

# *Lessons From The Gibson Girl*

*Her Quest for Equality, Justice, and Love*



Gary W. Clark

LESSONS FROM THE GIBSON GIRL  
Her Quest for Equality, Justice, and Love  
Copyright © 2017 Gary W. Clark

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017938304  
PhotoTree.com, Wichita, KS

ISBN: 978-0-9907615-7-0

Library of Congress Cataloging-in Publication Data  
Clark, Gary

Lessons From The Gibson Girl: Her Quest for Equality, Justice, and Love  
p. cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Women's Rights — United States — History. 2. Women's Studies — United States. 3. Editorial Cartoons. 4. Gibson, Charles Dana, 1867–1944

Published by PhotoTree.com  
Wichita, Kansas  
[www.garywclark.com](http://www.garywclark.com)

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except by a reviewer who may reference short excerpts in a review. Phototree.com is a trademark of Gary W. Clark.

Cover and interior design by Gary W. Clark  
Edited by Gena Philibert-Ortega

## Acknowledgements

I wish to thank my editor and mentor Gena Philibert-Ortega for her valuable input, which always keeps me from wandering too far off chasing bright lights, in addition to her organization and editing guidance. Also, I want to express appreciation to my *focus group* – Allison, Cheryl, Diana, Kim, Lindsey, Marilyn, and Terri – for their honest and beneficial analysis of a working draft, which helped me develop a cohesive theme.

I have benefited from numerous organizations, universities, agencies, and libraries for assistance in research and acquiring images. The genealogy department at the Wichita Public Library in Wichita, Kansas was exceptionally helpful in obtaining archived microfilm from the Library of Congress. The Wichita State University Ablah Library gave me access to a phenomenal collection of original periodicals dating back to 1886, in addition to their comprehensive collection of biographical and historical works. Access to many Library of Congress records and images were invaluable to the content of this book. Also, several Internet sources for archived articles, stories, and information were indispensable. These included Google Books, HathiTrust Digital Library, and Newspapers.com.



# Table of Contents

Preface

Introduction – Hooked on Gibson • 9

1. Imagination and Wit • 19

2. Becoming the Artist • 25

3. American Society • 43

4. The Gibson Girl • 65

5. The Gibson Man • 87

6. Rise to Fame • 97

7. A Lesson Gallery • 111

8. A Real Gibson Girl • 205

9. Pursuing a Dream • 219

10. Noir et Blanc • 229

11. Gibson Girl Goes to War • 239

12. Life Moves On • 257

Epilogue • 268

Bibliography • 271

Notes • 272

Index • 276

Books by Author • 278

## Preface

*Lessons From The Gibson Girl* illuminates the thought-provoking satirical artwork of Charles Dana Gibson as he introduced the fictional, and sometimes controversial Gibson Girl to America and indeed the world. She was on the leading edge of the battle that sought to bring equality to not only the sexes, but to many segments of society that were taken advantage of, including the poor and children.

Her reign of popularity and influence coincided with the two decades leading to the passing of the 19th Amendment: *The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.* As the centennial anniversary of this historic amendment is approaching in 2019, the battles and related social skirmishes that were fought to achieve the milestone should not be forgotten any more than decisive military campaigns fought to keep us free are commemorated.

As a character that flowed from C. D. Gibson's pen, the Gibson Girl became a model of intelligence, drive, and independence that women emulated and men admired. She became a staunch champion of equality, justice, and respect. Graced with balance of *everywoman* in her personality, she became a heroine to a wide array of the turn-of-the 19th century populace: young and old, rich and poor. Remarkably, C. D. Gibson's art, wit, and observations are timeless.

The iconic Gibson Girl cannot be separated from Gibson the artist. He spoke through her. His words and images were influenced by the women in his family and many who surrounded him. Gibson, the man, was speaking from their viewpoint – a perspective he sincerely embraced. His empathy, understanding, and support of women's rights cannot be overstated.

The messages and protests he delivered were rallying cries for those who had been repressed and lessons for those with shortsighted and selfish positions. America was finally casting off stereotyped visions of women, minorities, and even work-place tragedies such as cruel child labor. But not without resistance. Still, C. D. Gibson and his cast of notable actors rose to unmatched popularity in the social media of their time and helped influence America's future.

Created in clever and masterful ink drawings, the Gibson Girl graced classic magazines such as *Collier's*, *Life*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, and *Harper's Weekly*, revealing the good, the bad, and foibles of the rich and poor alike. Progressive and sometimes controversial social values were taking hold in America – championed weekly by the Gibson Girl in one-panel vignettes that anyone could understand.

