

The American Girl to All the World

Heather Voigt looks at Charles Gibson's turn of the century icon

THE GIBSON GIRL first appeared in *Life* magazine in 1890. In contrast to the previous decade's standard of beauty, fair-haired and plump and burdened by layers of crinoline skirts, the Gibson Girl was tall and willowy and wore her dark hair in a softly twisted bun. Her active lifestyle, which included sports like golf, required her to wear less constrictive skirts and blouses. Charles Dana Gibson's illustrations made the Gib-

son Girl the image of the ideal woman throughout the first decade of the 20th century. Gibson's friend, Richard Harding Davis, reported seeing "countless young women" wearing the hairdos and outfits of the Gibson Girl "from New York and Boston to Grand Rapids and Sioux City".



son Girl as a reform figure rather than a fashion model. Charlotte Perkins Gilman described the Gibson Girl as "braver, stronger, more healthful and skillful and able and free, more human in all ways". Nevertheless, the Gibson Girl's main goals were traditionally female — courtship and marriage. As evidenced by the illustration entitled "The Weaker Sex", in which a group of Gibson Girls prod a tiny

Many American women,



Left: *The Weaker Sex II* (1903). Right: *Molly Bawn* (1911). (Library of Congress)

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One of the reasons the Gibson Girl became so popular was because the illustrations could be easily mass marketed. The image of the Gibson Girl appeared not only in magazines, but also on objects such as furniture, pillow covers, silverware and even ashtrays. The Gibson Girl was also appealing because she lived in a

fantasy world with few problems. In an illustration entitled "Serious Business — A Young Lawyer Arguing His First Important Case", the Gibson Girl is clearly displeased with her male companion's attempts to resolve their lover's quarrel, but even such minor problems were rare for her. She spent much of her time in leisurely activities such as sitting on the beach.

Twentieth century feminists

regardless of class, saw themselves as a Gibson Girl. Working-class women believed that Gibson's original inspiration came from a model with an Irish working class background and another model who worked as a maid. To the upper classes, the Gibson Girl's presence at balls and the opera meant that Charles Gibson was obviously trying to portray the wealthy. Nevertheless, the middle classes felt that, with some effort, they could achieve the more carefree life of the Gibson Girl, and they could afford to adopt her hairstyle and clothing to meet their goal.

man with a needle, Gibson Girls did hold power over men; however, they were not depicted working outside of the home or advocating women's suffrage. Unlike her successors, the Gibson Girl was a moderate reform figure. After the first decade of the 20th century, the popularity of the Gibson Girls declined. The start of WWI belied her carefree lifestyle, and Gibson declared he wanted to do more "serious" art. By the 1920s, the Gibson Girl had been replaced by the flapper, an icon that advocated more daring choices in fashion and lifestyle.