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“Nostalgic Elegance”

The Enduring Style of the Gibson Girl

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This paper offers new perspectives on the sartorial style of the Gibson Girl archetype, the ideal of feminine beauty at the turn of the twentieth century, and its reinterpretation and prevalence post-World War II. We explore this nostalgic resurgence of turn-of-the-century style, identify which characteristics defined it, and examine its dissemination across the fashion industry. From the couture designs of Dior and Schiaparelli to sew-at-home patterns like those offered by Butterick, Simplicity, and McCall, the resurgence of the Gibson Girl's sartorial style influenced fashion and

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- 1 “Charles Dana Gibson,” National Museum of American Illustration, <<https://americanillustration.org/project/charles-dana-gibson>>.
- 2 Maria Elena Buszek, *Pin-Up Grrrls: Feminism, Sexuality, Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 87–88.
- 3 Carolyn Kitch, *The Girl on the Magazine Cover: The Origins of Visual Stereotypes in American Mass Media* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 39.
- 4 See also: Susan Wolstenhome, “Edith Wharton’s Gibson Girl: The Virgin, the Undine, and the Dynamo,” *American Literary Realism, 1870–1910*, 18, no. 1/2 (1985): 92–106; Lidice Jennifer Campuzano, “The Gibson Girl Who Was This Icon of Genteel Femininity” (Master’s thesis, Fashion Institute of Technology, 2008); and David Jeremiah Slater, “The American Girl Her Life and Times: An Ideal and Its Creators, 1890–1930” (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 2005).
- 5 We searched digital databases such as *Women’s Wear Daily*, *Vogue*, *Harper’s Bazaar*, the *New York Times*, and Jstor using keyword combinations of Gibson Girl and Gibson Girl look and received the largest number of returns from the time period of 1947–48 and again 1951–52.
- 6 Charlotte Nicklas and Anabella Pollen, eds., *Dress History: New Directions in Theory and Practice* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 3.
- 7 Pamela Jane Sachant, “Costumes and Clothes: The Intersection of Art and Life in George Seeley’s Photographs and Laura Seeley’s Diary,” *Dress* 29, no. 1 (2002): 87.
- 8 Gerald W. Johnson, “An Exercise in Nostalgia,” *New York Times*, October 22, 1967.
- 9 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, no. 2 (1987): 211.
- 10 “The Gibson Girl’s America: Drawings by Charles Dana Gibson,” Library of Congress, <<https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/gibson-girls-america/creating-an-ideal.html>>.
- 11 “The Gibson Girl’s America.”
- 12 Adrian Bailey, *The Passion for Fashion: Changing Styles in Dress* (Surrey, UK: Dragon’s World, 1988), 92.

gained further popularity through presentations in film, theater, and retail merchandising.

Keywords Gibson Girl, Charles Dana Gibson, nostalgia, fashion, shirtwaist, New Woman

Introduction

CHARLES DANA GIBSON’S place in history was forever solidified through his creation of the Gibson Girl, an illustrated ideal of the American woman he first drew in 1890.¹ Though Gibson was not the first illustrator to attempt to visually define the ideal woman, the Gibson Girl enjoyed widespread popularity and endured as a standard of beauty. He managed to depict traditionalist ideas and romanticized femininity as well as forms of gender progressivism for the time.² He is credited with creating the quintessential definition of the ideal American woman for an entire generation.³ The sartorial style of the Gibson Girl affected and reflected fashion in a far-reaching way. Her style not only dominated the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries but also resurged predominantly from 1947 to 1948 and again from 1951 to 1952.

This research analyzed the Gibson Girl style and examined its 1947–48 and 1951–52 resurgences. Scholars have examined the Gibson Girl as well as her societal impact; however, her resurgent sartorial stylistic influences have not yet been documented.⁴ Our study utilized a variety of period publications such as *Women’s Wear Daily*—a trade publication intended for fashion-industry insiders, *Vogue*—a fashion publication intended for consumers, and the *New York Times*—a widely distributed leading news source. Other primary sources included home sewing patterns, imagery of extant artifacts, and photography from the period.⁵ This research found that, despite the varied purposes of the sources, the characteristics that defined Gibson Girl-style revivals were similar. According to historians Nicklas and Pollen, “dress history has from its inception, drawn on many sources and approached its subject in many ways.”⁶ Our research benefitted from access to

a wide variety of sources via digital databases that ultimately revealed the analysis provided here. Our survey of Gibson Girl-inspired fashions may prove useful to historians of dress interested in the sartorial style of the Gibson Girl and how it impacted the American fashion system both in her heyday as well as in the mid-twentieth century.