Sadly, many injustices the Gibson Girl tackled are still prevalent today, and astonishingly gaining fervor in many circles. Compassion is increasingly cast aside by fear-mongers who have taken the art of manipulation to new and frightening heights. These levels of blatant denial or disregard of overt sexism, racism, religious persecution, and other fundamental prejudices have not been seen in many decades. The overused adage of *history repeats itself if ignored* is never so accurate as it is today.

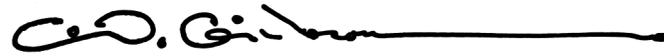
In this book, I wish to share the stories, attitudes, and battles of yesteryear with those who are concerned with today's turmoil. However, to bring balance to the reading, the amusing cartoons and situations that entwine the Gibson Girl help alleviate the sadness of current state of affairs with confidence that the tide can be reversed – again.

– Gary W. Clark



Charles Dana Gibson (1867 – 1944)  
Library of Congress

Hooked on Gibson



The Gibson Girl, a world-famous fictional character at the turn of the 20th century, was infused with real values from the artist who drew her. Just as many of today's cartoonists project their dreams, observations, and opinions upon their characters, the Gibson Girl was a product of Charles Dana Gibson's life.

She was infused with his charming wit, adventurous spirit, and admirable values. The two were one, yet they complimented each other.

She was his alter-ego, but only in the sense of her outgoing personality versus his bashful nature. Through her, Gibson strived to make the world a better place – while still delivering clever humor at the same time.

C. D. Gibson, as he usually signed his art, poked fun at and chastised controversial or unjust social practices of the time. Primarily through his signature character, he championed women's rights while exploring affairs of the heart. He also fought for the young and disadvantaged, and those who were burdened by religious or ethnic prejudice.

On the lighter side, he created looks and attitudes that many young women and men emulated. If you read anything around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, you knew Charles Dana Gibson and his leading lady, the Gibson Girl.

Outside of the names of presidents, kings, and queens, his was one of the most recognized in the world. Beginning in 1888, his artwork appeared in leading magazines nearly every week for thirty years. It was not unusual for his social satire to grace the cover and inside double-spreads of both *Life* and *Collier's* in the same week. In addition, he was in demand to illustrate novels and short stories from best-selling authors.



Charles Dana Gibson  
*Ladies' Home Journal*, 1902

He was actually uncomfortable that his popularity arose from mostly one aspect of his work, the iconic Gibson Girl. Whether it was an intriguing look, her style and fashion, or the various crusades she found herself in, this New Woman captured the attention of a generation. The Gibson Girl was so popular, he actually became her captive. Not unlike an actor who becomes type-cast, publishers clamored to include her mystique in their magazines and books.

He obviously accepted this symbiotic relationship with her since she made him very rich and also gave him an audience for important issues to question, lampoon, or assail. Through Gibson's singular bond with the Gibson Girl, he strived to influence the world with a more just social conscience than it previously possessed.

Keep in mind that in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, vast numbers of the population were not well-read. Still, everyone understood a well-drawn cartoon. Readers flocked to magazines that informed and entertained by combining sophisticated cartoons with current events or issues.

Now, one hundred years later, much of the population digests their news from electronic images and entertaining video supplied by countless news and late-night talk shows. The essence of Gibson's messages is still apropos today, only the medium has changed. Assuming he adopted the internet, streaming video, and television, C. D. Gibson would have succeeded just as well in the current era.



*A Careful Daughter*  
*Life*, March 17, 1904

**A CAREFUL DAUGHTER**

“NO, MOTHER, THIS BOOK IS NOT AT ALL FIT FOR YOU TO SEE.”

“BUT YOU ARE READING IT!”

“AH, BUT WE WERE BROUGHT UP SO DIFFERENTLY.”

**Fame** stemmed from Gibson’s artistry and wit. Most of his fans identified not with Gibson himself, but the characters he created led by the Gibson Girl. Frederick W. Morton, editor of *Brush and Pencil*, observed in 1901 that Gibson:

*... describes graphically what he sees, using his own inimitable means of depiction. He has a quick eye for the ridiculous, whether it be manifested in high or low estate, and he hits off absurdities in a telling way.<sup>1</sup>*

He was especially adept at fabricating double entendres or crafting snarky quips, usually directed towards deserving bores. His command of wit and timing set him apart from many contemporary artists who drew nearly as well, yet could not deliver the exceptional punch line.

*Was That You I Kissed...*  
*Life*, December 4, 1904



**HE:** WAS THAT YOU I KISSED IN THE CONSERVATORY LAST NIGHT?  
**SHE:** "ABOUT WHAT TIME WAS IT?"

To be sure, he possessed marvelous pen and ink skills. Not only did he accurately project the human form and surrounding elements into well-composed drawings, Gibson expressed a subject's emotions with only a

few well-placed lines of ink. The sentiment could have been joy, sadness, disappointment, love, lust, or desire as it reached into the reader's conscience more often than not.

