. [*Ladies' Home Journal*] began to break up stories and articles in 1895, forcing readers to turn to the back pages where most of the advertisements were placed. Ads for cornflakes or baking soda were strategically placed next to cooking columns. "When pages are properly made up," one writer observed, advertising "is contiguous to the department to which it is most heavily akin." One magazine placed nearly a third of its ads in this way. Even short stories reinforced consumerism by frequently mentioning brand names, describing clothing styles, and stressing the household comfort possible through the purchase of goods.¹⁵

Beyond a doubt, advertising was at the very heart of the growing magazine industry. With each passing issue, women's magazines redefined the notion of American womanhood and built a feminine ideal around the clothing, cosmetics, and other household goods featured within their pages.

While national advertisers fed the growing magazine industry in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the real success of any given magazine was measured by the size of its reading audience. Women's magazines had been published in America since 1792, yet these magazines had not been able to reach mass circulation. Zuckerman writes: "These early publications targeted an elite class of readers, carried little or no advertising, were relatively expensive, and generally contained literary, etiquette, and fashion material."¹⁶ Consequently, pre-Civil War magazines had a very limited audience. The increased support of the advertising industry in the late-1800's enabled magazine

publishers to lower their subscription rates substantially and attract a larger number of female readers. Mary E. Triage reveals: " "Between 1894 and 1920, the prices of these magazines ranged between twenty-five and fifty cents a year. Even compared to the popular 'ten-cent monthlies' such as *McClure's* and *Cosmopolitan*, this is a remarkably low price."¹⁷ As these magazines came within the affordability of middle and working-class women, the content of the magazines underwent dramatic changes. Publishers no longer catered to the "elite" woman. Instead, women's magazines focused on more pertinent and timely issues related to the home and the workplace. Within their favorite magazines, women found a place to voice concerns about nearly every aspect of their lives. Suffrage, of course, topped their list of priorities. These magazines became a chief outlet for feminists and activists who wanted to speak publicly about women's issues. Still, whether it was realized or not, magazine publishers (most of them male) continued to dictate to women the duties and responsibilities of their gender. Zuckerman writes: "Just as readers undoubtedly affected magazine content, so the process worked in the reverse; women's journals certainly influenced their readers. This happened indirectly through the images put forth in the fiction."¹⁸ It also happened through magazine illustrations and visual imagery. Alongside their partners in the advertising industry, magazine publishers of the period had set out to construct a nationally-recognized image of womanhood.

Taking their cue from the successful advertising and magazine industries, women's organizations launched a visual campaign to promote the suffrage cause. The campaign, which captured the nation's attention in the first two decades of the twentieth century, is another event that helped to improve the visibility of women in American culture. A growing number of feminists during this period abandoned the written and spoken word

in favor of suffrage art as a communication tool. Cartoon historian Alice Sheppard notes:

From 1910 to 1920, at least three dozen American women seized their drawing pens, pencils, grease crayons, and brushes to contribute cartoons for suffrage. Examples of pro-suffrage art, numbering in the hundreds, assumed many forms: magazine cartoons, posters, illustrated fliers, calendars, decorative stamps, figurines, and post-cards.¹⁹

Although suffrage art became an important component of the women's movement, it was not as well-received as trading-card imagery and magazine art. There are two possible explanations for this. First, as women's historian Lois W. Banner has demonstrated, feminists in the early twentieth century maintained the belief "that spiritual qualities were more important to creating and maintaining the appearance of beauty than were physical attributes."²⁰ By the turn of the century, however, the magazine and advertising industries had taught the younger generation of Americans to value beauty above all things. The women who graced magazine covers and trading-cards were beautiful, and suffrage art basically lacked the essential element of attractiveness (see figure 3). Secondly, some of the more radical feminists had stirred controversy with cartoons that negatively portrayed American men as tyrants (see figure 4). Such cartoons evoked a mixed response from the American public. Sheppard adds: "When, after six decades of activism, suffragists adopted the political cartoon, some powerful and provocative examples aroused ambivalence even among supporters."²¹ Still, whether Americans favored suffrage art or not, it had become a significant part of their visual culture in the early years of the twentieth century.

In addition to cartoons and other artistic expression, suffrage parades also attracted attention to the women's movement. A large number of these parades were held in major American cities after the turn of the century, and the women in charge of these events used their new consumer identity to put large businesses behind their cause. Schlereth describes the ideal partnership that formed between advertisers and suffragists during the period:

To promote buying, department stores resurrected older holidays and dreamed up new ones, such as Ladies' Day and the Fete d' Automne, particularly directed at women consumers. Women, in turn, appropriated such advertising strategies to promote women's rights. As William Leach documented, suffragists conducted marches and pageants echoing those arranged by department stores. A purple, violet, and gold color scheme unified the Washington suffrage parade of 1913. "Yellow rallies" were held in New York, with marchers wearing yellow capes and carrying "yellow balls of light in the shape of lanterns." In May 1914 twelve little dressed as butterflies, symbolizing the suffragette states to date, led decorated floats and bedecked automobiles in a parade through Louisville, Kentucky.²²

The carnivalesque quality of suffrage parades made them a great favorite of the American people, and women's groups quickly learned that large audiences could be reached through showy displays. On occasion, however, such displays were met with resistance. Such was the case in July 1917, when pro-suffrage members of the National Woman's

Party were arrested and imprisoned for "committing a nuisance"²³ in a Washington demonstration. For the most part, though, suffrage parades after 1910 were well-received and drew positive attention to the cause. Like suffrage art, the suffrage parades helped to bring American women one step closer to the Nineteenth Amendment.

While the Columbian Exposition, the rise of the advertising and magazine industries, and the new visibility of the suffrage movement were all significant to the evolution of the "New Woman," it was the First World War that forever changed the perception and position of females in American society. Carl and Dorothy Schneider write: "American women experienced this 'Great War' differently than any previous war. For the first time, the Army and Navy nurse corps were activated. It was the first American war in which no woman enlisted as a foot soldier disguised as a man."²⁴ From the outbreak of the war in 1914, women had embraced the opportunity to prove their competence as nurses, physicians, telephone operators, metal workers, and Marines. Through their efforts, the old image of women as weak and fragile beings was put to rest. Women had emerged from the traditional domestic sphere to join their brothers and husbands in military production and in the war overseas, and their contribution to the cause was evident throughout the nation. The end of the war would, of course, push many of them back into their pre-war lives, whatever they may have been, but American women had gained significant ground through their involvement in the struggle. It was, perhaps, the ultimate makeover.

No where is the contribution of American women in World War I more evident than in the propaganda posters produced between 1914 and 1917. These posters, similar in nature to the ones developed by the large advertising industries, promoted the image of

the American woman as a symbol of national pride. Several propaganda illustrators, including Howard Chandler Christy and James Montgomery Flagg, used women to inspire Americans to enlist in the wartime cause. Several of Christy's posters, in fact, pictured the "ideal" American woman in uniform, leading her nation to victory (see figures 5-7). These posters, which were a highly visible component of the wartime culture, had a tremendous impact on the American mindset. Cultural historian Martha Banta demonstrates the triumph of World War I poster art over wartime photography:

During World War I photographs recorded the look of American women as uniformed participants in the war effort on the home front. The women of these photographs are neither the sexy figures of the theater world nor the bravura images of the poster world. Their uniforms are utilitarian and do little to enhance their appearance, but they do indicate that the women are doing their "bit." Limited in physical and imaginative scale, such women are safe and therefore usable as public figures. Photographed marching into patriotic rallies, they could not be mistaken as militant suffragists; not to be taken as a possible threat to the nation's family life. The realistic scenes prepared by the government photographers place their subjects firmly in that domesticated middle ground that merges the home front with the war effort abroad. These women were national heroines, but of the kind intended for return to the regulated life once peace was achieved. In contrast, government poster art created a fantasy world where the heroic female image reaches for the timeless and the sublime.²⁵

Even if women were returned to their traditional gender roles in practice at the close of the war, a new standard had been set for them in theory. World War I poster art had created an image of American womanhood that was far removed from the nineteenth-century cult of domesticity.

Finally, on August 18, 1920, women secured the long-sought right to vote. This sixth and final development in the period spanning 1890 to 1920 is typically viewed by historians and feminists as the dividing line between traditional and modern womanhood. The passage of the Nineteenth Amendment did not, of course, put an end to gender inequality in America, but it did allow women to actively participate in their government. Women's historian Dorothy Brown describes a new challenge that these women were faced with in the years following suffrage: "They had won the right to express their political choice. They must now decide how they would use it."²⁶ After 1920, women who had devoted their entire lives to the suffrage cause continued to campaign for the passage of bills that would protect women's interests in the home and in the workplace. Brown adds: "They built a foundation that weathered the setback of the depression, the turmoil of World War II, and the challenge of affluence and the feminine mystique."²⁷ Certainly, the Nineteenth Amendment had enabled them to build such a foundation.

Although American women had been pushing for political equality since the birth of the nation in 1776, nearly a century and a half had passed before the government finally budged. Abigail Adam's famous request was formally honored in 1920, but it could actually be said that America had begun to "remember the ladies" in the three decades preceding this great event. Several other events, including the Columbian Exposition of 1893, the rise of the advertising and magazine industries, the spectacle of suffrage art and

parades, and the First World War, had helped to redefine the notion of womanhood in America. Since women had come to be associated with beauty, virtue, consumerism, and strength, the new perception of femininity that evolved between 1890 and 1925 was highly idealistic and seldom representative of the average American female. Still, a number of talented artists during this period set out to capture the image of this "New Woman" on paper. While there were many variations, the most popular and enduring ideals were those penned by illustrators Charles Dana Gibson and John Held, Jr. Their individual heroines came to dominate the covers of several American magazines during a most eventful era in women's history, and their influence as artists was widespread.²⁸ Since their debut in early twentieth-century mass culture, the "Gibson girl" and the "Held flapper" have represented conflicting views about womanhood. Historians and feminists associate the Gibson ideal with traditional femininity to the same extent that they associate the Held ideal with progress and liberation. A closer examination of these two figures will reveal, however, that there are misconceptions surrounding both images. Quite possibly, Gibson's heroine is undercelebrated to the same degree that Held's heroine is overcelebrated in the American mind.

Notes

1. Jeanne Madeline Weimann, The Fair Women, with an Introduction by Anita Miller (Chicago: Academy Chicago, 1981), 4.
2. Catherine Clinton, The Other Civil War: American Women in the Nineteenth Century, revised edition (New York: Hill and Wang, 1984), 184.
3. *Ibid.*, 187.
4. Weimann, 6.
5. *Ibid.*, 51.
6. Thomas J. Schlereth, Victorian America: Transformations in Everyday Life (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991), 141.
7. *Ibid.*, 174.
8. Kathy L. Peiss, "American Women and the Making of Modern Consumer Culture," The Journal for Multi Media History 1 (Fall 1998), 2.
9. Michael F. Jacobsen and Laurie Anne Mazur, "Sexism and Sexuality in Advertising," chapter in Marketing Madness: A Survival Guide for a Consumer Society (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1995), 74-87.
10. The use of mass-marketed feminine ideals in early nineteenth-century media was opposed by some noted illustrators of the period. In her book *Imaging American Women* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), Martha Banta describes artist Stuart Davis as one such critic: "Stuart Davis made a deliberate political statement through his parody of the popular, yet reactionary, taste for banal pictorializations of American girls. The 'right' girls hold their place as the national type because their look prints up as being 'American.' However individualized the nuances of their actual appearance, their images must lend themselves to pictorial homogeneity and easy translation upon the page; they must also be 'pretty'" (page 95). Davis used his own artwork to protest the use of such ideals. His drawings appeared in *The Masses*.
11. Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," American Quarterly 18 (1966), 152.
12. Marilyn Maness Mehaffy, "Advertising Race/Raceing Advertising: The Feminine Consumer-(Nation), 1876-1900," Signs 23 (Autumn 1997), 132.
13. *Ibid.*, 172.

14. Mary Ellen Zuckerman, A History of Popular Women's Magazines in the United States, 1792-1995 (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998), 59.
15. Peiss, 2.
16. Zuckerman, 1.
17. Mary E. Triece, "The Practical True Woman: Reconciling Women and Work in Popular Mail-Order Magazines, 1900-1920," Critical Studies In Mass Communication 16 (March 1999), 46.
18. Zuckerman, 91.
19. Alice Sheppard, Cartooning for Suffrage, with an Introduction by Elisabeth Israels Perry (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994), 22.
20. Lois W. Banner, American Beauty (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), 206.
21. Sheppard, 23.
22. Schlereth, 161.
23. Clinton, 201.
24. Carl and Dorothy Schneider, "American Women in World War I," Social Education 58 (February 1994), 83.
25. Martha Banta, Imaging American Women: Idea and Ideals in Cultural History (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 573.
26. Dorothy M. Brown, Setting a Course: American Women in the 1920's (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987), 47.
27. Ibid., 249.
28. Zuckerman attributes the new availability of magazines in the late nineteenth-century to "improved rail transport and more extensive postal service" (p. 31). She also notes: "Simple demographics aided magazine sellers. Between 1890 and 1920, total U.S. population jumped from almost 63 million to 105.7 million. During the same period females in the population increased by about two thirds, going from 30.7 million to 51.8 million. The literacy rate continued to climb, reaching 94 percent for the total population in 1920" (p.33).



Figure 1 Clark's O.N.T. spool cotton, trade card, ca. 1880. Warshaw Collection of Business Americana, Archives Center, National Museum of American History (NMAH), Smithsonian Institution.



Sensation.



Temptation.



Appropriation



Damnation.



THE MASCULINE WOMAN
She is mannish from top to her hat,
Coat, collar, stiff shirt and cravat,
She'd wear pants in the street
To make her complete,
But she knows the law won't stand for that.

Figure 3



"The Ballot Box is
Mine Because it's
Mine!"

Figure 4

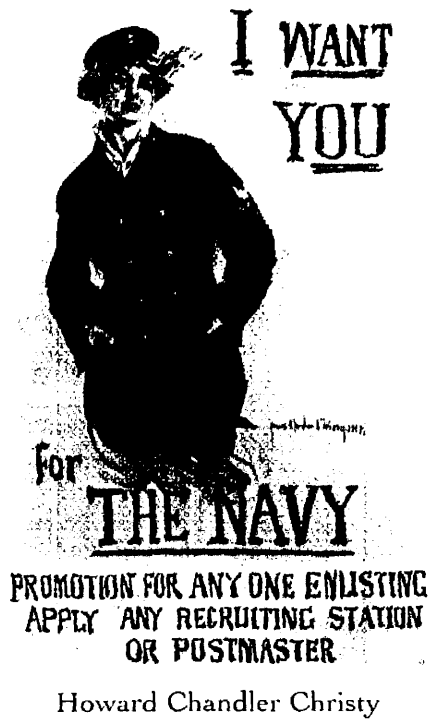
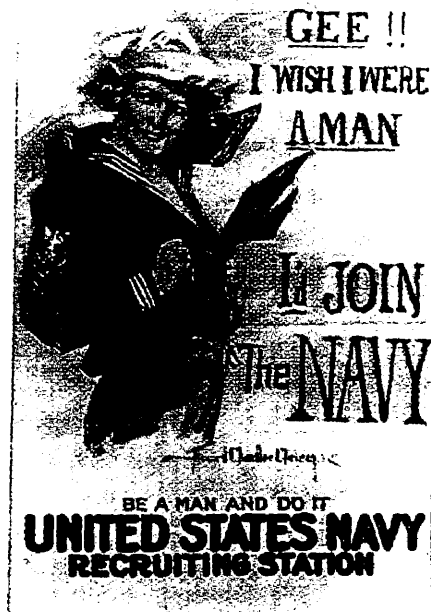


Figure 5



Howard Chandler Christy

Figure 6



Howard Chandler Christy

Figure 7

Chapter Two: The Subtle Feminism of Charles Dana Gibson

He was wielding [his pen] with telling effect in a peace-time cause without realizing his partisanship in the struggle. Throughout the last years of the nineteenth and the first of the twentieth century, scores of his drawings were so many lusty blows in behalf of a social revolution swiftly advancing toward accomplishment. If he had been asked whether he intended his pictures as propaganda, he would have honestly denied it; he was, he would have said, simply illustrating timely and amusing phases of American life. Pressed further, he might have admitted that in some cases his pen was animated by a sense of fair play. Nevertheless and notwithstanding, those drawings directly and indirectly were potent factors in the emancipation of American women.

--Fairfax Downey

By the time Fairfax Downey published his biography of American artist Charles Dana Gibson, the image of the famous "Gibson Girl" had long-since vanished from the pages of popular women's magazines. Gibson had introduced this fresh-faced vision of beauty to America nearly fifty years earlier, making her the dominant role model for women across the nation. Her pale skin, upswept hair and fashionably-slim waist made her a great favorite of the growing advertising industry, and she was commonly referred to as the "New Woman" of the twentieth century. While this title certainly suggested a breaking away from the traditional female stereotypes of the nineteenth century, several critics have claimed that Gibson's feminine ideal was actually a hindrance to the women's rights movement in America. The artist's own grandson, Langhorne Gibson Jr., has written that "the Gibson Girl gets very low marks from many ardent feminists who maintain, and correctly so, she was still fettered by the collective restraints of the previous generation of women."¹ In the minds of these ardent feminists, the turn-of-the-century

woman simply required more of a radical makeover than the one Gibson was willing to give her. Still, a closer examination of Gibson's work would suggest, as Downey argues, that the artist did play a significant role in the advancement of American women. Although Charles Dana Gibson is not typically recognized as a key figure in the women's rights movement, the Gibson Girl of the early twentieth century reflects a feminist attitude toward women's clothing, careers, education, matrimony, sexuality, manners, recreation and leadership.

Above all things, the Gibson Girl was a model of fashion. Her debut in the American media coincided with the growth of the women's fashion industry, and the nation looked to Gibson's American beauty as a trendsetter. Her stylish figure dominated the pages of several popular magazines at the turn of the century, including *LIFE*, *Collier's* and *Harper's Bazaar*, and women, who were responsible for close to ninety percent of consumer spending in the United States, emulated that style.² Through his drawings, Gibson set the fashion standard for an evening at the opera, a weekend at the beach, an afternoon on the golf course, and a day on the job. The Gibson Girl, it seemed, had an outfit for every occasion. In the last decade of the nineteenth century, fashion journals like *Harper's Bazaar* reflected the Gibson style. Her presence in popular advertisements and catalogs "elevated the combination of skirt and shirtwaist into the realm of fashion. Now even women who were forced to work for a living had an opportunity to enter the elite world of chic."³ Downey observes: "She might, in those days before bathing beauty contests had sordidly commercialized the term, have been called Miss America."⁴ Indeed, she reigned over a generation of fashion-conscious American women at the turn of the century.

