

Then and Now

The Seductive Genius of C. D. Gibson

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Preface

Then and Now traces Charles Dana Gibson's thought-provoking satirical artwork as it captured the admiration of men and women with seductive humor for more than thirty years. This book is not a biography of Gibson, though much of his personal journey through life is recounted as it influenced his artwork. It is a view of the humor and art he wielded to lampoon, and sometimes scold society, from his first cartoons in 1886 through the roaring 1920s.

In his clever ink drawings, Gibson recorded the good, the bad, and foibles of the rich and poor alike in classic magazines such as *Collier's*, *Life*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, and *Harper's Weekly*. Not an editorial cartoonist, he was described as a social satirist. Remarkably, his art, observations, and messages are timeless.

Though a century has passed since his provocative, yet comedic art touched millions of readers, many of the problems he tackled are still highly visible now. His era's issues were women's rights, gender equality, government inefficiency, and big business influence.

This project began as a fun look at lifestyles and cartoon art in the early 20th century; it sprang from my interest in early photographs and the people in them. However, as I studied Gibson's work and learned about the artist, the scope of this story became wider and considerably more interesting.

Then and Now presents some of Charles Dana Gibson's best sketches and wit, providing entertainment for a casual reading. However, just as he deftly infused his drawings with humor, he also inserted ideas and issues to ponder beyond the amusing cartoons – issues that are as relevant *now* as *then*.

– Gary W. Clark

He was especially adept at fabricating puzzling 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?"

Another element found in his genius was 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.

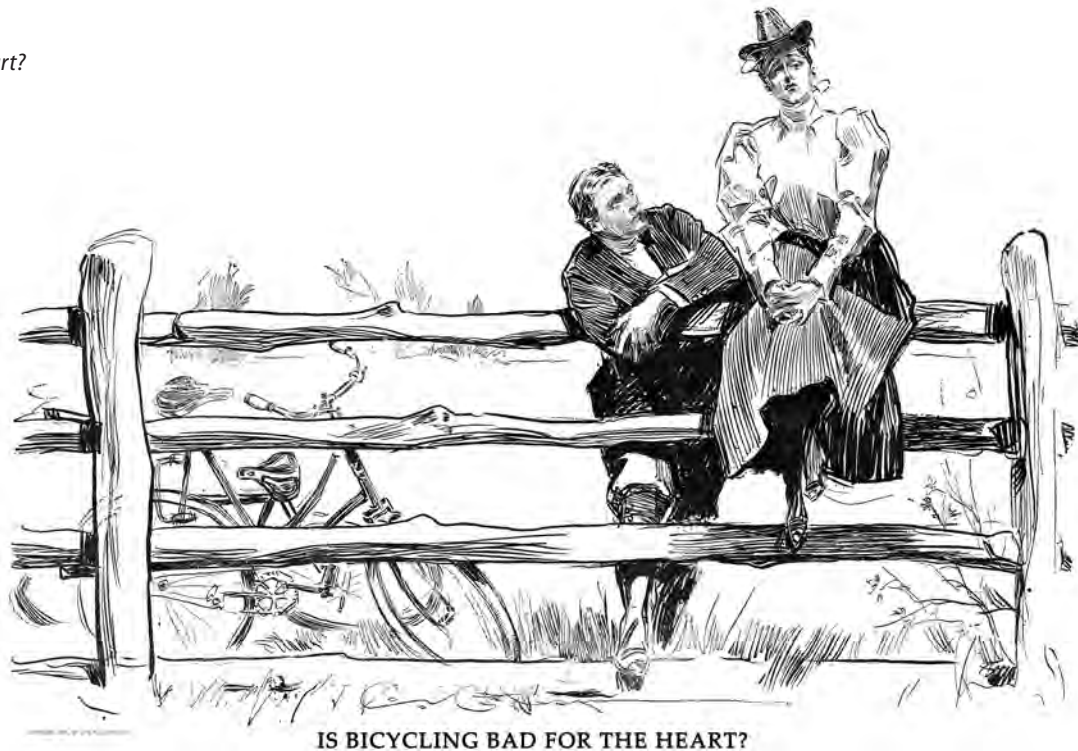
The July 1898 *Dominion Medical Journal of Toronto* offered:

*E. D. Page also teaches that the bicycle causes masturbation in women and girls . . . No woman should ride a bicycle without first consulting her medical man, and should ride only when suitably dressed.*⁴

There were countless papers and articles with similar alarms, supposedly with the foolish purpose of reversing the excitement of a new mode of travel, exercise, and entertainment. One of Gibson's 1897 cartoons teased the medical fear-mongering by asking the double entendre question "Is Bicycling Bad for the Heart?"