This brilliance worked in partnership with his bravery. Not dragon-slaying type of bravery, but the courage to combat archaic norms and traditions that unfairly defined people, especially women.

He fearlessly scolded, chastised, and even made fun of his fellow man's arrogance and condescending ways. In addition, his genius included knowing how far to push a controversial topic. Sometimes he devised a blistering point, yet cleverly walked the tightrope between lecturing his audience and entertaining them. Many men loved it, though they probably laughed at the cartoons while convincing themselves, *that of course is not me*.

He was even-handed and did not hesitate to equally question the follies of men, women, rich, poor, young, or old – and when deserving, praise their wisdom. The everyday populace never failed to give him material by divulging their best and worst sides simply by being who they were in public. He lived in bustling New York City, attended theatre and society balls, took in baseball games and boxing matches, sailed off the New England coast, met royalty in England, experienced bohemian life in Paris, and mixed with hard-working friends and colleagues. From his experiences he endowed the Gibson Girl with sophistication, intelligence, bravery, and a social conscience.





One of her favorite sports.  
*The Education of Mr. Pipp*, 1899

**The Gibson Girl** was not simply a striking portrait – she experienced life. That was her magic, people related to the characters she portrayed. Joining the Gibson Girl, young women with newfound social freedoms and money were breaking traditional roles as Gibson weaved his leading lady into social, professional, and political scenarios and, of course, love.

The suffragist movement had bravely soldiered on since Civil War times, though by 1890 it still had not won a major nationwide victory. The *New Woman*, as she was popularly labeled, commanded that she be allowed to play golf at her father’s country club whether she wore a suffrage campaign button or not. Voting, jury duty, and respect would soon follow.

This era gave cartoonists endless subjects and people to parody. Not to deny the underlying issues were serious and important, there were multiple ways to address them – Gibson used humor.

Many scholars have dissected the Gibson Girl’s motives and philosophies while criticizing her actions as if she was a living person, usually in defense of a dissertation. But, the Gibson Girl was complex, as we all are. Gibson gave her emotions, quirks, and fears – all stirred together sometimes. She seemed authentically human, contributing to her popularity. Between 1888 and 1910 she, or her co-stars, appeared over one thousand times in *Life* magazine, in addition to another one thousand combined appearances in *Collier’s*, *Ladies’ Home Journal* and other magazines.

In spite of her popularity, it is important to note that Gibson did not refer to his women characters as Gibson Girls, the label was coined by the popular press. While Gibson frequently declared embarrassment at the expression, his publishers probably enjoyed the high-profile coverage.

Gibson himself described her as the *All-American* woman, even though his favorite models included a French woman, another of Scottish descent, and his most recognizable model was Irish-American. Of course, with the United States just over one hundred years old, it would have been difficult to actually define an All-American woman except for the Native