While the Gibson Girl remains one of the great female fashion icons of the American past, there are those who would claim that her wardrobe worked against the cause of the women's rights movement. Her style may have been new and popular, but it certainly could not be considered revolutionary. Like the Victorian women before her, the Gibson Girl sported full skirts and a corset, which women's historian Lois W. Banner refers to as "that torture instrument of Victorian dress, which gave women eighteen-inch waistlines, fainting spells, and sometimes even permanent damage to internal organs."⁵ The physical discomfort of the corset was a serious concern of many early American feminists, including Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. According to Carolyn Johnston, author of *Sexual Power: Feminism and the Family in America*, the majority of these feminists "believed that women's physical mobility was essential to mental freedom."⁶ Michelle Mock Murton, a fashion historian, supports Johnston's statement. She notes: "Key impediments to women's equality were patriarchal ideologies and pronouncements which encumbered women's bodies, adversely effecting their physical and mental health."⁷ Stanton herself frequently articulated the need for dress reform:

The comfort and convenience of the woman is never considered, from the bonnet string to the paper shoe, she is the hopeless martyr to the inventions of some Parisian imp of fashion. Her tight waist and long trailing skirts deprive her of all freedom of breath and motion. No wonder man prescribes her sphere. She needs his help at every turn.⁸

In an attempt to achieve "mental freedom" through dress, a handful of these nineteenth-century women had attempted to popularize bloomers, pantaloons, and other garments

that allowed females to move more freely. Although this approach to equality failed, it was considered a bold feminist statement. Gibson's "New Woman" seemed to lack this boldness. The Gibson Girl kept her ankles covered and her undergarments laced properly. Banner notes: "If she were particularly daring, she might loosen her corset."⁹ Many feminists would cite this as the extent of the Gibson Girl's fashion rebellion.

While Gibson's sense of fashion rebellion did not altogether appeal to ardent feminists at the turn of the century, his subtle makeover of the American woman had a great impact on women's dress reform in the United States. The Gibson Girl may not have abandoned her corset for a pair of bloomers, but her creator did expand her wardrobe to include several simpler, more functional articles of clothing. Banner notes: "Instead of yards of trailing petticoats and beribboned gowns, which women had laboriously to embroider by hand, she wore a tailored suit or a dark skirt and a simple blouse, or 'shirtwaist,' modeled after men's attire."¹⁰ In a sketch titled *The Last Day of Summer* (see figure 1), Gibson's heroine even went so far as to don a man's suit coat and necktie.¹¹ Still, she managed to maintain her femininity. Unlike several of the unsuccessful feminist movements of the nineteenth century, Gibson's vision of gender equality did not require women to abandon or downplay their womanly charm. In fact, that "womanly charm" was a celebrated part of the Gibson Girl's image. Langhorne Gibson Jr. writes: "Under her influence, women could enjoy a new freedom at the beach in costumes which left their arms bare. The calves of their exposed legs were covered only by black stockings."¹² Gibson's grandson also claims that his grandfather modernized the American woman by sketching her "in military costume, in clerical robes, and as an ambassadoress."¹³ The American public may have criticized women like Stanton and Anthony for going to

extremes to "unsex women" through radical fashion makeovers¹⁴, but it embraced the Gibson Girl with open arms. She posed no threat to the American conservatives who were not quite ready for bold transformations in women's fashion, yet, in many ways, she set the stage for women's dress reform in America.

In addition to expanding their wardrobes, the women of Gibson's generation were also beginning to take on new responsibilities in the world of work. According to Margaret Gibbons Wilson, author of *The American Woman In Transition*, the period between 1870 and 1920 saw a sixty-three percent increase in the number of females employed outside of the domestic sphere.¹⁵ Wilson notes: "That development was an important one, one that had a marked influence upon women's feelings of self-worth and their relationship with other members of their families."¹⁶ While many of these women sought occupations that were traditionally associated with their gender, including teaching and nursing, the growth of American industry presented them with several new work options. Office and sales positions were increasingly filled by women in the early years of the twentieth century, and Thomas J. Schlereth, author of *Victorian America*, notes that "a talented woman might be promoted to a lower-level managerial post, such as supervisor of a typing pool or a head of a bookkeeping department."¹⁷ Many women were seeking higher education to make themselves more marketable in the work force. Several women's colleges, including Vassar, Smith and Wellesly, assisted these women in developing their professional skills. Feminists of the period emphasized the importance of expanding professional and educational opportunities for women. In fact, Carolyn Johnston writes: "The women's rights movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries enlisted its membership primarily from the ranks of these educated women, a

large percentage of whom had entered professions as a kind of calling, forsaking marriage."¹⁸

At first glance, Gibson's drawings do not appear to support the notion of professional and educational advancement for women. When he presented his American heroine as an intelligent and talented individual, he often portrayed her as a sort of "queen" of the domestic realm. According to Langhorne Gibson Jr., the "prevailing ideas" of his grandfather's time "included the notions that [women] were genetically inferior, that their smaller brains could not retain much information, and that their proper place was in their homes and forever at the beck and call of their husbands."¹⁹ Had the artist openly rejected or ignored these common perceptions of women, it seems unlikely that the Gibson Girl would have achieved such a high degree of acceptance and popularity with the American public. The Gibson Girl had to maintain a great deal of traditional femininity, which, for many, was measured by her presence in the domestic sphere. Gibson Jr. notes that his grandfather's heroine "was still her own worst enemy."²⁰ He continues: "Even though she held herself aloof and was capable of wit and even caustic sarcasm, she, like her Victorian counterpart, had no aptitude for self-accomplishment. Her achievement in life was measured only by the man she married."²¹ This prevailing attitude directly contradicted the feminist notion that women were highly-intelligent and deserving of professional opportunities outside of the home.

Gibson may not have thrown his heroine into the midst of the career world, but he did not necessarily confine her to the walls of the sitting room, either. In fact, a closer examination of his sketches reveals that he may have actually helped to elevate the image

of the American woman to greater professional heights in the American media of the early twentieth century. For example, the standard shirtwaist blouse and the simple skirt popularized by Gibson's drawings became the accepted uniform of working women. Schlereth writes that "many office women emulated 'the Gibson look' because it was fashionable and practical," and because it was recognized by Americans as "a middle ground in clothing, one neither too feminine or too masculine."²² Also, as much as Gibson's "New Woman" still presided over the affairs of the household, she did play an involved role in the world beyond it. Downey observes: "The working girls Gibson drew were the governess, the saleswoman, the sempstress, the artist's model, the chorus girl, the housemaid."²³ These traditionally female-dominated careers may not have been radical enough to please the feminists of Gibson's era (see figure 2a),²⁴ but they did allow women more freedom in the working world. Gibson may have confined his women to the realistic careers of the age, but the important thing is that he recognized their mental capacity and their increasing presence in the American work force. His hope for the expansion of women's careers was very much alive when he attended Chicago's World Fair in 1893. It was here, Downey writes, that Gibson "perceived that [women] had stormed commerce, and that some bold spirits among them were advancing beyond clerical jobs."²⁵ His later sketches would reflect the ambitions of these "bold spirits" and acknowledge their growing presence in American culture.

In addition to his positive portrayals of working-class women, Gibson also became an artistic proponent of women's higher education. Before the appearance of the Gibson girl in American mass culture, educated women had been largely perceived as violators of the sacred cult of domesticity. These "old-maid" types were generally shunned as social

outcasts. Lynn D. Gordon suggests that Gibson promoted the social acceptance of educated women through his "typical, fun-loving, middle-class Gibson Girls," who "softened the disturbing image of educated women."²⁶ These heroines proved that it was possible for a woman to pursue a course of study and still maintain her sense of traditional femininity. The Gibson "college girl" certainly appeared to be no threat to the social structure (see figure 2b). Through Gibson's imagery, Gordon suggests that "popular culture accepted the reality of women's higher education, but showed how it need not lead to social change."²⁷ Still, social change was inevitable. Over the course of his career, Gibson's enthusiasm for the professional education of women would become increasingly evident through his sketches of "sweet girl graduates in cap and gown," who "meant to use this higher education of theirs to meet men mentally on equal terms, to break down the male monopolies, [and] compete in business and the professions."²⁸ Downey adds: "He would see every one of these drawings of his come partly or entirely true. By foretelling the future, ... he helped pave its way."²⁹

While new jobs and educational opportunities gave many females a chance to establish themselves as professionals outside of the home, the majority of women's lives still centered around the subject of matrimony in the early years of the twentieth century. The women of Gibson's generation typically married in their early twenties, choosing "to be wives and mothers over following a career."³⁰ In the larger cities of the east, including New York, Boston and Washington DC, marriage even became a sort of fashion statement for young women who made it their personal ambition to marry for fame, reputation and money. The overwhelming attitude was that marriage provided more security than the working world could offer. Thus, Johnston notes that the "career

women of this period who became advocates of women's rights still viewed family issues as primary to their reform agenda."³¹ For the most part, marriage was still the norm for the American woman. The Gibson Girl was no exception.

Gibson has been widely criticized by feminists who feel that the artist limited his heroine to matters of courtship and marriage, thus keeping her on the sidelines of the women's rights movement. There was nothing new or inspiring about the Gibson Girl's continuous search for the perfect husband. In fact, Gibson Jr. has written that his grandfather's "New Woman" of the twentieth century "would make the same mistakes as her predecessor by marrying foolishly or being too haughty or too narcissistic."³² Gibson, it seemed, had created an American beauty who insisted on flirting and attracting male attention. She thrived on this attention, measuring her personal worth by her success with the opposite sex. This is apparent in such sketches as *The Greatest Game In The World: His Move* (see figure 3), which features an eager Gibson beauty clinging tightly to a handsome young man.³³ She is anxiously waiting for a kiss or a marriage proposal. The Gibson Girl's flirtatious behavior may have appealed to the American public at large, but it seemed to do nothing for the feminists who were working to improve the image of the American woman. She was branded as something of a female sex object, existing solely for the purpose of the men who adored her. Her matrimonial aspirations were the essence of her entire being, making her a model trophy for the male population. Novelist Edith Wharton, along with several well-known feminists of the period, were critical of this "tendency to make a woman into an art object, another prize for the connoisseur's collection."³⁴ To many, it seemed that this was exactly what Gibson had succeeded in doing with his sketches.

While no one can deny that the Gibson Girl's world revolved around affairs of courtship and matrimony, Gibson himself seldom provided his audience with a positive, happily-ever-after picture of wedded bliss. In fact, it might even be said that Gibson's sketches were intended to dissuade a generation of American women from falling into a marital trap. Although Gibson was happily married to his wife, Irene Langhorne Gibson, for nearly fifty years, he was remembered by his contemporaries as the "man who so often had lambasted marriage"³⁵ in the nation's leading magazines. He had a real problem with the accepted reality of eastern women marrying wealthy European aristocrats to gain titles or advance their social standing. His pessimism toward these marriages was illustrated in famous sketches like *A Castle In The Air* (see figure 4), which features a beautiful young socialite who regrets her union with an older, wealthy, uninteresting man. The caption reads: "These young girls who marry millionaires should stop dreaming."³⁶ According to the artist's grandson, Gibson's "passion about the subject of marriage was based on reasons other than love."³⁷ Gibson Jr. writes:

Venting his ire at the exquisite women he drew who married old and unattractive men for money, he seemed to enjoy their unhappiness as they sat alone at massive dining room tables or collapsed over piano keyboards pining for children and young, virile husbands forever out of their reach. In particular, Dana, an ardent American, railed against the quite common practice of wealthy Americans marrying off their daughter to European peers for the privilege of a title. His central character in these drawings, his American Girl, for all her beauty and gracefulness, was more often than not

a grasping, willful, and obviously shallow creature for whom he accorded little compassion.³⁸

Scores of Gibson's "blind" innocents (see figure 5)³⁹ had committed themselves to these loveless marriages, but the artist made a national example of them in the American media. Their eyes, and perhaps the eyes of the nation, were opened to the disappointments and regrets that often accompanied marriage in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Gibson's heroine often yielded to the traditional demands of marriage, but she, unlike her Victorian predecessor, proved that she could maintain an individual identity apart from her husband. A collection of popular sketches published in 1901 told the story of a young woman attempting to reintroduce herself to society in the wake of her husband's death. Schlereth writes: "Since many married women depended upon their husband's for part or all their sustenance, widowhood meant economic as well as emotional loss."⁴⁰ Still, the heroine of *A Widow and Her Friends* emerged from this tragedy with confidence and spirit. Unlike the widows who had followed Queen Victoria's example of perpetual mourning, Gibson's widow slid quite comfortably into her new role as an independent woman. In one particular illustration, Gibson says that the widow actually surprised a number of her nearest acquaintances by being "about so soon" (see figure 6)⁴¹. Gibson glorified her widowhood. She embarked on new journeys, attended fancy balls and operas, became a trained nurse, and cultivated several new interests, including painting, ice skating and horseback riding. Gibson gave his heroine free reign over her own destiny, and these sketches demonstrated the potential of the "new" twentieth-century woman. They confirmed the long-held feminist belief that women were

strong and intelligent creatures, quite capable of caring for themselves in the absence of men.

Even as Gibson was subtly attacking the turn-of-the-century institution of marriage, activists and reformers of the period were turning their attention toward a more radical topic: women's sexuality. Although modern historians and feminists precipitously date the first sexual revolution to the 1920's, James McGovern has suggested that "there were occasional 'advance signals' of 'rebellion' before the war."⁴² Medical research during the Progressive era offered new theories and beliefs about women's sexuality, which had been a taboo subject throughout the nineteenth century.⁴³ Discussion of birth control, pregnancy, childbirth and menopause was still quite controversial around the turn of the century, yet many women's activists insisted on calling attention to these issues out of a growing concern for women's health. Their concern was widely misinterpreted as a form of rebellion. According to Banner, "most members of the middle class, among whom the repressive ideas about sexuality were particularly prevalent, were no more open about sexual matters than they had been before."⁴⁴ Ironically, Gordon notes: "Several mid twentieth-century studies indicate that rates of premarital coitus among white American women rose greatly from the 1890's through the 1920's."⁴⁵ In spite of this increase in premarital sexual activity, activists were facing an America that still publicly held fast to the old Victorian beliefs. Their movement was in desperate need of a sort of transitional icon to pave the way for open discussion of issues related to women's sexuality.

Few would describe the Gibson girl as the definitive symbol of the turn-of-the-century sexual revolution. If anything, her modest image appeared to uphold purity as an essential virtue of womanhood.⁴⁶ Still, she could be counted among those "advance

signals" that McGovern claims existed in the Progressive era. Interestingly, women's reformers did indeed rely on the Gibson heroine to lead a subtle sexual revolution of her own. Banner writes:

The Gibson girl was their representative in the pictorial sphere. Strong and independent, at her best she was a companion to men, not a dependent. Her moral code was not always strict: sometimes ... it was indicated that she was not averse to sex, and that, although she might preserve her virginity until marriage, she did not avoid other sorts of physical relations.⁴⁷

Certainly, the Gibson girl was pictured as being more at ease with men than her Victorian predecessor had been. Where the Victorian woman had been expected to be charmingly submissive, the Gibson girl could be openly flirtatious and still maintain a sense of moral respectability. Gibson may have never intended for his heroine to be a transitional figure of the women's sexual movement, but the subtle sexuality behind the image of his heroine can not be denied. In turn-of-the-century American culture, it provided a glimpse of sexual emancipation to come.

In addition to sexuality, the turn-of-the-century women's rights movement focused on the subject of feminine manners and propriety. According to Gibson Jr., the Victorian woman of the nineteenth century was a "small and delicate, pure and meekly faithful" woman who "blushed, cried, and fainted over trivialities."⁴⁸ The feminists naturally rebelled against this weak perception of the female gender, and the early years of the twentieth century were devoted to the modernization of the American woman in the media. Historian Carolyn Kitch of Northwestern University writes:

During the 1910's, Americans' hopes for, and anxieties about, changing gender roles were frequently debated in magazine and newspaper articles. These concerns also provided a recurrent theme for visual communication. The spectre of a world in which domineering and destructive women emasculated weak and powerless men inspired a distinctive motif that ran through various forms of popular culture: the pairing of large (though usually beautiful) women and little, often tiny, men. While this motif was always presented as a joke, it never was only a joke.⁴⁹

Gibson, of course, played a key role in the "visual communication" that led to the ultimate transformation of the American woman. His illustrations featured the larger-than-life women described in Kitch's article, yet there is some debate surrounding the impact of these sketches on the women's rights movement.

At first glance, Gibson's heroines appear to be simple extensions of stiff Victorian propriety and etiquette. Turn-of-the-century society still maintained the opinion that a lady should appear dignified and respectable in public, and the Gibson Girl met that expectation with finesse. She was the center of the social eye, much like the Victorian women before her had been. She knew how to entertain, converse, and hold her head gracefully in all social situations. In many ways, the Gibson Girl reflected the Victorian perception of women as ornamental objects. Downey states: "Because Gibson drew maidens straight as poplars, girls dared not droop, and the debutante slouch was deferred for a quarter of a century. The modesty and the dignity of the Gibson Girl was apparent in every picture."⁵⁰ There was certainly nothing revolutionary in her behavior. If

anything, it seemed to bind a new generation of American women to the traditional female stereotypes that had dominated in Victorian society.

Still, while preserving the dignity and modesty of the American woman, Gibson's illustrations provided the nation with a hint of female rebellion. Kitch writes: "Of the various threats the New Woman posed to the American status quo, the prospect of sex-role reversal -- masculinized women and feminized/emasculated men -- was the easiest and funniest to handle through visual communication."⁵¹ Gibson's sex-role reversals appeared humorous and light-hearted enough to even the most conservative Americans, yet they carried a significant message to all. They placed women in new positions of power over men. Gibson's heroines typically ruled over the men in their lives, and they were not always the most elegant rulers. Kitch explains: "Gibson's illustrations showed men being physically threatened or otherwise bullied by their wives."⁵² She includes the example of an illustration featuring "a young woman not even noticing that she had stepped on, and flattened, a man on a walking path" (see figure 7)⁵³. The "Gibson Man" seemed to exist solely for the amusement of the Gibson Girl, when he existed at all. As Downey writes, he was an irrelevant and insignificant figure in the world of Gibson's art: "The Gibson Eden had been peopled in reverse order. It was a paradise enshrining an utterly desirable Eve and lacking an Adam. Nobody seemed to miss him much. If there were a vague male or two on the outskirts, few paid any heed."⁵⁴ Certainly, this notion of the larger-than-life female exaggerated the role that women played in early twentieth-century society. Still, even in a comic light, Gibson's illustrations provided hope to a generation of American women who had their sights set on gender equality. They also reveal a great deal about Gibson's own attitude toward women, which Gibson Jr.

summarizes with one of his grandfather's most memorable statements: "I don't think husbands should allow their wives to have their own way. I think they should insist on it."⁵⁵

The gender-role reversals in Gibson's famous illustrations helped to elevate women to a new height in the American media, but, as Downey suggests, "the battle for women's rights ... was won on the playing-fields of America."⁵⁶ The latter years of the nineteenth century had seen the growth of popular sports in America, and women, who had formerly been barred from all exercise because of "the supposed delicacy of their physical constitutions,"⁵⁷ were beginning to participate in physical sports for the first time. Some of the new and exciting sports that opened up to women were football, basketball, bicycling, swimming, tennis, track, horseback riding, and golf. According to Glenda Riley, a professor of history and director of the Women's Studies Program at the University of Northern Iowa, golf was especially popular "because it was considered to be particularly well-suited to the delicate and genteel nature of turn-of-the-century women."⁵⁸ Banner suggests that the popularity of such "delicate and genteel" sports can be traced back to turn-of-the-century physicians who took women's health issues into consideration and determined that "American women did not get enough exercise."⁵⁹ This new concern with women's health issues was widespread. Several of the nation's popular leading magazines, including *LIFE* and *Collier's*, supported the induction of the female population into the world of athletics. Gibson certainly bought into this national fascination with women's sports, and his famous heroine appeared on the golf course, at the swimming hole, and even on the college football field. The Gibson Girl was recognized as something of a national athlete.