Is Bicycling Bad for the Heart?

Life, June 10, 1897



Besides Rev. Hawthorne's criticism of bloomers, the clergy were quick to play the "woman's place is in the home" card, fearing a suffrage connec-

tion and predicting certain damage to women. The January 1902 *Ladies' Home Journal* led with a three-quarter page viewpoint by J. Cardinal Gibbons, Archbishop of Baltimore, titled "The Restless Woman" in which he relentlessly used biblical verses and his own arguments against women in sports and other less-womanly pursuits which violated their "well-defined places:"

That woman was created to fill certain well-defined places in this world no one family with her physical, moral and mental makeup can doubt.

The Restless Woman

By His Eminence, J. Cardinal Gibbons



The Restless Woman
Ladies' Home Journal,
January 1902

After berating women's equality in matters outside their well-defined duties and the home, he also highlighted a dedication to sports as evil:

I see no harm in a woman's taking part once in a while in a game of golf, or any other outdoor exercise that befits her station. She is not to be housed like a plant, and never allowed the benefits derived from fresh air and moderate exercise. Any proper outdoor pursuit should be encouraged as an occasional recreation, but as a regular avocation it must be condemned.⁵

Unconventional suffragist might be a fitting description of the Gibson Girl. Arguably, she was an important transitional figure in the United States suffrage movement, even if accidental.

She was emblematic of the young educated, independent, and confident women who broke free from the shackles their mothers suffered. The new generation took up the battle flag from the aging and dying stalwarts, bringing more aggressive ideas to the national suffrage movement.

These new leaders grew up reading the surging media coverage of contemporary issues, including Gibson's social satire. They even embraced and adopted the media to help recast their mission in a character that was less fearful to many.

In Emily Scarborough's exceptional master's thesis, "Fine Dignity, Picturesque Beauty, and Serious Purpose: The Reorientation of Suffrage Media," she observed:

*Twentieth century suffragists sought to review their image in the public's mind. To do so, they created an identity that played into existing, popular opinions on class, race, and beauty to become mainstream rather than marginal.*¹³

From the pages of popular magazines, the media-savvy Gibson Girl went to war for suffrage in her own subtle way.

Gibson is credited with great influence over society, especially young college students. Possibly one such collegian was Alice Paul who became one of the most important suffrage leaders of the 20th century. Before her thirtieth birthday, she had confronted President Wilson and anti-suffrage politicians with a large Woman Suffrage Procession in Washington – the day before his inauguration. She kept up the fight for the nineteenth amendment, even suffering arrest and prosecution several years later for picketing the White House.

Alice was a biology major at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania, entering in 1901 at the age of sixteen at the height of Gibson's popularity. She

Snarky Repartee



A DISPOSITION

He: YOU'LL HAVE TO GO A LONG WAY BEFORE YOU WILL MEET ANYONE WHO LOVES YOU MORE THAN I.

She: WELL, I'M WILLING TO.

A Disposition

Life, October 10, 1901

Gibson Goes to War

The Great War inflicted millions of casualties on France, England, and other allies before the U. S. entered the war in April 1917. For thirty-two previous months, American sentiment ranged from outrage to isolationism to pacifism, as reluctance to help our friends and allies sadly dominated official policy.

Charles Dana Gibson was part of the outrage long before the U.S. Declaration of War.



A GIRL IN TIPPERARY
"My Heart's Right There"



A Girl in Tipperary

Life, December 3, 1914

The sketch of a tearful woman reading war reports includes a caption that referenced what would become the most popular English war song, *It's a Long Way to Tipperary*.