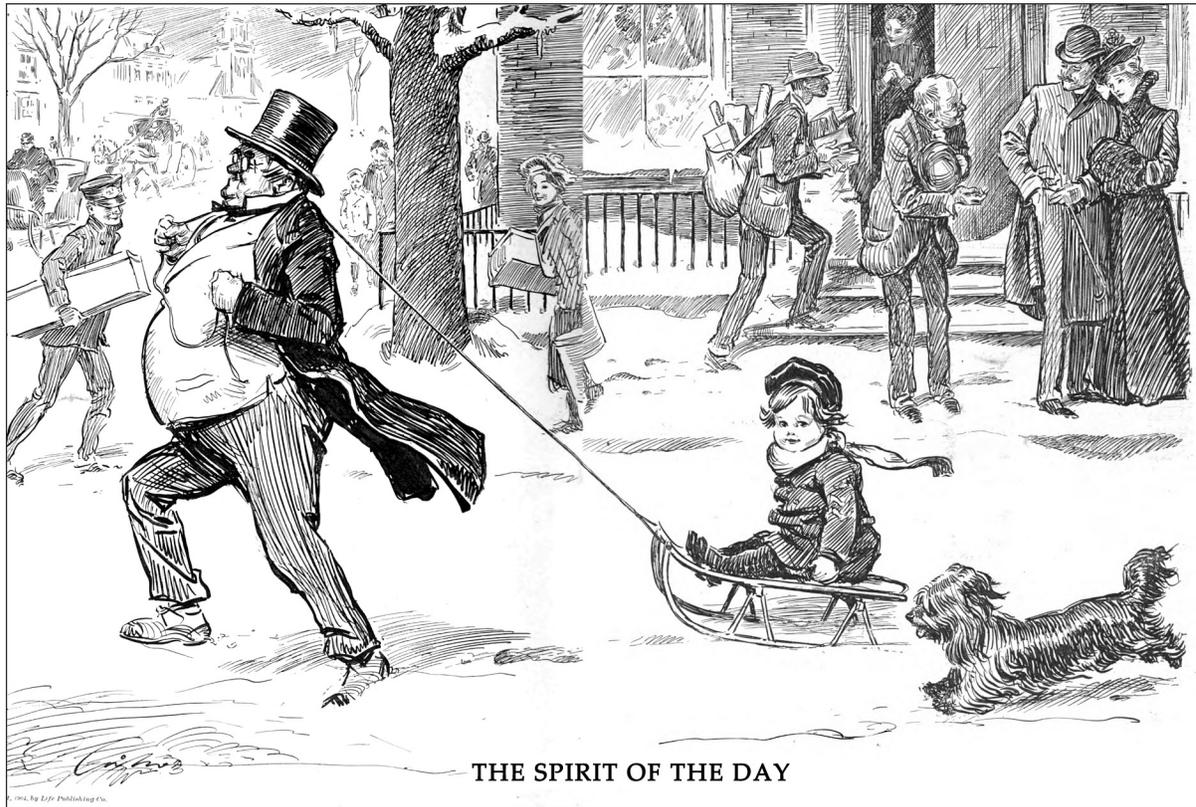
American. The country in 1900 was still largely a nation of immigrants. At the turn of the century, the Gibson Girl was one of the most idolized fictional characters. Preceding the movie and television industry, there were no on-screen stars to worship, though she was followed as if she were real. Today, any number of current famous people capture the attention or adoration of fans. These followers emulate the celebrity in dress, look, and positions. Loves and accomplishments are intensely followed. However, Gibson was clear about giving the Gibson Girl aggressive positions against controversial topics. She was more than a romantic comedy. Unfortunately, people who are only vaguely familiar with Charles Dana Gibson mistakenly believe that the Gibson Girl was the only character he drew. Yet a broad collection of characters sprang from his portfolio, such as the cross-section of passengers on a ferry boat.

*In The Same Boat*  
*Collier's, April 30, 1904*



IN THE SAME BOAT.

His heartwarming sketches, such as the portly well-off old man spontaneously pulling a young boy on his sled, endeared Gibson to everyone. The reader may not have agreed with some sketched messages, but surely the most critical of them enjoyed his innocent renditions.



*The Spirit of the Day*  
*Life*, December 1, 1904

Gibson did not generalize and condemn a whole group for the actions of a few. He was fair, without preconceived prejudices and was likely to praise or reprimand any of those around him – whichever they deserved. Men might have viewed his artistic creations as a means to keep current on societal and political matters. For decades cartoons channeled messages quickly, sometimes raising the reader's blood pressure.

Gibson usually made his reader smile as they digested a critical point. Since many situations involved women – beautiful ones at that – he kept the attention of even the shallowest man. He seduced them with beauty while presenting his message. Still, he was not shy about exposing men's foibles when warranted and quickly illustrated the errors of their ways.

With his pen and ink, he influenced women in more subtle ways, usually promoting equal rights and joys that were previously enjoyed solely by men. In fairness however, he seemed to believe that equality for the fairer sex meant they needed to strive for improvement also. He would call them out for misplaced weakness. There can be no mistake though, he still possessed a knight-in-shining-armor spirit and would champion their cause with little room left for misunderstanding.

Yet, sometimes a cartoon was just a cartoon. He did not try to move the nation's conscience everyday, some days he just entertained his readers with witty commentary on unique situations.



*Young Widow:* HOW LONG SHOULD I WEAR MOURNING?  
"I'M UNABLE TO SAY. I WASN'T ACQUAINTED WITH YOUR HUSBAND."

*How Long Should I ...*  
*Life*, August 31, 1899

**Athletic**, handsome, and intelligent, Gibson was nonetheless modest and avoided public adulation as he easily moved among society's elite, politicians, authors, and fellow artists. Everyone loved him or at least his work, even those who were on the receiving end of his sharp pen.

Whether known by Dana, as his family and friends called him, C. D. Gibson, or Charles Dana Gibson, he seduced everyone with his cartoons' charms, wit, flattering sketches, and occasional snipes when warranted.

*Lessons from the Gibson Girl* reveals how Gibson's thoughts are prophetic and relevant to any number of today's challenges and issues. His artwork and words were funny, sad, educational, and brilliant – while gently prodding people to treat each other with respect, compassion, and equality – admirable traits exhibited by the Gibson Girl.



Charles Dana Gibson c. 1890