While the growth of women's sports at the turn of the century was undeniably a milestone in the struggle for women's rights, it remains unclear whether or not Gibson intended for his images of athletic females to be used as propaganda in the American media. Some might argue that the artist's illustrations were simple and meaningless reflections of the period, containing no underlying messages about the physical or mental capacity of females. Gibson's women had been thrown into the world of athletics, but, as one commentator remarked, these women were expected to have "managed their sporting lives with no more dishevelment than a sparkling eye or a straying tendril."⁶⁰ The Gibson Girl's athletic participation was accepted and even encouraged, yet, quite unrealistically, the artist expected it not to alter her elegant physical appearance. Even his most radical drawing, *The Coming Game* (see figure 8)⁶¹, illustrates this notion. The sketch features a team of female football players in competition with a team of young men from Yale. At what appears to be one of the most intense moments of the game, the female players are still projecting a strong sense of femininity. In fact, a girl on the Vassar team temporarily pauses to fix a loose strand of hair. This was typical behavior for Gibson's athletic heroines. They were allowed to enter the sphere of athletics, but they were always "ladies" before they were athletes.

Gibson's illustrations of female athletes do appear mild next to the more modern images of women in sports, but even with the aforementioned limitations, their impact on the women's rights movement in America was extraordinary. The Gibson Girl always maintained her femininity, yet she presented the nation with a new and accepted female body image. She was strong, healthy and energetic, and her physical strength empowered her not just in the world of athletics, but in society at large. Her participation in sporting

events challenged the nineteenth-century belief that "it was in bad taste for a girl ... to ride out alone with a young man" on a bicycle or on horseback, or "to get herself up in any way that would tend to make her look masculine."⁶² Gibson's heroines blended physical fitness and female elegance splendidly. Downey observes: "The new deity was a pretty American girl speeding joyously along on a bicycle. On that simple machine she rode like a winged victory, women's rights perched on the handlebars and cramping modes and manners strewn in her track."⁶³ These images of the Gibson Girl brought a generation of young American women into the sphere of athletics and kept them there permanently. Feminists of the late nineteenth century had aimed to accomplish such a victory themselves, but, as Mildred Adams notes, Gibson "did more through his drawings to convince maidens East and West that they wanted to be athletic than any number of health crusades could do."⁶⁴ Gibson's heroines were the forerunners of women like Gertrude Ederle and Amelia Earhart, who further illustrated female strength and physical endurance in the years after Gibson's artistic decline. The influence of these heroines can not be underestimated.

Finally, the improved physical image of women at the turn of the century assisted in elevating them to new heights in the world of American politics. Women's suffrage had topped the feminist agenda throughout the nineteenth century, and Gibson's generation was on the very verge of achieving that goal. The American media had finally begun to recognize the female presence in the world of work and athletics, and women across the nation were beginning to emerge from the confines of the domestic sphere. Popular culture played a significant role in launching the image of the "New Woman," and artists like Gibson were in a position to advance the cause of the suffragettes. Many did take up

the cause. Johnston observes:

The theme of female dominance runs throughout early twentieth-century comic strips, reflecting the anxieties of men whose involvement and power in the family were diminishing. Although these comic-strip wives are often objects of derision, they are very dominant characters who represent the spectre of female power.⁶⁵

This projection of female power in the media was critical to the success of the women's movement. It prepared the nation for the dawning of a new era of gender equality.

Indeed, Gibson's popular illustrations sparked the evolution of the American woman in the national media. Still, the artist goes unrecognized as a participant in the women's movement of the early twentieth century. His illustrations certainly "opened people's eyes to the fact that women's capabilities were equal to those of men and women's roles were changing," but, as Gibson Jr. states, "Dana was a conservative and did not campaign for equal property rights and suffrage for women."⁶⁶ Many of Gibson's heroines had ventured into the outside world of work and sports, but a large number of them still found comfort and fulfillment within the traditional domestic sphere. The artist's own wife appeared to have been one of these women. Gibson Jr. writes:

Irene, his model and inspiration, was no liberal. She savored her womanhood and enjoyed the power of her own femininity. Moreover, when she was a young woman around the turn of the century, it was not yet the vogue for society people like [herself] to reach out beyond their comfortable cocoon to sponsor and work for "good causes."⁶⁷

Certainly, Gibson had not intended that his illustrations be used as bits of women's rights propaganda. The old-fashioned New York society to which the artist and his wife belonged distanced them from the women's rights movement, and neither of them wanted to be openly active in the campaign.

The Gibsons' lack of physical involvement in the feminist campaign of the early twentieth century does not automatically exclude them as influential figures in the struggle for gender equality. While he denies that either of his grandparents played an active role in the women's rights movement, Gibson Jr. suggests that his grandfather's illustrations had a powerful impact on a generation of Americans:

The simple, yet forceful, statement his Gibson Girl made was a woman need not abandon her central role of lover, wife and mother to take more from life than previous generations had offered her. She could stand proud and still be agreeably sensitive and wistful, needful of love and approval. Unlike her rather dour and militant contemporaries, the women aggressively active in the temperance and suffrage movements, the Gibson Girl was no threat to the sexist structure of American society. As a result, she was embraced by men and women alike. Women's movements were in their infancy, but America was not ready for revolutionary notions. Because Dana's subtle vision of the New Woman was universally popular, the Gibson Girl, perhaps, did more to further the cause of women's rights than the dedicated, courageous women activists who mainly were scoffed at by both sexes.⁶⁸

In truth, turn-of-the-century America did not need another feminist leader to make speeches or carry banners in parades. It needed an artist like Gibson, and, whether he intended to or not, Gibson answered that calling. He served the cause of the feminist movement with his own pen. Kitch writes: "In all of these media, the figures and faces of women were never merely about womanhood itself; they were also about broader social or political concerns."⁶⁹ In fact, it was impossible for Gibson's illustrations to exist apart from these larger issues. The Gibson Girl actively promoted the cause of the women's movement in America, even though Gibson himself did not.

So, quite indirectly, Gibson was very influential in bringing the American woman into the political arena. His art, which "lost its popular-culture currency at essentially the same moment that American women won the right to vote,"⁷⁰ had successfully demonstrated that females could handle the same social and political responsibilities as males. Without rallying behind the suffragettes, Gibson himself projected higher hopes for American women than perhaps any other figure of his time. His later illustrations even made strong predictions about the leadership roles that might possibly open up to women as the twentieth century continued to progress. Downey highlights some of Gibson's most promising predictions: "He drew a woman's council of war, the participants attired in becoming military tunics and field marshal millinery. Gibson Girls became handsome ambassadors and cabinet ministers. They presided on the bench and filled the pulpit."⁷¹ While it is not entirely clear what made Gibson, a man who "disliked the violent and vandalistic activities of the early suffragettes and owned misgivings as to the coarsening effect of politics on femininity,"⁷² place his heroines in roles of national leadership, Gibson Jr. points to Irene as the probable source of his grandfather's inspiration.

According to Gibson Jr., Irene developed a "new commitment to politics [that] coincided with the victory of nationwide suffrage for women with the passage in 1920 of the Nineteenth Amendment."⁷³ She became an active supporter of the Democratic Party, and she went on to participate in several women's organizations across the nation. Downey suggests that the artist probably "lost his doubts when his capable wife later served as a Democratic national committeewoman and worked energetically, if vainly, both in the Al Smith and John W. Davis campaigns."⁷⁴ Her political involvement more than likely inspired one of Gibson's most promising pieces, which he titled *An Ambassador's Ball In The Days to Come* (see figure 9)⁷⁵. The sketch features several charming women in the process of making political decisions. This sketch was only one important piece in Gibson's hopeful *Leap Year* series, which elevated women to leadership roles at the national level. Downey writes that the artist "would see every one of those drawings of his come partly or entirely true. By foretelling the future, he helped pave its way."⁷⁶

In conclusion, it appears that Gibson's art had an extraordinary impact on the women's rights movement of the early twentieth century. His illustrations reflected new ideas about women's clothing, careers, education, matrimony, sexuality, manners, recreation and leadership, and the nation absorbed those ideas without question or dispute. Gibson's heroines remain a disappointment to radical feminists who associate them too much with the traditional feminine stereotypes of the nineteenth century, but the success of these heroines can and must only be measured within the boundaries of their own time frame. They should be seen as the transitional figures that pointed an entire generation of American women in the direction of gender equality. The Gibson Girl represented the

consciousness of the turn-of-the-century woman, and, as Downey writes, "the times were ripe for her to enthrone herself as uncrowned Queen of the United States and she did not let the moment slip."⁷⁷ Actually, Gibson did not allow her to slip. Through the strokes of his pen, "he had placed the once-termed weaker sex on a pedestal," and the American woman, in turn, "used it as a tier in an ever-rising pyramid."⁷⁸

Notes

1. Langhorne Gibson Jr., The Gibson Girl: Portrait of a Southern Belle (Richmond: The Commodore Press, 1997), 185.
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22. Schlereth, 69.
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24. Charles Dana Gibson, A Widow and Her Friends (New York: Robert Howard Russell, London: John Lane, 1901).
25. Downey, 260.
26. Lynn D. Gordon, "The Gibson Girl Goes to College: Popular Culture and Women's Higher Education in the Progressive Era, 1890-1920," American Quarterly 39 (Summer 1987), 215.
27. Ibid., 226.
28. Downey, 262.
29. Ibid., 264.
30. Johnston, 97.
31. Ibid.
32. Langhorne Gibson Jr., 133.
33. Charles Dana Gibson, "The Greatest Game in the World: His Move," as reproduced in Gillon, 117.
34. Eleanor Dwight, The Gilded Age: Edith Wharton and Her Contemporaries (New York: Universe Publishing, 1995), 43. Again, Wharton is being referred to here as a "feminist" in the sense that her writings can be considered an artistic approach to liberation. She was not an active supporter of suffrage, yet she frequently questions and challenges the role of women in society.
35. Langhorne Gibson Jr., 119.

36. Charles Dana Gibson, "A Castle in the Air," as reproduced in Gibson Jr.
37. Gibson Jr., 97.
38. Ibid.
39. Charles Dana Gibson, "Two Blind Women," as reproduced in Gillon, 7.
40. Schlereth, 282.
41. Charles Dana Gibson, A Widow and Her Friends.
42. James R. McGovern, "The American Woman's Pre-World War I Freedom in Manners and Morals," Journal of American History 55 (September 1968), 317.
43. Actually, women's sexuality became a more "taboo" subject as the nineteenth century wore on. This seems to have stemmed from the rise of Victorianism in England, which had a direct influence on American culture during the period. In her book, *The Victorian Woman*, Suzanne Fagence Cooper suggests: "Our preconceptions about Victorian sexuality are significantly undermined when we encounter ... evidence of extra-marital sex" (p.30). Cooper notes that "the evidence for pre-nuptial conception comes from the parish registers of mid-Victorian England" (p.30). This suggests that, although sexuality was a "taboo" topic of conversation in nineteenth-century, the effects were still very present. The same holds true in America, where Victorianism took hold.
44. Banner, 15.
45. Gordon, 224.
46. In addition to the influence of Victorianism through art and literature, the American notion of sexuality in the nineteenth-century seems to have also stemmed from the Cult of True Womanhood, which emphasized purity as one of the four cardinal virtues of females.
47. Lois W. Banner, American Beauty (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), 171.
48. Langhorne Gibson Jr., 129.
49. Carolyn Kitch, "Destructive Women and Little Men: Masculinity, the New Woman, and Power in 1910's Popular Media" (Maryland: Loyola College Journal of Magazine and New Media Research, Fall 2000), 2.
50. Downey, 188.
51. Kitch, 4.

52. Ibid.
53. Charles Dana Gibson, A Widow and Her Friends.
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61. Charles Dana Gibson, "The Coming Game: Yale versus Vassar," as reproduced in Downey, 261.
62. Downey, 252.
63. Ibid.
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65. Johnston, 98-99.
66. Langhorne Gibson Jr., 185.
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69. Kitch, 4.
70. Ibid., 10.
71. Downey, 262.
72. Ibid., 265.
73. Langhorne Gibson Jr., 193.

74. Downey, 265.

75. Charles Dana Gibson, "An Ambassador's Ball in the Days to Come," as reproduced in Downey, 264.

76. Downey, 264.

77. Ibid., 268.

78. Ibid.



Figure 1

THE LAST DAY OF SUMMER

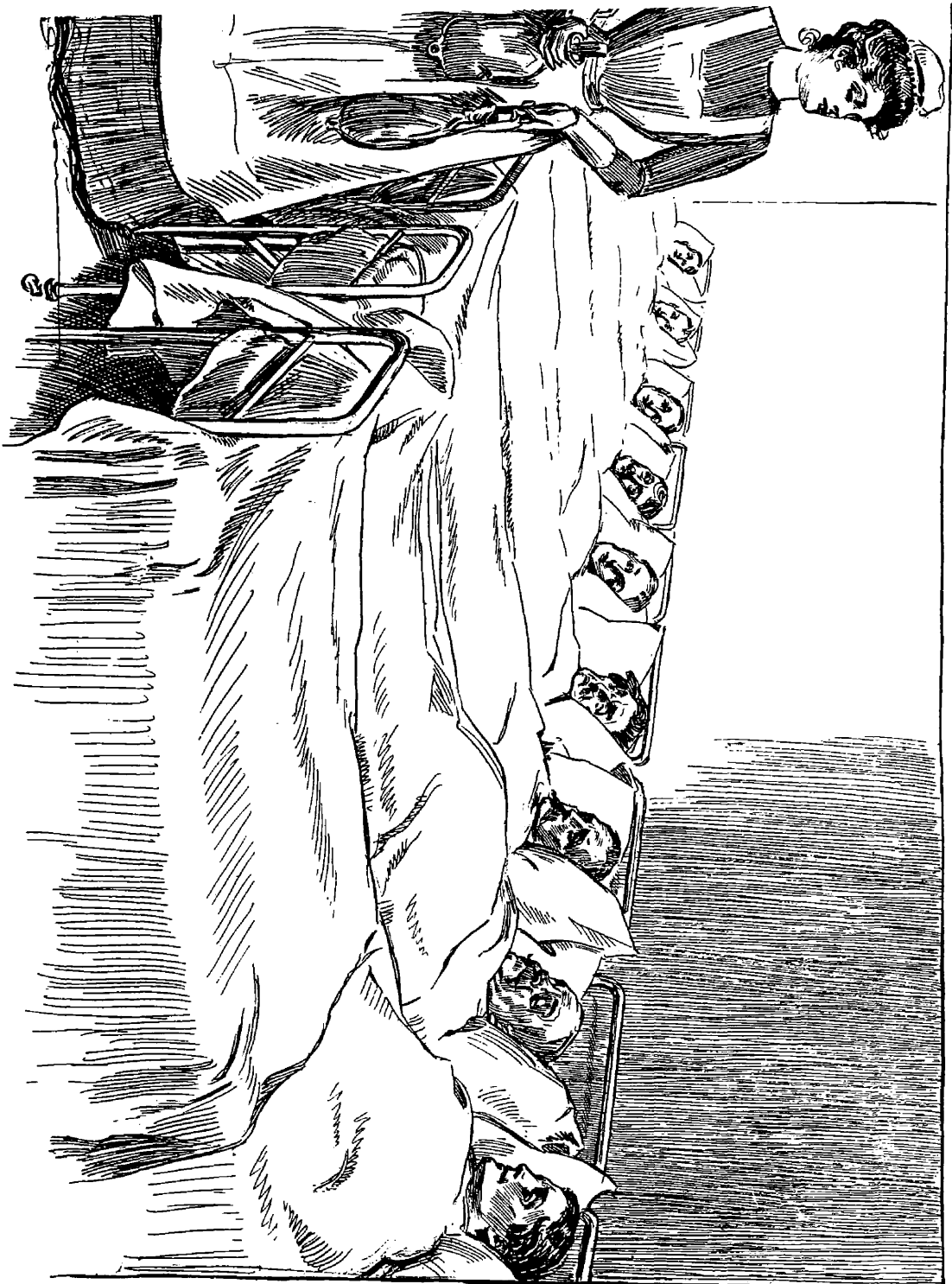


Figure 2

Harrison Fisher's College Girls

When a college girl looks back on those undergraduate experiences which hold the dearest distinction — not as to the honors won, but as to the girl who is getting the best out of college life — it is not the play-days, but the work-days that perhaps recall her dearest memories. The hours of study, surrounded by her books and absorbed in the work, she loves — sometimes it may be sometimes doing with "the other girls."



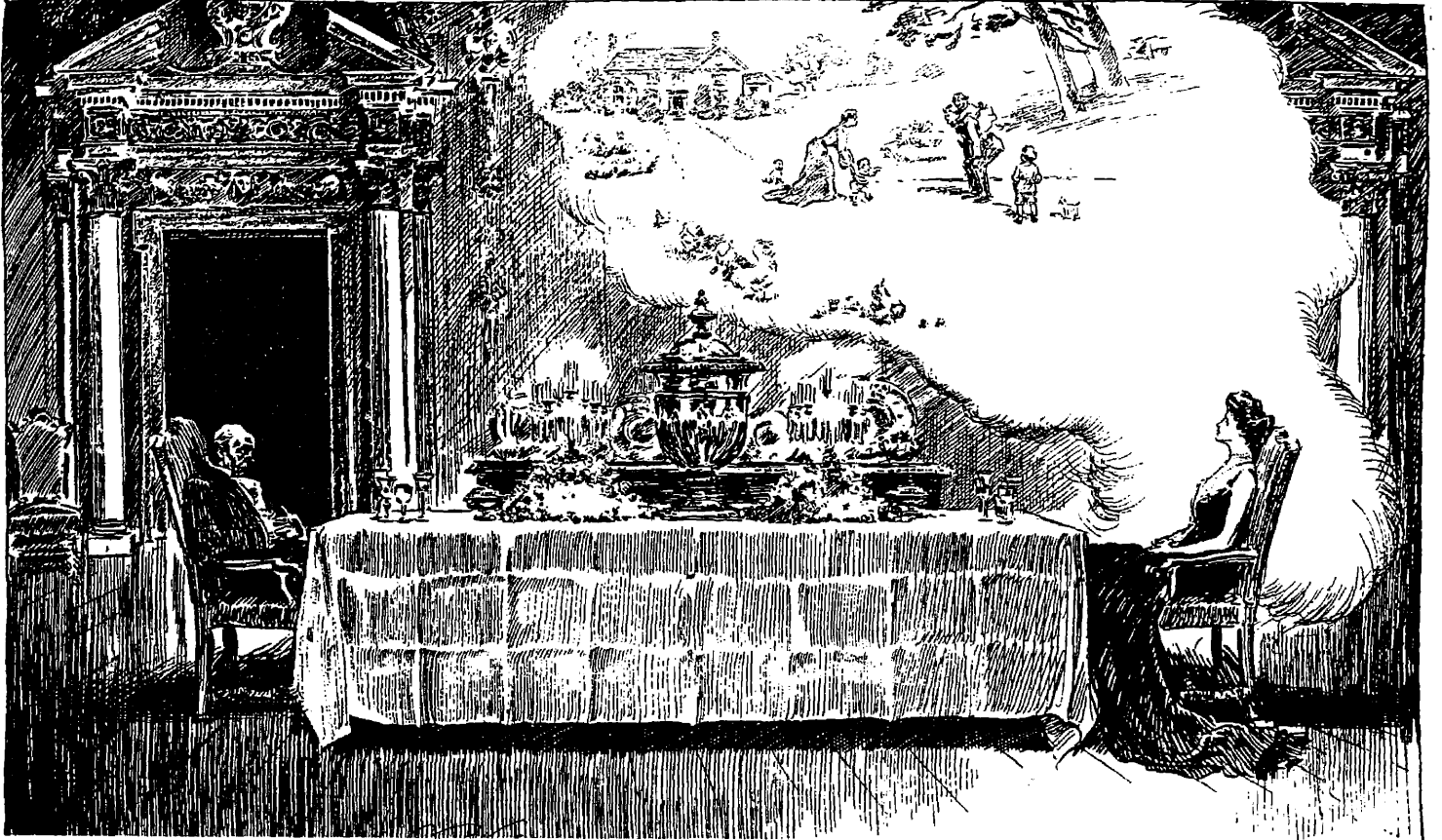
Copyrighted by Harrison Fisher, 1914. Published by the American Book Company, 490 Broadway, New York, N. Y.

Courtesy, The Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College.

Figure 2a



Figure 3 THE GREATEST GAME IN THE WORLD—HIS MOVE



A Castle in the Air.

These young girls who marry millionaires should stop dreaming.

Figure 4

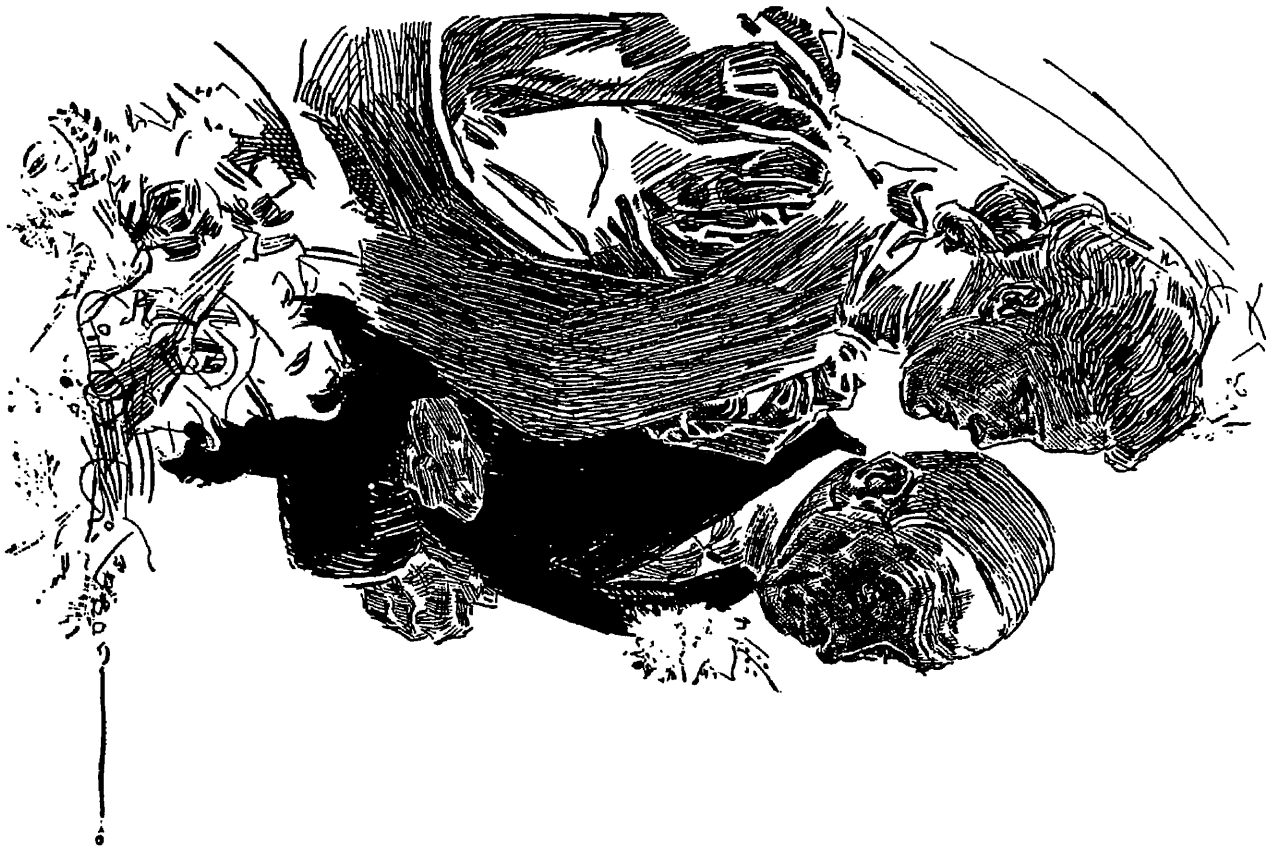


Figure 5

TWO BLIND WOMEN

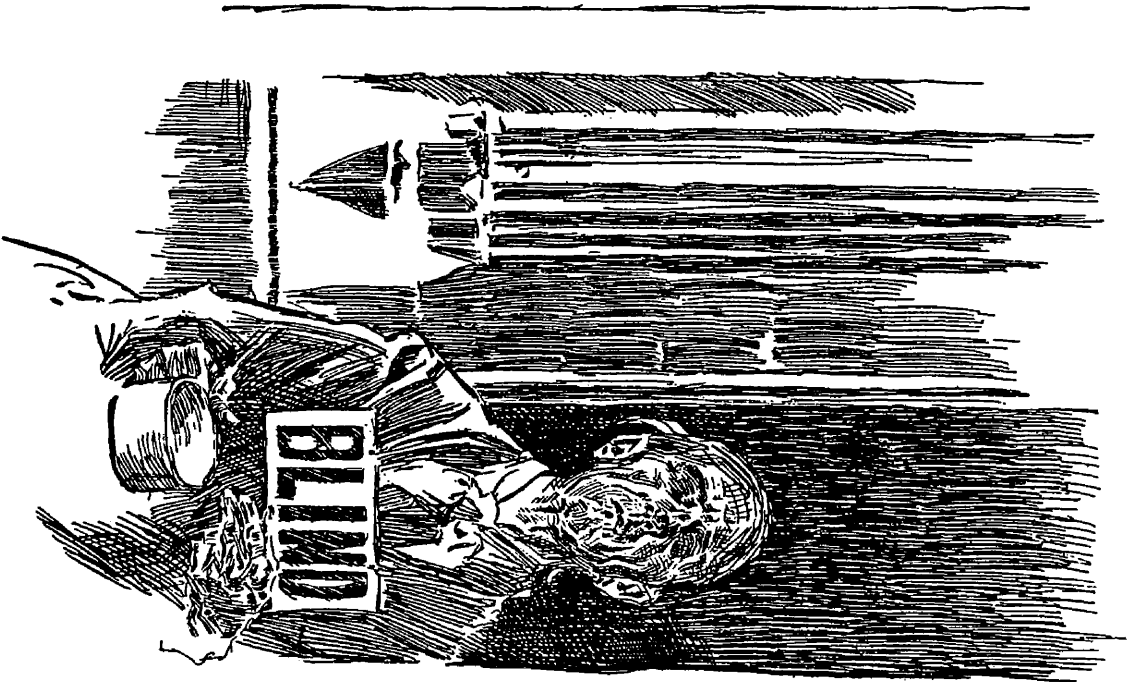




Figure 6

SOME THINK THAT SHE HAS REMAINED IN RETIREMENT TOO LONG.
OTHERS ARE SURPRISED THAT SHE IS ABOUT SO SOON.



STEPPED ON.

Figure 7

THE COMING GAME

YALE VERSUS VASARA



Figure 8



AN AMBASSADOR'S BALL IN THE DAYS TO COME.

Figure 9

Chapter Three: The Overt Feminism of John Held, Jr.

Held drew his flapper as the fashionable, and therefore social, counterpoint to her sister the Gibson Girl. In the process he created the flapper uniform, a realistic and detailed external expression of social change. But if Held identified key topics and characters signifying women's liberation, he approbated them not wholly as a documentation. Realism appeared in the interest of communicating an overall attitude.

--Shelley Armitage

If Charles Dana Gibson hastened the women's movement in America, it can also be said that his own career was cut short in the process. Gibson's subtle rebellion prompted a more radical image of femininity in the mass media, and the Gibson girl was made obsolete by her own example. As the advertising and magazine industries began searching for a bolder ideal in the first decade of the twentieth century, they turned their attention toward youthful, working-class women in urban centers like New York City. What they discovered was a new generation of independent, fun-loving girls who were in a position to lead a national revolution in manners and morals. One New York artist by the name of John Held Jr. was able to capture the vitality of these modern women in his drawings, which commonly appeared in popular magazines like *Judge*, *Vanity Fair*, *Life*, and *The New Yorker*. By the second decade of the new century, Held had replaced Gibson as the chief illustrator of the American feminine ideal. The "Held flapper," as his ideal came to be known, set a standard of womanhood that seemed to contradict the standard previously set by Gibson. Historian Kenneth A. Yellis writes: "The flapper could hardly have been a more thorough repudiation of the Gibson girl if that had been her intent, as, in a sense, it was."¹ The same historians and feminists who shun the Gibson girl as a symbol

of progress have continuously praised the flapper as the savior of the early twentieth-century women's movement. The Held flapper may have been a role model for the first generation of politically-liberated women in America, but a closer examination of the image suggests that it was a largely superficial emblem of progress. As in the case of Gibson, Held's contribution to the women's movement can be assessed through his artistic statements about women's clothing, careers, education, marriage, sexuality, manners, recreation and political power.

First and foremost, the Held flapper was recognized as an icon of fashion. Her arrival around 1913 marked a radical departure from the genteel image that had been preserved in the Gibson illustrations. Taking her name from an English description of awkward, pre-pubescent girls, the flapper offered American women a new approach to womanhood through style and dress. Her raised hemline, rolled stockings, bobbed hair and painted face were the external markings of her liberation from the restrictive concept of nineteenth-century femininity, and she wore them proudly. Like the Gibson girl, the flapper's style was emulated by young women across America. In spite of a large number of attempts that were made to pass bills outlawing the new flapper look, Held's heroine continued to dominate the pages of the nation's leading fashion magazines. Writing for *The New Republic* in 1925, Bruce Bliven voiced the following protest about the Held flapper and her many followers:

Not since 1820 has feminine apparel been so frankly abbreviated as at present; and never, on this side of the Atlantic, until you go back to the little summer frocks of Pocahontas. This year's styles have gone quite a

long step toward nudity. Nor is this merely the sensible half of the population dressing as everyone ought to, in hot weather. Last winter's styles weren't so dissimilar, except that they were covered up by fur coats and you got the full effect only indoors. And improper costumes never have their full force unless worn on the street. Next year's styles, from all one hears, will be, as they already are on the continent, even more so.²

Apparently, critics like Bliven failed to discourage the flapper trend. By the mid-1920's, the Held flapper had already secured her place as the queen of fashion in the American mass media.

While the flapper uniform stirred a moral controversy between the older and younger generations, early twentieth-century proponents of women's dress reform viewed Held's ideal as a welcome sign of change. Through clothing and personal appearance, the younger generation of women realized that they could consciously and openly display their newfound autonomy. They took pride in defying the Parisian trendsetters and American stylists who, according to Frederick Lewis Allen, had "predicted the return of longer skirts"³ by the mid-1920's. Allen writes: "Despite all they could do, however, the knee-length skirt remained standard until the decade was approaching its end."⁴ Held's popularity as an artist can be attributed to his ability to capture this external rebellion and sell it back to a younger generation of American women who were seeking to make a political and social statement. Armitage, Held's biographer, writes: "The flapper's dress Held saw as her uniform, which identified the role of its wearer."⁵ Her role, in fact, seems to have been that of a crusader. One popular Held drawing features a flapper clinging to

her silk stocking as tightly as a soldier might cling to his weapon (see figure 1). The caption reads "Hold 'em!" Regardless of whatever obstacles she encountered, the Held flapper was always ready for combat. Her uniform could not betray her. Even her physical frame - thin and boyish - made her a stronger advocate of gender equality. She could stand up to any man, and she was willing to cast off her traditional femininity to prove it. Held regarded the bobbing of the hair as the quintessential mark of liberation (see figure 2). Still, his heroine possessed a unique charm and attractiveness. Dorothy and John Tarrant have concluded: "The genius of John Held lay in his ability to create, through the grace of his line and unerring taste, a world that grew ever more beautiful as skirts got shorter and fun got wilder."⁶ The younger generation of American women were anxious to follow him into this world. Held became the artistic hero of their cause.

While Held's flapper has become synonymous with the women's liberation movement in the 1920's mass media, historians and feminists would do well to reassess the flapper uniform and its impact on American culture. The uniform may have freed females from the restrictive nineteenth-century corset and petticoat, but this new style seems to have posed a new set of problems for American women. One problem appears to have been the growth of pornography. Joanne Meyerowitz claims that the older generation of women viewed the arrival of the revealing flapper image with ambivalence:

Women supporters welcomed a visual rhetoric that they read as a positive post-Victorian rejection of bodily shame and a healthy respect for female beauty. In contrast, women protesters struggled to reassert their diminishing moral authority, to wrest control from the mass market of

supply and demand. They publicly denounced the new taxonomy of sexual display which they saw as harmful, especially to women and youth.⁷

As it happened, the concerns of these protesters proved to be legitimate. Meyerowitz notes: "The American slang 'cheesecake' entered the common parlance around 1915 as a term for publicly acceptable, mass-produced images of semi-nude women."⁸ Coincidentally, this was around the same time that Held's flapper entered the American cultural scene. It seems safe to say, then, that the presence of the flapper image encouraged the growth of the pornography industry in the early twentieth-century. The flapper's boyish-thin figure posed additional problems for American women. Sara Burrows, a staff writer for *Life*, has traced the emergence of excessive dieting and eating disorders in America to the "liberated" ideal of the 1920's. Burrows writes:

That extreme thinness was one of the most shocking aspects of the flapper look for the parents and grandparents of fashionable Jazz Age women, and it was something new to fashion. Until the flapper clothes required it, a fashionable shape depended much more on a woman's underwear than her ancestors.⁹

Fashion historian Michelle Mock Murton views constrictive nineteenth-century clothing as a form of mental imprisonment equal to that which was spurred by the flapper image:

"This phenomenon is not entirely dissimilar to the twentieth-century chimera which created social diseases for women such as bulimia and anorexia nervosa."¹⁰ Interestingly, The Held flapper also enslaved women to the beauty and cosmetics industries. According to marketing researchers Michael Jacobsen and Laurie Anne Mazur, the advertisers and

magazine publishers of the 1920's aimed "to instill the self-consciousness that would eventually fuel the consumer culture."¹¹ The painted Held flapper with the rebel attitude became a poster girl for the beauty and cosmetics industry. Through her, American women were led to believe that true beauty could be found inside a lipstick case and a rouge compact. In actuality, then, it seems that the flapper's "liberated" style cost her more than she could have ever realized. The pornography, dieting, and cosmetics industries grew rich off her proclaimed freedom, and they would continue to do so in decades to come. Interestingly, these industries would eventually become the targets of a new women's movement in America.

Clearly, the feminine ideal of the 1920's had to exist to the "New Woman" of the 1920's as something more than a fashion plate. Clothing could serve as an external signifier of change, but the young women of Held's generation understood that real change had to come from within. Many of these women sought careers that would provide a sense of financial independence and personal fulfillment. Women's historian Dorothy M. Brown notes: "By 1920, women composed 23.6 percent of the labor force."¹² Interestingly, the women of the 1920's found themselves in a different position than women of previous generations. Women who had entered the work force in earlier decades usually stayed there for a limited number of years. After marriage, they generally surrendered themselves to quiet lives of domesticity.¹³ The women of the 1920's, however, were the first generation to balance careers with marriage. Brown writes:

Married women who did try 'something else' by working outside the home did so for a variety of reasons: the emphasis on the new woman and new career options; the escalating standard of living which called for two

salaries; the desire to make a jump to the middle class, and, most urgently, the need to contribute to the family food and shelter. Generally all reasons were included under the umbrella of 'necessity.' The 1920 census recorded that one in four wage-earning women was married and one in eleven of all married women was employed.¹⁴

Regardless of their reasons for seeking employment outside of the home, these women were met with a growing number of career options. While some continued to pursue traditional female professions like teaching and nursing, others ventured into exciting new professions in business. Labor historian Sharon Hartman Strom has referred to the first three decades of the twentieth century as the period of "the feminization of American office work."¹⁵ It appears that 1920's women were the first to fully benefit from this gender shift in business and clerical work. Strom writes:

Although most women hired for industrial jobs during World War I throughout the country were fired in 1919, women office workers often stayed on; the war had demanded more deep-rooted modernization, permanently increased the number of jobs in the office, and installed women in them for the foreseeable future.¹⁶

Undoubtedly, the 1920's was an exciting era of professional opportunity and advancement for American women.

As an artist, Held was aware that women were playing an increasingly significant role in the world of work. The Held flapper was recognized in the mass media as the

leader of new-order working girls, and her example was highly regarded by the younger generation. Yellis writes: "The ideal woman now, for those who did not work as well as for those who did, was self-sufficient, intelligent, capable and active. She possessed skills and had acquired needs unknown to her mother."¹⁷ In the 1920's, these skills were more important than class. In fact, class, like gender, could not define the Held flapper's capacity for professionalism. Frederick Lewis Allen writes:

Up to this time girls of the middle classes who had wanted to "do something" had been largely restricted to school-teaching, social-service work, nursing, stenography, and clerical work in business houses. But now they poured out of the schools and colleges into all manner of new occupations. They besieged the offices of publishers and advertisers; they went into tea room management until there threatened to be more purveyors than consumers of chicken patties and cinnamon toast; they sold antiques, sold real estate, opened smart little shops, and finally invaded department stores. In 1920 the department store was in the mind of the average college girl a rather bourgeois institution which employed "poor shop girls"; by the end of the decade college girls were standing in line for openings in the misses' sports-wear department and even selling behind the counter in the hope that some day fortune might smile upon them and make them buyers or stylists.¹⁸

This remarkable transformation has been attributed to the boldness of the Held heroine. Historians and feminists have shunned the Gibson girl of earlier days as an elitist ideal, but

Held's flapper has been credited with breaking the barriers of class and gender.

Historically, Held is remembered as a benefactor of the working-class woman.

While Held rejected class distinctions, the Held flapper does not appear to have been as professionally-liberated as some might contend. She had been freed from the shackles of nineteenth-century domesticity, yet she was not bent on career distinction. In truth, the flapper was too preoccupied with physical appearance and leisure activities to pursue professional endeavors. Her flashy wardrobe may have shaken the world of women's fashion, but it was not the typical garb of a serious career girl. Yellis writes:

The new office situation made constant demands on women and necessitated a dress and grooming appropriate for it. Perfumes as well as natural body odors, for example, had to be minimal in "the enforced intimacy of heterosexual office work," so that the "physical being" may be de-emphasized and "the social role and the office" stressed. Sexuality had to be understated in order for the work of the office to continue smoothly. The career woman had to "conceal and control" her femininity, to "reduce herself to an *office*" by minimizing her "natural shape, smell, color, texture, and movement and to replace these by impersonal neutral surfaces." Hence, for example, the popularity of the colors black and beige in the 1920's.¹⁹

Certainly, the flapper did not meet these requirements. The Held drawings seemed to measure liberation in terms of fashion and sexual expression, not professional opportunity or advancement. A series of drawings by Held's wife Myrtle in 1916 even appeared to

mock career-minded females. The drawings, which are collectively titled "Eight New Professions For the Ladies" (see figure 3), underestimate the value of women in the business world. Instead of working as real-estate agents or secretaries, the "career women" in these drawings have devoted themselves to frivolous pursuits such as dog-walking, vampiring, and posing as rhythmically-expressive dancers. The caption reads: "Own up, now; don't you yearn to become a tired business woman?" Such drawings hardly do justice to the women who were making great professional strides in the decade of the 1920's. In the wake of the Nineteenth Amendment, they appear nothing short of discouraging.

If women were in need of a professional role model in the 1920's, they were also in need of an educated one. For both sexes, the decade was a period of increased educational opportunities. Dorothy Brown notes: "One-fourth of the nation was either learning or teaching in its schools."²⁰ Female enrollment in institutions of higher learning had been climbing steadily since the turn of the century, and colleges like Vassar and Wellesley were turning out more educated women than ever before. Lois Banner writes:

Even though the higher education of women was often viewed as a way of extending women's traditional roles, in practice such education often had different results. Particularly among the women's colleges of the Northeast, the belief that women students had to equal and excel male students elsewhere and that college-educated women had a special mission to society and to women was quickly generated.²¹

By the 1920's, women were indeed using their educations to compete with men in various

fields. This was particularly evident in the world of business, where "women were more likely than men to be hired for office jobs that were being subjected to systemization, mechanization, or both."²² The Nineteenth Amendment had given them a voice in government, and, for many, a college education was the next step toward liberation.

Interestingly, the Held flapper also failed to endorse the higher education of women in the 1920's. While no one can deny that the flapper had a smart attitude in her dealings with men, she did not possess the same academic vigor that Gibson's heroine had demonstrated at the turn of the century. Like professionalism, education seemed incompatible with the flapper's overall image. It cramped her fun-loving style. The cover of a March 1926 issue of *Life* (see figure 4) features the Held flapper in the classic "Thinker" pose, yet her capacity for intellectual thought is defined by the reading material in her hand. That material happens to be one of the ever-popular "confession" magazines of the period. The illustration seems to suggest that women are not capable of higher-order thinking; that they reflect only on trite matters of romance and fashion. The image is highly misrepresentative of the true female "thinkers" who were using education as a step-ladder to equality. Once again, Held had underestimated the role of women in 1920's American culture.

While the number of women seeking professional and educational opportunities outside of the home skyrocketed²³ in the 1920's, the notion of domesticity was not altogether abandoned. In truth, most women's lives still centered around marriage. According to Brown, the 1920 census revealed that "sixty percent of American women over the age of fifteen were married," and that "in all groups and areas marriage had increased."²⁴ It seems, however, that the institution of marriage underwent a makeover in

the 1920's. New ideas about the role of women were taking shape, and the notion of the "wife-companion" emerged. This allowed the married woman to form a more equal partnership with her husband. She was no longer strictly confined to the role mother and caretaker in the home. The appearance of new household appliances and time-saving gadgets also helped to redefine the responsibilities of wifedom. Historian James McGovern writes:

Married women, especially those in the upper and middle classes, enjoyed commensurate opportunities. Experts in household management advised women to rid themselves of the maid and turn to appliances as the "maid of all service." Statistics in money expended on those industries which reduced home labor for the wife suggest that women in middle-income families gained considerable leisure after 1914.²⁵

So, for many women in the 1920's, marriage was less burdensome than it had been for their mothers and grandmothers. It was possible for a wife to maintain a sense of personal freedom and autonomy under the new rules of matrimony. Still, not every marriage thrived under these new rules. Allen writes: "The divorce rate ... continued its steady increase; for every 100 marriages there were 8.8 divorces in 1910, 13.4 divorces in 1920, and 16.5 divorces in 1928 - almost one divorce for every six marriages."²⁶ It is not known how many of these divorces were actually filed by women, but one thing remains clear: women in the 1920's no longer felt compelled to stay in unfulfilling or abusive relationships.

Historically, the flapper is viewed as an opponent of marriage. In his analysis of the

two early twentieth-century feminine ideals, Yellis states: "The Gibson girl was maternal and wifely, while the flapper was boyish and single."²⁷ Many self-proclaimed flappers embraced the single life wholeheartedly, using their bachelorette status as another expression of personal freedom. Certainly, women were not as financially dependent upon men as they had been in previous decades. "Flapper Jane," the subject of Bruce Bliven's 1925 article of the same name, offered the following statement:

Not so many girls are looking for a life mealticket nowadays. Lots of them prefer to earn their own living and omit the home-and-baby act. Well, anyhow, postpone it years and years. They think a bachelor girl can and should do everything a bachelor man does.²⁸

Although "Jane" was devoted to flapperhood, she understood that marriage was still inevitable for the majority of young women coming of age in the 1920's. Contrary to popular belief, the flapper was not the eternal bachelorette that contemporary historians have made her out to be. Women like "Jane" enjoyed their single years, to be sure, but many agreed that flapperhood was only a temporary phase of life.

As it appears, Held did nothing to alter this understanding. His illustrations celebrated the new freedom of the American woman, but the Held flapper, like her real-life imitators, did not dismiss the idea of marriage. In truth, Held's flapperhood was an exclusive rebellion reserved for the younger generation of women. Cigarettes and silk stockings were theirs for a time, but even Held's own heroines were forced to surrender to a more traditional way of life. This is best illustrated in a cartoon that appeared in *The San Francisco Call* on May 7, 1927 (see figure 5). The cartoon focuses on the wedding

of a flapper named Peggy, who once "dreamt of a sheik and incense." In the end, Peggy settles with a cathedral wedding to the boy next door. Interestingly, the cartoon is titled "Peggy's Progress." A Packard Automobile advertisement published that same year (see figure 6) tells the story of a saleswoman whose "automobile expertise" endears her to a customer. Their relationship also ends in marriage. Held appears less enthusiastic about this union. The caption reads: "There is always the chance that she might 'sell herself' and have to marry the prospect in order to put over her sale." Still, it reinforces the notion that marriage was indeed inevitable for the 1920's flapper. Both Peggy and the saleswoman approach the altar with bowed heads, surrendering themselves to their fates. They serve as a reminder that marriage still had a place in the new femininity of the 1920's.

Despite her reputation as "boyish" and "single," no one can deny the flapper's leadership in the sexual revolution of the 1920's. Reformers and activists had been pushing for such a revolution long before the appearance of the flapper in the mass media, but it can hardly be said that the image contributed to the advancement of their cause. The flapper's "sexual liberation" was not based on issues of birth control and women's health, which had topped the feminist agenda since the turn of the century, but on the mere freedom to flaunt sexuality in the public sphere. Allen writes:

Modesty, reticence, and chivalry were going out of style; women no longer wanted to be "ladylike" or could appeal to their daughters to be "wholesome"; it was too widely suspected that the old-fashioned lady had been a sham and that the "wholesome" girl was merely inhibiting a nasty mind and would come to no good end.²⁹

One must question the extent to which the mass media was responsible for this social transformation. The magazine and advertising industries were marketing sexuality as the ultimate expression of youth and beauty, yet, in reality, their audience may not have been altogether comfortable with these media images. Lynn D. Gordon writes: "The sexual 'revolution' never went so far that women lived their lives with a series of sexual partners, and no legal attachments."³⁰ As previously stated, women of the decade continued to choose marriage over a life of promiscuity.

It has been shown that Held still regarded the institution of marriage as "progress" for the "New Woman" of the 1920's, yet the overt sexuality of the Held flapper set a new standard for the American feminine ideal. In particular, Held's image promoted the use of sex as a bargaining tool for women to use freely in their relations with men. His most famous heroine, Margy, is guilty of such acts. Margy's feminine power was strictly based on her sexuality. She thrived on her ability to charm men, to reward her "rescuers" with kisses (see figure 7), and to make herself sexually appealing through the purchase of rouge, french perfume, and silky underwear (see figure 8). Only recently have historians begun to examine the social implications of this "sexual revolution" in the 1920's mass media. Joanne Meyerowitz writes: "To suggest that women used sex in the public realm detracted from the fight for equal rights because it implied that women advanced themselves differently, and less honorably, than men."³¹ The flapper's sexuality, then, must not be interpreted as a measure of liberation. If anything, it demoralized the American woman and reduced her to an inferior status in the public sphere.

The sexual revolution in the 1920's mass media was actually a reaction to a larger revolution in manners and morals. Most historians have attributed this revolution to the

event of the First World War, which created a generational divide in American culture. Others, including James McGovern, have maintained that it had its roots in the earlier Progressive Era. Regardless of what sparked such a revolution, one thing remains certain: by the 1920's, more American women were drinking, dancing, smoking and swearing in public than ever before. It should be noted, however, that this revolution was fought between generations, not sexes. A self-proclaimed flapper, Ellen Welles Page, offered the following explanation in her "Appeal to Parents", which was published in a December 1922 issue of *Outlook* magazine:

We are the Younger Generation. The war tore away our spiritual foundations and challenged our faith. We are struggling to regain our equilibrium. The times have made us older and more experienced than you were at our age. It must be so with each succeeding generation if it is to keep pace with the rapidly advancing and mighty tide of civilization.³²

Although the revolution affected both sexes, most historians would agree that it impacted females on a more drastic level than males. They were, it seems, at the heart of the movement. The revolution in manners and morals would forever change the perception of women in American society.

The flapper image has become synonymous with the early twentieth-century revolution in manners and morals. The Held woman typically engaged in those very behaviors that challenged traditional views about femininity and pitted the older generation of Americans against the younger. She attended petting parties and smoked in

public, to be sure, yet her relations with men at times appear to have been based on the tried-and-true "domestic humor" formula employed by Gibson some twenty years earlier. Interestingly, Held altered this formula in a way that detracted from its original meaning. Where Gibson had used the "big woman" motif to elevate women to a position of power, Held used it to modify female behavior. Carolyn Kitch observes:

The artist occasionally used the big woman - little man motif, sometimes in ways that mimicked the evilness of women in 1910's imagery -- for instance, the physically violent young woman on the cover of a 1923 *Judge* issue [see figure 9]. Yet unlike earlier versions of the destructive woman, Held's fighting girl was unglamorous and clearly ridiculous; ... The only truly oversized women in Held's visual world were overweight ones, such as the grotesquely muscular woman (whom no man would want anyway).³³

Clearly, the girl on the cover of the 1923 issue of *Judge* can be considered such a woman. She exercises physical control and power over the man in the illustration, yet she has paid a price for it. Her power has reduced her to that undesirable "muscular" status that Kitch refers to in the statement above. Images like these reinforced the notion that power was incompatible with physical attractiveness. In Held's world, a woman had to choose between the two.

Just as the assertive woman came under the scrutiny of Held, so did women who engaged in those risky behaviors associated with the revolution in manners and morals. As previously stated, the flappers in Held's drawing were avid drinkers and smokers, yet

they also paid a price for their deviance. A closer examination of Held's work suggests that the artist himself may have blamed his own heroine for the demise of female respectability and the nineteenth-century "Cult of True Womanhood." A cartoon entitled "The Ladies of Rum Row" (see figure 10) that was printed in a 1924 issue of *American Legion Weekly* featured a line-up of women who were in direct violation of the prohibition laws, thereby contributing to the decade's crime problem. Another cartoon printed the same year (see figure 11) emphasized the threat that female bootleggers posed to the nation's respectable prohibition forces. Both cartoons indicate that women's liberation was responsible for the nation's moral decline. The media portrayed the "New Woman" as the sole perpetrator of the problems straining American society, and Held's illustrations supported this view. Under the reign of his flapper, the old American moral code was rapidly deteriorating.

If the 1920's was the decade of revolution, the world of sports certainly underwent one of its own. It is remembered as perhaps the greatest sporting era in American history. Golfing, tennis, boxing, wrestling, football and swimming were established as the national pastimes of a generation that had the advantage of recreation and leisure. Allen writes:

The country club had become the focus of social life in hundreds of communities. But it was an even greater era for watching sports than for taking part in them. Promoters, chambers of commerce, newspaper owners, sports writers, press agents, radio broadcasters, all found profit in exploiting the public's mania for sporting shows and its willingness to be persuaded that the great athletes of the day were supermen. Never before

had such a blinding light of publicity been turned upon the gridiron, the diamond, and the prize ring.³⁴

Women were not excluded from this national sporting sensation. If they were not all participants, they at least had their share of role models. Profit had also been found in "superwomen" like Gertrude Ederle, the first woman to swim the English Channel, and Helen Wills, champion tennis player. The younger generation of American women turned to these national heroines to pave the way in the world of sports. They also looked to alternative forms of amusement in the night-life of American cities. Dancing remained the favorite pastime of working-class women who had more leisure time as a result of the shorter work day. Even those who worked longer hours or at more than one job were active participants in such recreational pursuits. Lois Banner writes: "If we can believe contemporary commentators, young women who worked long hours at boring occupations during the day did not collapse with fatigue at night, but rather desired nothing more than to forget themselves in activities like dancing."³⁵ Certainly, recreation was a significant part of the female experience in the 1920's. Whether they were watching their favorite athletes, engaging in sports themselves, or dancing the night away, women were making use of their leisure time.

Although most historians would agree with Caroly Kitch's statement that "Held's excessively thin flapper had little physical presence,"³⁶ the image is often praised as the first of the athletic feminine ideals in the American mass media. This may have less to do with the flapper's physical frame and more to do with her lighter, flexible clothing. After all, the Gibson girl participated in every active sport from golf to football, yet historians have underestimated her as an athletic heroine because she appears too restricted by her

traditional wardrobe. The flapper was physically free of such restraints. In 1925, Bruce Bliven of *The New Republic* assessed her athletic liberation through clothing:

Here is a real point. The recent history of the Great Disrobing Movement can be checked up in another way by looking at the bathing costumes which have been accepted without question at successive intervals. There are still a few beaches near New York City which insist on more clothes than anyone can safely swim in, and thereby help to drown several young women each year. But in most places --universally in the West -- a girl is now compelled to wear no more than a man.³⁷

The new similarity between women's and men's swimming wear might have led to greater equality in recreational pursuits across the board, not just at the beach. Even if the flapper was not physically built to compete with men, she could dress appropriately for the challenge. In the opinion of contemporary historians and feminists, her physical mobility elevated her to a new status in the athletic sphere.

Although her style was indeed lighter and more flexible than that of the Gibson girl, the Held flapper may be an object of undue praise where the early twentieth-century women's recreational movement is concerned. It can not be said that the new clothing styles of the 1920's were entirely conducive to athletics. In fact, an examination of Held's illustrations reveals that the "sporty" flapper still maintained a sense of fashion-consciousness in recreational activities. The flapper appears to have been as committed to her cosmetics and silk stockings as the Gibson girl had been to her corset. In 1923, feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman warned young flappers across the nation: "A generation

of white-nosed women who wears furs in Summer cannot lay claim to any real progress."³⁸ For the Held flapper, however, the world of sports and recreation was not a battle ground for equality; instead, it was a place to meet and secure the validation of men. This could often be accomplished through traditional, gender-appropriate activities like dancing and motoring. Where the Gibson girl had been pictured in fierce athletic competition with men, the Held flapper existed only as a male companion. Heroines like "Sentimental Sally" (see figure 12) appeared bold and daring in their flying pursuits, yet they failed to reflect the ambitions of real-life heroines like Amelia Earhart. They were still largely dependent on the opposite sex. The Held flapper was part of an exciting new era in recreation and leisure, to be sure, but her reputation as an athletic ideal is questionable.

A final and perhaps most significant new freedom enjoyed by women of the decade was, of course, the right to vote. The passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in August 1920 was a milestone in the American women's movement. Still, it did not complete the political liberation of women. Rothman writes:

The suffrage campaign had not been fought on the grounds of equality or equal opportunity - and the few efforts, such as those of the National Woman's Party, to move the legacy in that direction ran into the bitter and successful opposition of the Progressives themselves. It is all the more predictable, then, that in the absence of such an ideology women in the 1920's expressed themselves in personal and private terms. Flaunting conventions on the dance floor was a good deal more feasible than battling quota systems.³⁹

Rothman makes a valid point. Voting rights had indeed been the ultimate goal of the Progressive-era suffragettes, but few had set their sights on equal opportunity. It must not be erroneously assumed that the Nineteenth Amendment solved the problem of gender inequality in America. Although their overall condition had improved as a result of its passage, women were still subject to discrimination in the work force and in the political arena. Unfortunately, the younger generation expressed little interest in taking up the cause. Allen writes: "Few of the younger women could rouse themselves to even a passing interest in politics: to them it was a sordid and futile business, without flavor and without hope."⁴⁰ As Rothman suggests, it was easier to defy conventional dress and behavior than to wage another long political battle. In this sense, the women's liberation movement came to a standstill in the 1920's.

The flapper symbolizes the waning enthusiasm for feminine politics in the 1920's. As a youthful ideal, she had to be separated from the outdated suffragettes of the Progressive era. Although she belonged to the first generation of women voters, she was not interested in the battles her mother and grandmother had fought. Bruce Bliven's article suggests that the real-life imitators of Held's ideal were prone to a sort of political passivity that they themselves recognized as a weakness. His "Flapper Jane" admitted: " 'Feminism' has won a victory so nearly complete that we have even forgotten the fierce challenge which once inhered the very word."⁴¹ If the challenge was forgotten, media imagery may have been to blame. As the creator of the new feminine ideal, Held appeared far less concerned with the political empowerment of women than his predecessor had been. His heroines are concrete examples of those who sought liberation on the dance floor (see figure 13). Unlike the Gibson girl, they were not strong figures in

the political arena. In a sense, they deprived young female voters of the kind of political leadership they would so desperately need in the years to come.

In conclusion, it appears that the Held flapper had definite shortcomings as a feminine ideal. Although she has often been praised as the heroine of the women's liberation movement, historians would do well to reconsider her influence on American culture. Held's statements about fashion, careers, education, marriage, sexuality, manners, recreation and power represent a sort of superficial liberation that may have gone undetected for several decades. Despite her own enthusiasm for Held as an artist, Armitage herself even questions the flapper as a feminine ideal. She writes: "It was the expressionism of the flapper - her externalization of ideals - that, once co-opted by the media and aped by the public, negated her intellectual effect as a symbol, so that her deeper purpose and meaning was lost."⁴² If this "deeper purpose" existed at all, it remains unclear. Held's fun-loving, rule-defying young woman will always hold a special place in the American imagination, but the artist's contribution to women's progress may not have been as substantial as previously thought.

Notes

1. Kenneth A. Yellis, "Prosperity's Child: Some Thoughts on the Flapper," American Quarterly 21 (Spring 1969), 44.
2. Bruce Bliven, "Flapper Jane," The New Republic 44 (Sept. 1925), 66-67.
3. Frederick Lewis Allen, Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920's, First Perennial Classics Edition (New York: Harper Collins, Inc., 2000), 90.
4. Ibid.
5. Shelley Armitage, John Held Jr: Illustrator of the Jazz Age (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1987), 79.
6. Dorothy and John Tarrant, "It was the Jazz Age and John Held Jr. drew it and lived it," Smithsonian 17 (Sept. 1986), 98.
7. Joanne Meyerowitz, "Women, Cheesecake, and Borderline Material: Responses to Girlie Pictures in the Mid-Twentieth Century US," Journal of Women's History 8 (2001), 2.
8. Ibid.
9. Sara Burrows, "The Flapper: 20th Century Thin Takes Shape," Life, 2.
10. Michelle Mock Murton, "Behind the 'Barred Windows:' The Imprisonment of Women's Bodies and Minds in Nineteenth-Century America," WILLA (Volume IV), 22-26.
11. Michael F. Jacobsen and Laurie Anne Mazur, "Sexism and Sexuality in Advertising," chap. in Marketing Madness: A Survival Guide for a Consumer Society (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1995), 3.
12. Dorothy M. Brown, Setting A Course: American Women in the 1920's (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987), 77.
13. The notion of women "surrendering to quiet domesticity" kept with the traditional nineteenth-century Cult of True Womanhood that pertained to white women only. According to Kathy Peiss, author of *Cheap Amusements*, the female labor force from 1880 to 1920 consisted largely of foreign-born women or daughters of immigrant parents (p.34). While most of them were young, unmarried women, there were also those who were married and worked out of necessity.

14. Brown, 109.
15. Sharon Hartman Strom, " 'Light Manufacturing' : The Feminization of American Office Work, 1900-1930," Industrial and Labor Relations 43 (Oct. 1989), 53.
16. Ibid., 68.
17. Yellis, 51.
18. Allen, 84.
19. Yellis, 53-54.
20. Brown, 127.
21. Lois W. Banner, Women in Modern America: A Brief History (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1974), 38.
22. Strom, 59.
23. Brown notes that women composed 23.6 percent of the labor force by 1920 (p. 77). She adds that married women sought employment "for a variety of reasons: the emphasis on the new woman and new career options; the escalating standard of living which called for two salaries; the desire to make a jump to the middle class, and most urgently, the need to contribute to the family food and shelter. Generally all reasons were included under the umbrella of 'necessity.' The 1920 census recorded that one in four wage-earning women was married and one in eleven of all married women was employed" (p.109).
Brown also indicates that this surge in female employment was accompanied by an increase in women's educational opportunities, which is evidenced by the following statistics: "In 1900, 85,000 women were in college; in 1920, the number increased to 283,000; by 1930, 481,000 were enrolled, 43.7 percent of the total college population" (p.133).
24. Brown, 102.
25. James R. McGovern, "The American Woman's Pre-World War I Freedom in Manners and Morals," Journal of American History 55 (Sept. 1968), 320-321.
26. Allen, 100.
27. Yellis, 44.
28. Bliven, 66-67.
29. Allen, 96-97.

30. Lynn D. Gordon, "The Gibson Girl Goes to College: Popular Culture and Women's Higher Education in the Progressive era, 1890-1920," American Quarterly 39 (Summer 1987), 224.

31. Meyerowitz, 8.

32. Ellen Welles Page, "A Flapper's Appeal to Parents," Outlook (Dec 1922), 607. The *Outlook* and *New Republic* were two common publications that featured arguments on both sides of the women's sexual revolution of the 1920's. While articles like Page's were popular and aimed toward older generations, they were typically challenged by critics like Bruce Bliven, who questioned: "Just what will the appalling consequences be?"

33. Carolyn Kitch, "Destructive Women and Little Men: Masculinity, the New Woman, and Power in 1910's Popular Media," Journal of Magazine & New Media Research (Fall 2000), 10.

34. Allen, 179.

35. Lois W. Banner, American Beauty (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), 197.

36. Kitch, 10.

37. Bliven, 66-67.

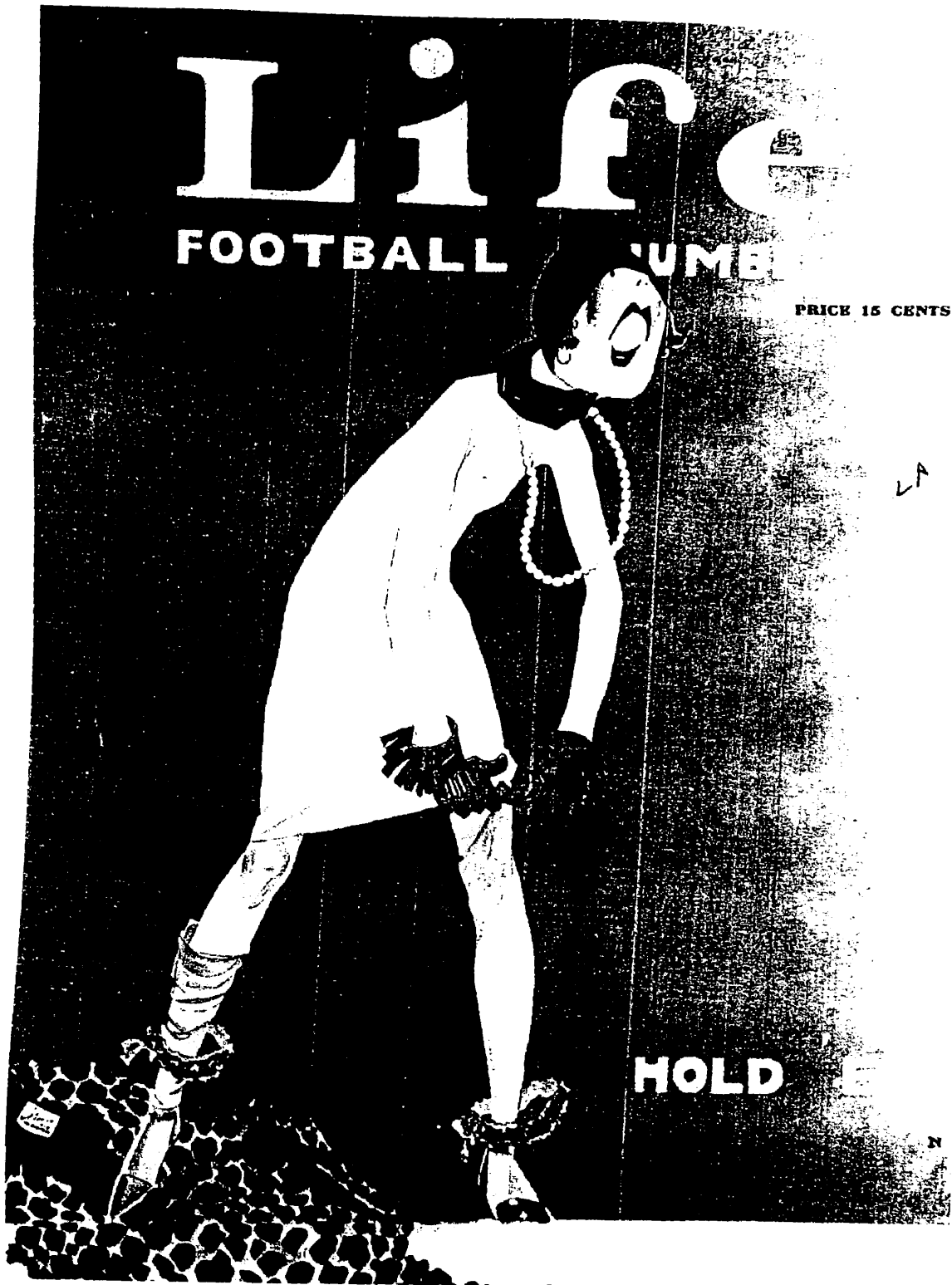
38. Sheila M. Rothman, Women's Proper Place: A History of Changing Ideals and Practices, 1870 to the present (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1978), 178.

39. *Ibid.*, 188.

40. Allen, 83.

41. Bliven, 66-67.

42. Armitage, 93-95.



Hold 'Em. *Life*, November 19, 1925. Permission of JB&R, Inc.

Figure 1

Life



Held's cover on December 18, 1924, for the old *Life* was captioned: "The Long and the Short of It."

Figure 2



Behold the Vorticist—the latest of the lady artists. She has renounced hair dressers, given up stars, and entered a nunnery for life. She inhabits Washington Square, and lives on Turkish cigarettes and the Freudian theory of dreams. Anyone can be me.



If everything else fails, you can always become a Very Librist. Any girl can be a Gertrude Stein. All the office equipment you need is a dictionary, a pair of shell-rimmed glasses, and an utter disregard for the feelings of your fellow creatures. Close your eyes and open your dictionary, write down a word—any word. Repeat the process until your page is full, and leave the rest to your loving readers.



Do you yearn to express yourself, rhythmically? Then, put on your last year's nightgown and an air of slothiness, rush out on the front lawn, and demonstrate to your neighbors that you believe in doing your Christmas shopping early.



Why not deal in dogs? It's being done this season. Just try to find a small shop, done up in Bull-terrier pink and blue. Then arrange the dogs of all nations in layers, and await results. If you lack confidence, just turn to the pages of dog advertising in this issue of Vanity Fair. Christmas must be coming, this year, in the dog days.

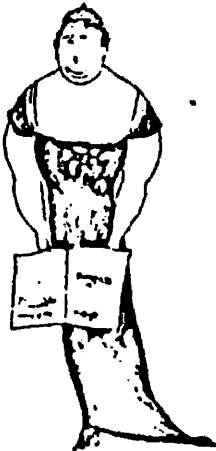
Here are Eight New Professions For the Ladies

Own up, now; don't you yearn to become a tired business woman?

SKETCHES BY MYATLE HELD



Some of our most unmarried women are taking up Prison Reform as an indoor sport this season. It necessitates sitting busily on one's desk and telephoning to prison wardens how to run their jobs and arranging who will speak at the next meeting of the Junior Sing-Sing Sewing Circle. Oh, death by capital punishment, where is thy sting!



And then, if you have the right figure for it, you can become one of those dowagers of the cabarets, who sing trembly things about "Sing, sweet bee—ind." Go in for tender things, just to take the diners' minds off their indie rubber sheet ailments. Always wear "Darling, I am growing old" lace, the entrée somewhere, and don't let the cheese escape before you give it "The Roney."



You can't train yourself to be the Hostess at a restaurant and dance—it's a gift. You must have a sweet and trusting look in your eyes, and you must never, under any circumstances, understand what a man means. We should strive to be kind to all these poor little and damdest Hostesses—for some of them don't even know where their next Rollo-Royce is coming from. Every hotel needs one.

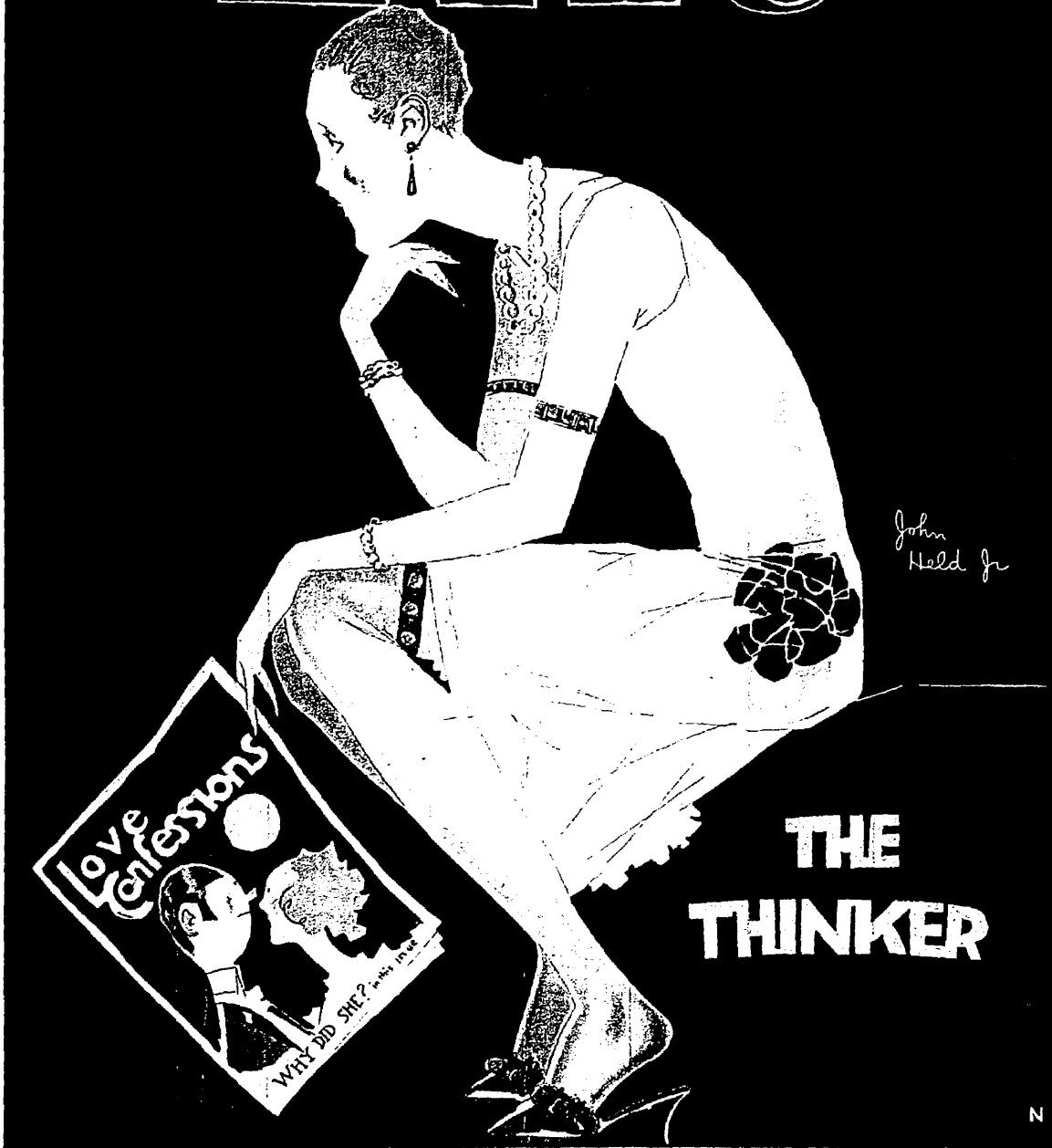


If you think you can train down to the weight, perhaps you can be a vampire. Study the workings of Theda Bara, Maximova, and other little rays of sunshine. Swathe yourself in one of those perilous bare-back gowns, and wear a single dagger in your hair. Remember that skulls are much worn, and that the whiter the face the better the vamp.

March 18
1926

Life

Price
15 cents



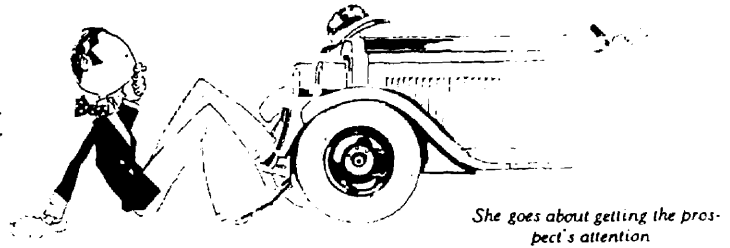
The Thinker. *Life*, March 18, 1926. Courtesy of Bill Blackbeard, The San Francisco Academy of Comic Art.

Figure 4

"WE Give YOU the LADIES"

By JOHN HELD, JR.

"An increasing number of motor car makers are availing themselves of feminine talent."—News item.



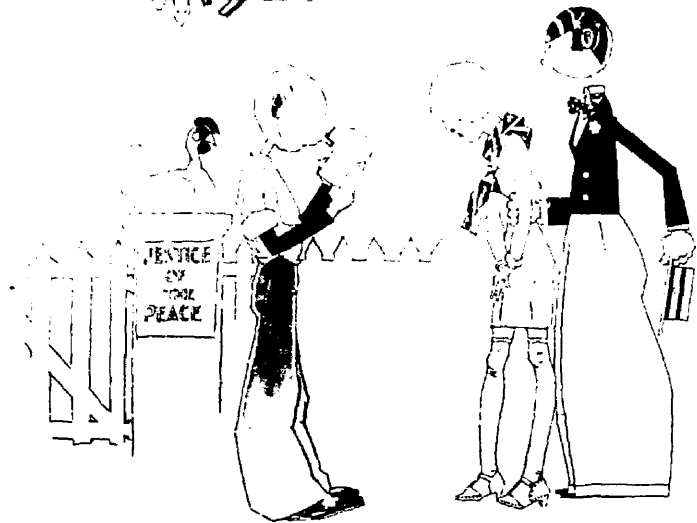
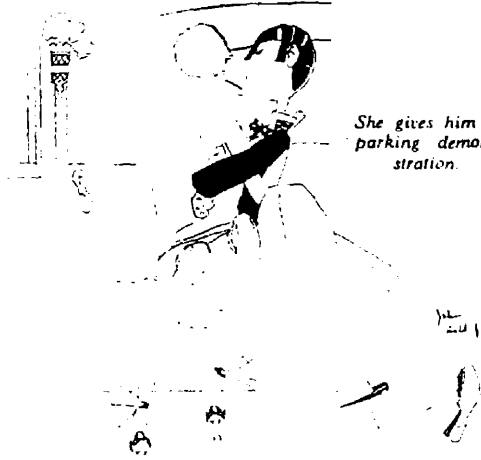
She goes about getting the prospect's attention

Now as to woman in the selling end:

Next, she breaks down his sales resistance



She gives him a parking demonstration



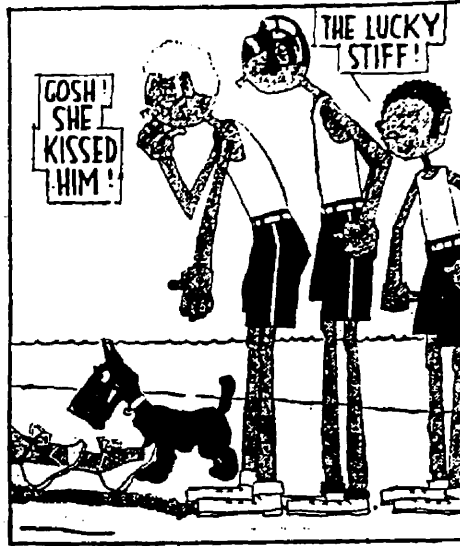
But there is always the chance that she might "sell herself" and have to marry the prospect in order to put over her sale

Packard Automobile Ad. Packard magazine, 1927.

Figure 6

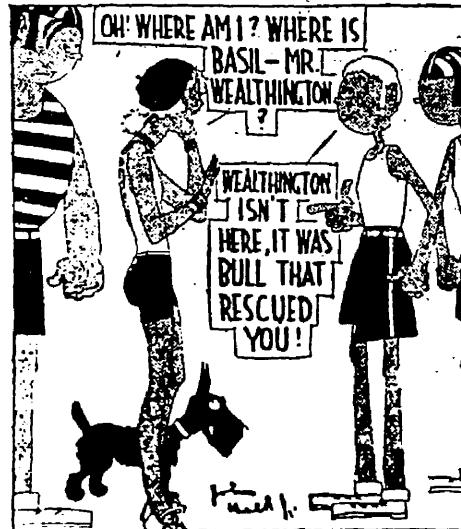
Merely Margy :- By John Held Jr.

Story By Lloyd Mayer



"ACTually, my dear, I THOUGHT I'd go mad and BITE myself because after I'd COYly ar-RANGED myself in this beCOMing FAINT on the BEACH, supported by what I FIRMy b'lieved to be BASil's MUsculous ARMS and any MINute expecting him to succUMB to my irRESISTible fAsiNATIONS and start NECKing me, I SUDdently decided to reVIVE sufficiently to

reWARD the hero with an affECTIONate emBRACE and, my dear, WHAT was my horror seconds later to discover I'd been VAGUEly pressing grateful kisses on BULL's revolting countenance, much to his s'PRISE and deLIGHT and the uncontrollable FURY of ARab and NOIsy and PHWHEN who were FIENDishly elated when they discovered I thought it was BASil



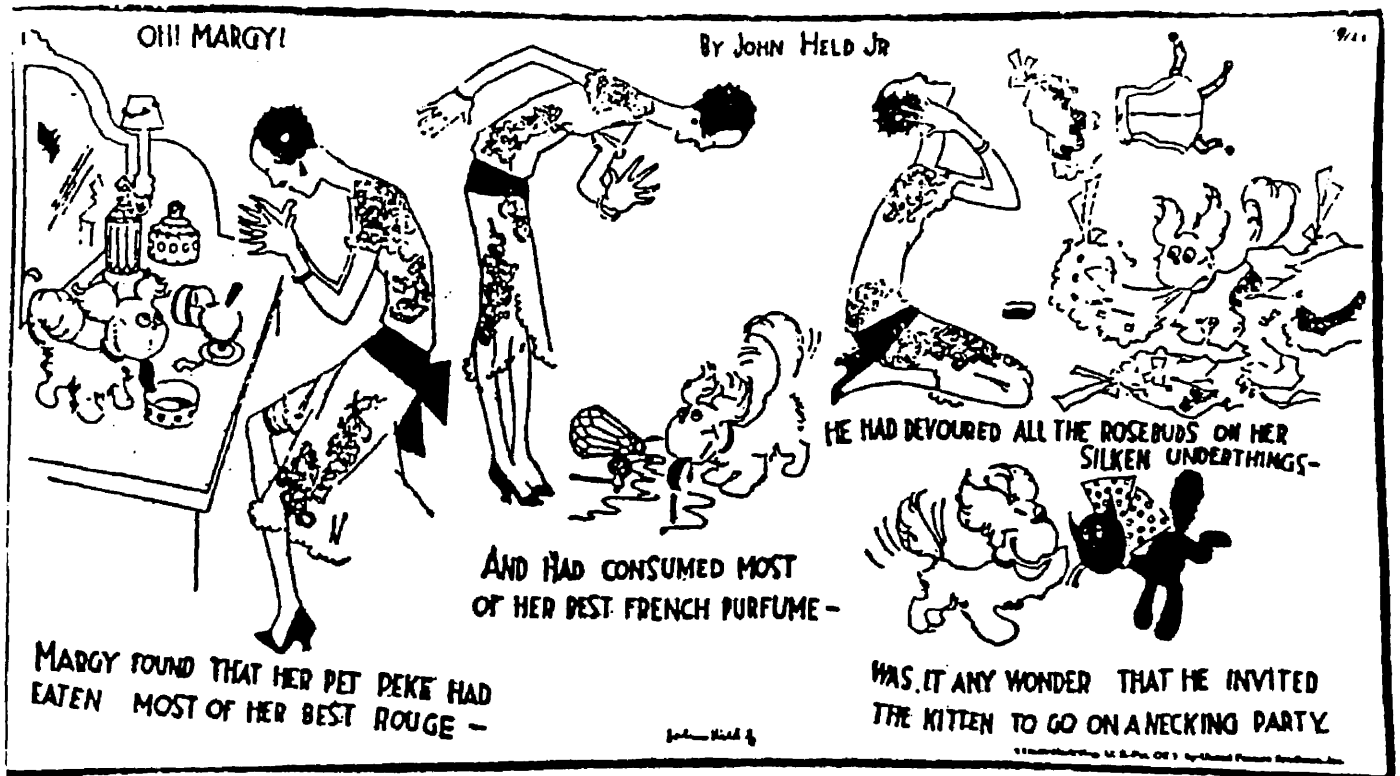
I'd been embracing under the FIRM delusion it was HE who'd RESCued me—can you COPE with it, my dear? HONestly, I THOUGHT I'd exPIRE with a few FASHionable OATHS, my dear, because the situation ACTually had me WHIPPED down to a NUB, no less, do you know what I mean? GOSH, I was PRACtically ready

to ROLL over and BUTter myself with disMAY, my dear, but I can't WAIT to tell you about the exCRUCiating discoveries I made seconds LATER about this PETrifying performance, my dear, because I know they'll simply SLAY you—I mean I ACTually DO!"

(Copyright, 1929, King Features Syndicate, Inc.)

Merely Margy, 1929. Courtesy of Bill Blackbeard, The San Francisco Academy of Comic Art.

Figure 7



Oh! Margy! ca. 1925. Courtesy of Bill Blackbeard, The San Francisco Academy of Comic Art.

Figure 8

APRIL 7, 1923

PRICE 10c

JUDGE

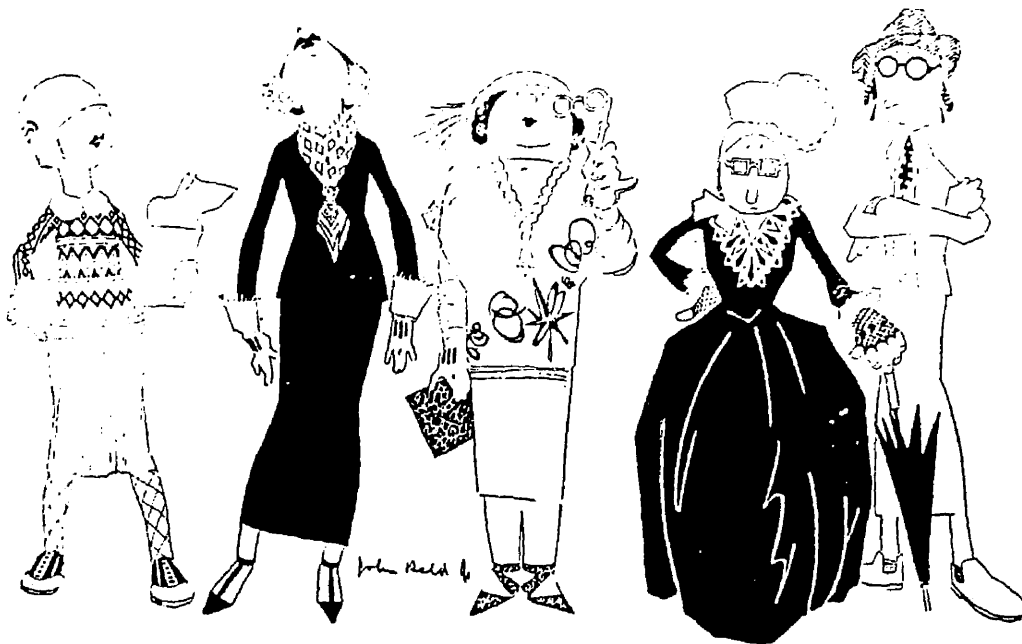


Copyright, 1923, Judge, New York.

"Where the Blue Begins"

Where the Blue Begins. April 7, 1923. Permission of JB&R, Inc.

Figure 9



The Ladies of Rum Row

More Than 25,000 Women Have Been Fined or Sentenced to Imprisonment for Violating the National Prohibition Law

The Ladies of Rum Row. *American Legion Weekly*, May 16, 1924. Courtesy of Bill Blackbeard, The San Francisco Academy of Comic Art.

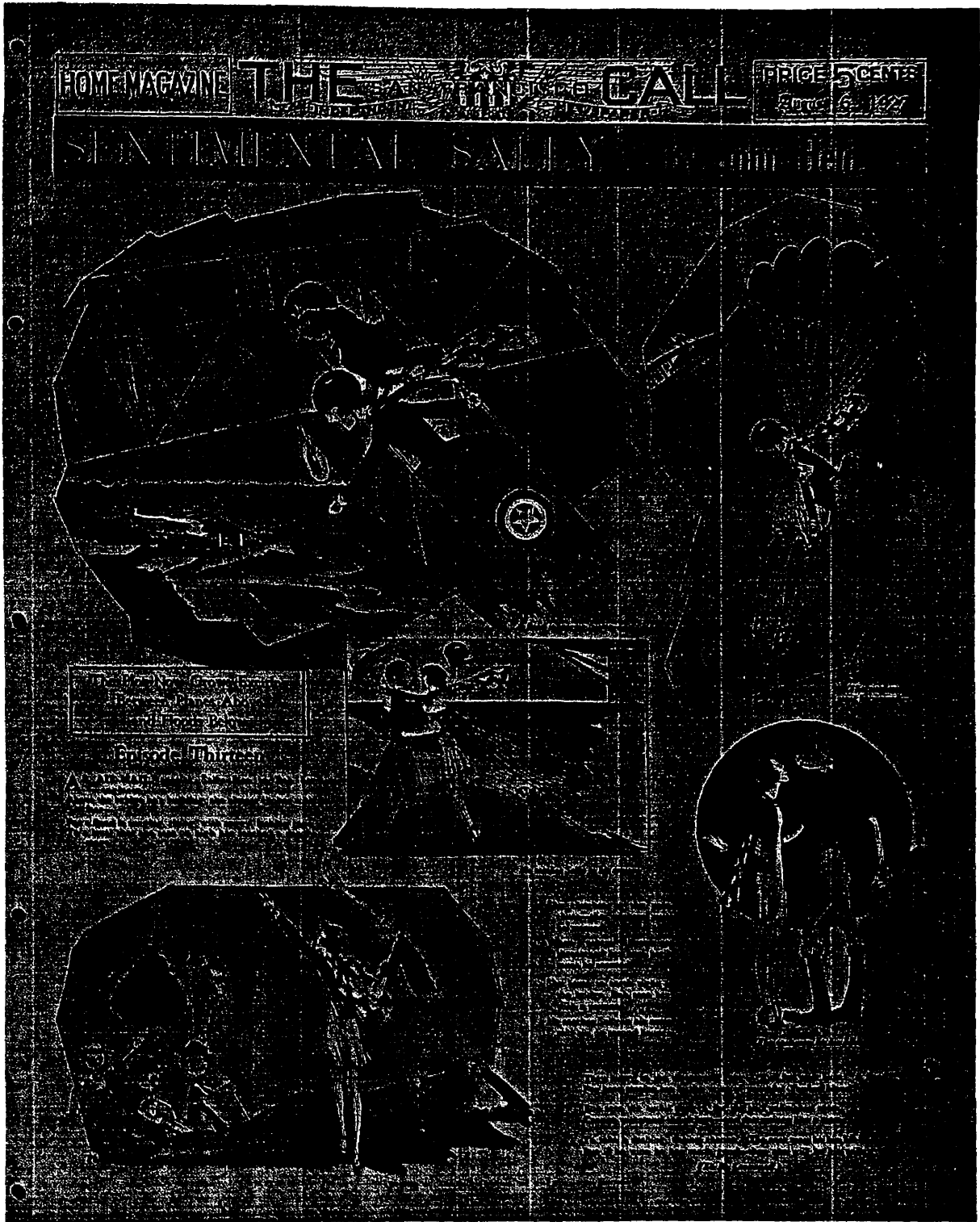
Figure 10

(Below) Dry Sleuths Are Ready to Admit. *American Legion Weekly*, May 16, 1924. Courtesy of Bill Blackbeard, The San Francisco Academy of Comic Art.



Dry sleuths are ready to admit that women bootleggers present a grave problem to the prohibition forces

Figure 11



Sentimental Sally. *The San Francisco Call*, August 6, 1927. Courtesy of Bill Blackbeard, The San Francisco Academy of Comic Art.

Figure 12



John Reed H

"EXPLAIN THIS BLACK BOTTOM DANCE."
"YOU DON'T LET YOUR RIGHT HIP KNOW WHAT YOUR LEFT HIP IS DOING."

Explain This Black Bottom Dance (undated). Permission of Illustration House, Inc.

Figure 13

**Chapter Four:
Daughters Of A Different Revolution:
The Feminine Ideal In The Twenty-First Century**

The two feminine ideals that emerged in the American mass media between 1890 and 1920 have been placed on opposite ends of the feminist spectrum. Still, in light of their differences, it can be said that the Gibson girl and the Held flapper shared two common traits: youth and beauty. These traits endeared both ideals to a nation of young women who valued appearances to the same extent that they valued equality, if not more. Even after the Gibson and Held heroines vanished from the pages of America's leading magazines, their influence was still felt in the media. Youth and beauty were at the heart of later twentieth-century feminine ideals, including the Hollywood vixen of the 1930's, the 'Rosie the Riveter' of the 1940's, and the domesticated housewife of the 1950's television sitcoms. While historians have only recently begun to consider the significance of these media images in the American women's movement, it is known that they contributed greatly to the shaping of American culture. As the first in a long line of mass-marketed ideals, the Gibson girl and the Held flapper set a precedent for modern American womanhood. They may not have endured as feminine ideals, but certainly the notion of the feminine ideal has endured. Modern ideals of youth and beauty are as deeply embedded in the American consciousness as they were in the first decades of the twentieth century. Women continue to turn to the media for pre-packaged models of femininity. As early as 1925, flapper critic Bruce Bliven posed the question: "Just what will the appalling consequences be?"¹ In a society where Barbie dolls, teen magazines, and even first ladies have become purveyors of American womanhood, the answer becomes clear.

Throughout the twentieth century, the advertising industry profited from the mass marketing of feminine ideals that American women sought to emulate through the consumption of beauty supplies and cosmetics. In recent years, however, advertisers have shifted their focus from women to girls and young teenagers. Researchers Michael Jacobsen and Laurie Anne Mazur write:

Girls and teenagers are perhaps most vulnerable to beauty-industry propaganda. For them, advertising is a window into adult life, a lesson in what it means to be a woman. And lacking the sophistication of their older sisters and mothers, girls are less likely to distinguish between fact and advertising fiction.²

In present-day American culture, these impressionable young girls are exposed to a feminine standard at an early age. Toys are socially-acceptable mediums through which ideals are typically conveyed. Since her appearance in 1959, the Barbie Doll has been a leading role model for American girls. Critics like Anna Quindlen of *The New York Times* have spoken against the doll, claiming that it is an impossible ideal. Quindlen states:

It is not only that Barbie, like Dracula, can appear in guises that mask her essential nature: Surgeon, Astronaut, Unicef Ambassador. Or that she is untouched by time, still the same parody of the female form she's been since 1959. She's said by her manufacturers to be 'eleven and one-half stylish inches' tall. If she were a real live woman she would not have enough body fat to menstruate regularly.³

Although Barbie is counted among the most influential of the twentieth-century feminine ideals for children, others have been begun to emerge. Jacobsen and Mazur report: "One toymaker produces a Little Miss Makeup doll, which looks like a five-or-six-year-old-girl. When water is applied, the doll sprouts eyebrows, colored eyelids, fingernails, tinted lips, and a heart-shaped beauty mark."⁴ Clearly, these toys deliver a standard version of American womanhood to receptive youngsters. In spite of a recent push for diversity and body acceptance, dolls like Barbie and Little Miss Makeup continue to offer an unrealistic and distorted view of femininity. Doctors David M. Garner and Anne Kearney-Cooke state: "Research has shown that dieting to lose weight and fear of fatness are common in girls as young as nine."⁵ By that age, girls have an accurate perception of the dominant ideal that exists in American culture and in the media, and many have already begun to take the necessary measures to achieve that ideal.

Just as they were one century ago, magazines are largely responsible for the construction and popularization of feminine ideals. The preoccupation with adolescence and youth has led to the establishment of countless teen-focused magazines in recent decades, including *Seventeen*, *YM*, *Teen*, *Sassy*, and *Cosmo Girl*. Although little research has been done on teen publications, Lisa Duke, an assistant professor in advertising at the College of Journalism and Communications at the University of Florida, notes: "It is known that teen magazines are consistent in their portrayal of the feminine ideal, subject matter across publications consistently centers on appearance, and the audience for teen magazines grows every year."⁶ In fact, Duke reports: "Of the fourteen million girls between the ages of 12 and 19 in the United States, it is estimated that more than half read *Seventeen*, the best-selling teen magazine."⁷ Magazines like *Seventeen* have become

successful promotional tools for advertisers and marketers who deliver an unattainable image of femininity to young readers. According to Sara Burrows of *Life*, this unattainable image appears to have stemmed from that supposed symbol of women's liberation, the 1920's flapper. Burrows remarks: "The first, strong impetus for today's obsessions with youth and body shape occurred in the flapper look of the 1920's, [and] that thin, curveless body ideal now dominates women at all levels of society."⁸ Certainly, the rail-thin models consistently featured in magazines for young women have been the subject of much criticism in modern society. Still, in a time when millions of women are affected by eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia, the thin model prevails. In her *History of Popular Women's Magazines in the United States*, Mary Ellen Zuckerman offers the following explanation:

While conceding that eating disorders are an important female concern, women's journal personnel downplay the role of their publications in creating these problems. They point to forces such as other media (television, movies), other institutions (e.g., beauty pageants), and a range of factors such as individual personality, environment, and biology, which together contribute to eating disorders. They claim the women's titles only reflect the standards of the culture within which they are produced, and that readers themselves dislike it when publications use more normal weight models to show fashions; the clothes don't look right.⁹

While this particular explanation takes the blame away from women's magazines and places it on various other media and institutions, the role of women's magazines in the

shaping of the feminine ideal should not be overlooked. Lisa Duke suggests:

Although teen magazines represent only one type of socializing influence in the lives of girls, these publications communicate in concert, offering adolescent and young-adult females a monthly reiteration of the same inter-related values, images and ideals. Because girls experience significant physical and developmental change in adolescence, media like teen magazines serve as guidebooks on acceptable appearance, gender roles, and relationship formation in adolescence, replacing parents and augmenting or surpassing peers as primary information sources.¹⁰

Television, movies, music videos and beauty pageants all contribute to ideas about femininity, yet the fashion magazine still appears to be the most consistent purveyor of American womanhood today. In the tradition of the Gibson girl and the Held flapper, supermodels peer from the pages of popular magazines. They claim nearly half of America's adolescent girls as their audience, and they remain as influential as they were one century ago.

While the nature of women's magazines changed drastically throughout the course of the twentieth century, the feminine ideals featured within these magazines have remained fairly consistent in appearance. Lisa Duke's qualitative study of race in popular teen magazines reveals that the models depicted in leading teen publications tend to be homogenous. Duke notes: "One study found that 65 percent were White females and depictions of White males outnumbered non-White females by more than three to one."¹¹ Amidst a national push for multiculturalism and ethnic diversity, minority women are still

largely under-represented in popular fashion magazines. It is widely understood that African-American females, in particular, exist outside of the media's ideal. Some have argued that this has worked to the group's advantage. Anna Quindlen, for example, writes:

There's a quiet irony in that. While black women correctly complain that they are not sufficiently represented in advertisements, commercials, movies, even dolls, perhaps the scarcity of those idealized and unrealistic models may help in some fashion to liberate black teen-agers from ridiculous standards of appearance. When the black teen-agers were asked about the ideal woman, many asked: Whose ideal? The perfect girl projected by the white world simply didn't apply to them or their community, which set beauty standards from within.¹²

Duke's findings are compatible with Quindlen's remarks. Her study, which includes a mix of black and white adolescent girls ranging in age from 12 to 18, reveals that minority readers are less likely to be influenced by exclusive white ideals featured in popular teen magazines. Duke writes:

Whereas young adolescent White girls were transfixed by the images of the model's bodies, African-American girls assess themselves and the bodies they see represented in the magazines with different eyes. They see "sick-looking" bodies where White girls see perfect ones. Black girls see average women where White girls see heavy women.¹³

In the absence of solid and consistent representation, young black readers tend to adopt role models that exist beyond the dominant media images. Several of the black teenagers in Duke's own study "pointed to the more infrequent images of African-American performers or athletes, or people with power as the ones on which they build their fantasies."¹⁴ Interestingly, it might then be argued that the dominance of white females over their black counterparts has proven to be a hindrance to members of the former group.

The fascination with femininity has even influenced the national perceptions of those individual women who fill the highest media spotlight in the land. The twentieth century produced a string of first ladies who are remembered for their personal style and public image. Some of these figures have become ideals representative of their eras. Jackie Kennedy is perhaps the most noted of these trendsetters. Fashion reporter Richard Lacayo states that Jackie's pillbox hats and A-line skirts tell "the story of a consummate act of imagemaking."¹⁵ Certainly, media images of the popular first lady influenced the way an entire generation of American women looked and behaved.

Today, former first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton and current first lady Laura Bush both serve as models of American womanhood. In terms of the women's movement, they are, like the Gibson girl and the Held flapper, typically placed at opposite ends of the feminist spectrum. While Hillary redefined the role of first lady with her presidential partnership, Laura Bush is commonly portrayed "as the portrait of normalcy -- precisely the image the White House wants to create after the turbulent two-for-the-price-of-one Clinton years."¹⁶ In these public figures, two distinct feminine ideals have emerged. Interestingly, both women have undergone scrutiny under the watchful eye of the

American media. On the eve of the Clinton inauguration, *Newsweek* reporter Sally Quinn remarked that a first lady must tow a fine line:

If she pursues the "we" of governing, she is in danger of perpetuating the image of the intelligent wife living through her husband. That stereotype is destructive and confusing. If she's a strong woman with no legitimate base of her own she could appear to be a frustrated and trapped woman, dependent on her husband and his largesse for her professional satisfaction.¹⁷

As media models of femininity, neither Hillary Clinton nor Laura Bush have been able to tow this fine line. While the former has been portrayed as an overly-involved participant in her husband's presidency, the latter maintains a more passive profile. Still, the media representations of these women can be misleading. For example, Margaret Talbot spoke of the "hypocrisy of Hillaryism" in an article that appeared in the midst of the Clinton sex scandals:

For in the wake of Bill Clinton's most recent sexual disgrace, it seems harder than ever to scrunch our eyes shut and construe Hillary as a feminist icon, a role model for young women of talent and ambition. It would be one thing if we could not imagine her having run for office or pursued a successful career on her own. But we can, easily. So the bargain she seems to have made - to put up with the humiliations of marriage to an apparently indefatigable womanizer in exchange for a share of his power -

seems, increasingly, like just that: a bargain, an unidealistic and demeaning deal that allows her to attain public authority at the cost of her own dignity.¹⁸

An element of hypocrisy has also been detected in the character of Laura Bush. Beneath her housewifely image, the current first lady may have an assertiveness of her own.

Reporter Kenneth T. Walsh maintains: "Laura Bush may avoid in-your-face partisanship and headline-grabbing events. But she won't spend all her time pampering her husband and staying out of the way either."¹⁹ Her commitment to educational reform and literacy demonstrate that she does have an individual political agenda apart from her husband.

Walsh adds: "Laura Bush's determination to be a more quiet presence may work to her advantage."²⁰ In the wake of Hillaryism, Laura is emerging in the media as a new twenty-first century political ideal.

While the notion of the feminine ideal is deeply embedded in the American consciousness, the narrowing of the gender gap in recent years has resulted in the emergence of a male ideal that simply did not exist prior to the modern feminist movement. According to an article in *Psychology Today*, a masculine ideal must now exist to satisfy that "subset of women who themselves are attractive, educated, and financially secure."²¹ Typically, this ideal is "a tauntingly insolent beefcake of a boy, smooth skinned, clean shaven, with a tight, carved body that's part tough guy, part Greek god."²² For the most part, it too is an unattainable image. Although women have a longstanding history of exploitation in the mass media, the use of half-naked men in magazines and advertisements is viewed as a direct assault upon the average American male. Michael Jacobsen and Laurie Anne Mazur claim: "Ubiquitous images of women's

bodies seem somehow natural in a culture that sanctions the objectification of women; subjecting male anatomy to the same cold, critical gaze is going 'too far.'"²³ It will be interesting to see how the new media shift toward masculinity will impact American culture.

In conclusion, it can be said that media ideals have become a pervasive force in modern society. Since the dawning of the advertising revolution in the late nineteenth-century, each generation has been met with a new standard of youth and beauty. While research indicates that minority women have been less influenced by these images than their white counterparts, all women, and men too, must concern themselves with the future of mass-marketed ideals. How women are portrayed or not portrayed is particularly important, since it will help determine the course of the women's movement in America. Stronger ideals will be needed to narrow the gap of gender inequality. The underlying messages conveyed through mediums such as toys and magazines must be carefully reconsidered. These seemingly harmless products have, in actuality, delivered a dangerous blow to the youth who look to them to provide a social standard of beauty. Through them, it is evident that the feminine ideal is still alive and well in America today. Just as Bruce Bliven pondered the outcome of the flapper phenomenon nearly a century ago, his question could be applied once again to the string of impossible ideals that dominate the American mass media today: What *will* the appalling consequences be?

Notes

1. Bruce Bliven, "Flapper Jane," The New Republic 44 (Sept. 1925), 66-67.
2. Michael F. Jacobsen and Laurie Anne Mazur, "Sexism and Sexuality in Advertising," chap. in Marketing Madness: A Survival Guide for a Consumer Society (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1995), 6.
3. Anna Quindlen, "Barbie at 35," The New York Times, 10 September 1994, 19.
4. Jacobsen and Mazur, 6.
5. David M. Garner, Ph.D., and Ann Kearney-Cooke, Ph.D., "Body Image 1996," Psychology Today 29 (March/April 1996), 56.
6. Lisa Duke, "Black In A Blonde World: Race and Girls' Interpretations of the Feminine Ideal in Teen Magazines," Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly 77 (Summer 2000), 367.
7. Ibid., 368.
8. Sara Burrows, "The Flapper: 20th Century Thin Takes Shape," Life (2001), 3.
9. Mary Ellen Zuckerman, A History of Popular Women's Magazines in the United States, 1792-1995 (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998), 236.
10. Duke, 368-369.
11. Ibid.
12. Quindlen, 19.
13. Duke, 379.
14. Ibid., 378. Although Duke's study included both White and Black adolescent girls, the magazines used in the study were predominantly white-centered. Interestingly, in her conclusion, Duke reports: "When African-American girls were asked if they would prefer a teen magazine just for Black girls, most said no" (p.384). Many of the Black girls claimed to enjoy special-interest and teen-related articles in the magazines, but recognized the ideals/images in such magazines as unhealthy and potentially threatening.
15. Richard Lacayo, "First Lady of Fashion," Time 157 (April 30, 2001), 73.

16. Kenneth T. Walsh, "Laura's Moment," US News & World Report 130 (April 30, 2001), 22.
17. Sally Quinn, "Beware Of Washington," Newsweek 120 (Dec. 28, 1992), 28.
18. Margaret Talbot, "Wife Story," New Republic 218 (Feb. 16, 1998), 19.
19. Walsh, 22.
20. Ibid., 23.
21. "The Beefcaking of America," Psychology Today 27 (Nov/Dec 1994), 34.
22. Ibid.
23. Jacobsen and Mazur, 11.

Conclusion

History busily alters the conditions by which the ideals of progressive societies like the United States form and re-form into a series of accepted national types. It is up to the image makers to keep their ideas abreast of the changes, lest the images their imaginations create find no audiences to share in the recognition of their meaning.

--Martha Banta

In the world of academics, the notion of the American experience is typically derived from the written and oral testimonies of those who actively participated in the great events that are said to have shaped a distinct national identity. The names of honored presidents and generals quite often come to mind. While their contributions provide a foundation for the study of the American past, the role of the "image makers" can be considered equally important to the construction of national culture. In an age when the mass media largely influences perceptions of that culture, image has become everything. It is, as Banta suggests, the trademark of progressive societies. At the heart of these images, Americans have found and will continue to find that true expression of self.

It was within such a society that artists Charles Dana Gibson and John Held Jr. rose to artistic eminence. Their drawings have become synonymous with a period that saw perhaps the greatest transformations in American womanhood. As demonstrated in Chapter One, the years spanning 1890 to 1925 witnessed a growing visibility of women in American culture. Through the Columbian Exposition of 1893, the rise of the magazine and advertising industries, suffrage art and parades, the First World War, and the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, women claimed the national spotlight. Both Gibson and

Held responded to this social transformation through their individual projections of the "New Woman" in the mass media. The introduction of their heroines set a national standard of physical beauty that had been missing under the traditional nineteenth-century Cult of Domesticity, which was based on spiritual attributes and kept women hidden from public view.¹ Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton top the list of reformers who devoted their lives to giving American women a voice, but, equally significant, Gibson and Held gave the American woman a face.

In the conclusion of her study of feminine images in 1910's mass media, Carolyn Kitch calls "for a way of re-visioning mass media imagery as iconology that reveal deeper commentary on American life -- as a collective text through which historians might better understand pivotal political and cultural moments of the past."² The aim of this particular study has been to examine the Gibson girl and the Held flapper within a feminist context. Each has been assessed in terms of her indirect influence on the early twentieth-century women's movement in America. Both ideals offer unique statements about women's clothing, careers, education, matrimony, sexuality, manners, recreation and political leadership. Clearly, an assessment of these ideals suggests that media iconology does, as Kitch states, play an important role in the shaping of national ideas and perceptions. An analysis can be difficult, however, because of the ambiguous nature of these ideals. The question still remains: Was the subtle rebellion of the Gibson girl, in retrospect, more influential than the open rebellion of the Held flapper?

The discussion of the Gibson girl in Chapter Two indicates that the image may have been more revolutionary than what was previously thought. Behind her sweet and innocent facade, there was something of a rebel in the Gibson heroine. She possessed a

social grace and dignity that did not altogether sever her from the nineteenth-century Cult of True Womanhood, yet at the same time, she clearly existed beyond the domestic sphere. Charles Dana Gibson never intended for his heroine to exist as a radical figure of the women's movement, and it is not likely that Americans of his generation saw the Gibson girl in such a light. Still, Fairfax Downey has written: "It was said of Charles Dana Gibson that he drew people as they sometimes are and were always meant to be. Not only as they might look at their best but as they might live with life at its brightest. Dreams came true, ideals were attained on his pages."³ Thus, it can be concluded that Gibson did envision something of a better life for American women at the turn of the century. For some, it may seem too gradual of a departure from traditional womanhood, but the underlying message was there. Gibson did envision a society in which women were freed from the pressures of the corset, the forced marriage, and the realm of domesticity. Furthermore, he envisioned a government in which women were not only allowed a vote, but were elevated to diplomatic positions. The woman herself had nothing to sacrifice. She could maintain her femininity and assert her independence at the same time. Gibson envisioned for his heroine the best of both worlds.

Just as the Gibson girl has been elevated here, the reputation of the Held flapper as the heroine of the women's liberation movement has been questioned. Chapter Three discusses the shortcomings of the flapper as a feminine ideal and calls for a more critical analysis of the popular media image. While the Held heroine provided a marked departure from traditional womanhood, it must not be assumed that her presence had an altogether positive impact on the course of the women's movement. Behind this fun-loving, carefree facade, there appears to be a girl who was willing to make perhaps too many

compromises. Unlike Gibson, Held did not envision for his flapper the best of both worlds. In the end, liberation cost her her femininity. The bobbed hair and the boyish figure symbolized an equality that, for the most part, simply did not exist in reality. Held, whose artistic career centered on surfaces, did not always provide his heroine with the depth that she so desperately needed to advance herself in the post-suffrage era. Shelley Armitage, Held's biographer, concludes:

What would appear to be the 'raising' of the flapper to the Ideal Woman really was her reduction. When she ceased being a revolutionary figure, she not only lost her energy for change but lost her symbolic meaning as well. Idealizing begat stasis. Change in contexts made her ridiculous. She became a commercial doll.⁴

In truth, this is the legacy of the Held flapper. While the image survives as an emblem of a carefree and relaxed decade in American history, it appears to have had a limited, and not altogether positive, impact on the women's movement of the 1920's.

The commercialization of feminine ideals, beginning with the flapper, has had a profound influence on modern American culture. Chapter Four reveals the extent to which modern American society has been influenced by mass-produced feminine ideals. While these ideals are a surface feature of progressive societies, they can be self-defeating. Through Barbie Dolls and teen publications, the advertising industry continues to construct ideals that set the national standard of beauty. While minority women still exist outside of this ideal, they, as well as men, are aware of its presence. The influence of these media images is felt at all levels of society.

While we have only recently begun to assess the significance of long-vanished ideals like the Gibson girl and the Held flapper, it is clear that such ideals have shaped our national perception of femininity and beauty. The image makers are responsible for the ideas and perceptions that Americans have of themselves as a people. They produce those reflections that offer deeper insights about the American way of life. Quite often, their contributions are long-lasting. In terms of Gibson and Held, can we truly say that either image was more beneficial or harmful than the next? According to fashion historian Martha Banta, probably not. Banta writes:

Such images *are* useful as evidence. They can signal the vigor of determined young women making real changes in American society, or they can stand for fun-loving girls who offer no direct threat to the status quo ... It is the ability of types to *flow past their containers* into the realms of ambiguity and paradox that is the source of their importance to us as cultural artifacts.⁵

Clearly, the ambiguity is present. As ever, beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

Notes

1. Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," American Quarterly 18 (1966), 152.
2. Carolyn Kitch, "Destructive Women and Little Men: Masculinity, the New Woman, and Power in 1910's Popular Media," Journal of Magazine & New Media Research (Fall 2000), 12.
3. Fairfax Downey, Portrait of an Era, as drawn by Charles Dana Gibson (New York and London: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936), 1.
4. Shelley Armitage, John Held, Jr: Illustrator of the Jazz Age (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1987), 92.

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