Gibson Girl Origins

According to art historian Pamela Jane Sachant, the Gibson Girl became “the ideal of femininity in the first decade of the twentieth century.”⁷ She “influenced the appearance, therefore the lives, of millions of young women and their attendant swains.”⁸ Considered the “New Woman” in comparison to her Victorian predecessors, she was portrayed “as tall, long-legged and graceful, with upswept hair, faintly pink cheeks, a provocative eye, and a cool detached air.”⁹ Her face was flawlessly beautiful, and her figure was slim yet voluptuous.¹⁰ Physical attributes aside, the Gibson Girl also proved to be progressive; she was “an independent and often well-educated young woman poised to enjoy a more visible and active role in the public arena than women of preceding generations.”¹¹ She was “determinedly self-assured, part college girl, part fashionable beauty . . . [she] was not just exceptionally pretty, she could look you straight in the eye, had a firm handshake.”¹² Gibson Girl illustrations were published in a wide range of print materials including newspapers and magazines, and her image came to be included on a variety of consumer products.

According to Gibson, “I never consciously sat to work to create a specific type of the American girl. . . . I saw her on the streets, I saw her at the theatres, I saw her in the churches, I saw her

FIGURE 1 Left to right: Anna Kochberg (née Simon), ca. 1909, courtesy of the estate of Roslyn Breyer; Charles Dana Gibson, “Head of a Girl,” ca. 1900, Library of Congress, <<https://www.loc.gov/item/2010716145/>>; Kochberg with her family, Philadelphia, courtesy of the estate of Roslyn Breyer. Kochberg’s appearance references the Gibson Girl aesthetic with upswept hair, soft facial features, elongated neck, shirtwaist with high collar of inset lace, and elbow-length bishop sleeves.



everywhere and doing everything.”¹³ Gibson’s illustrations were a stylized reflection of women and their behavior in society at the turn of the twentieth century. The style and activities of the Gibson Girl reflected through the eye of an illustrator popularized how an entire generation of women went about their lives in new ways. Several young society women (including his wife Irene Langhorne Gibson) served as inspiration for his creation, acting as models for the illustrator; the resultant famed Gibson Girl was actually a compilation of several women.¹⁴ Well-known and beautiful women, such as Evelyn Nesbit—a favored model and member of “the *Florodora* sextet,” mirrored the look of Gibson’s illustrations in real life.¹⁵ *Florodora* was a popular musical of the period, and Nesbit appeared in the Broadway production as a member of the chorus line. “The sextet” refers to a group of chorines in the musical who had a captivating effect on audiences and added to the fame of the show. Nesbit was “the most in-demand model in New York” shortly after moving to the city in 1900.¹⁶

Another example was Camille Clifford, an actress and model who “had won a competition to find a living version of the ‘Gibson Girls’ seen in . . .

illustrations.”¹⁷ Clifford’s hourglass figure and towering, piled coiffure exemplified the Gibson Girl’s image so closely that she was described as “the epitome of the ‘Gibson Girl.’”¹⁸ Plausibly we can say that Gibson’s illustrations captured the essence of many women of the period as they “strode from the nineteenth into the twentieth century emancipated, confident and chic.”¹⁹ Gibson’s illustrations provided a vehicle by which the spirit of the New Woman could be communicated to the public and therefore emulated by women across the nation. The influence of the Gibson Girl is readily seen in photographs from around the turn of the century; women styled their hair in emulation and often wore high-collared shirtwaists as did the Gibson Girl (FIGURE 1).

As the Gibson Girl enjoyed widespread favor among the general public, she became an ideal of beauty. Gibson’s images presented not only a new aesthetic but also a somewhat radical conception of femininity. Gibson Girls often were portrayed in a public, more assertive manner, and women took note. Photographs from the scrapbook of Edith Garfield Chesebrough, a class of 1905 Cornell University student, are the epitome of the Gibson Girl style (FIGURE 2). Fashion historian Kendra

- 13 Catherine Gourley, *Gibson Girls and Suffragists: Perceptions of Women from 1900 to 1918* (Minneapolis: Twenty-First Century Books, 2007), 32.
- 14 Agnes Rogers, “The Undimmed Appeal of the Gibson Girl,” *American Heritage* 9, no. 1 (1957), <<https://www.americanheritage.com/index.php/content/undimmed-appeal-gibson-girl>>.
- 15 Stephanie Savage, “Evelyn Nesbit and the Film(ed) Histories of the Thaw-White Scandal,” *Film History* 8 (1996): 160.
- 16 Lindsay Baker, “Evelyn Nesbit: The World’s First Supermodel,” British Broadcasting Corporation, <<http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20141222-the-worlds-first-supermodel>>.
- 17 Pamela Church Gibson, *A Century of Hairstyles* (London: Shire Publications, 2014), 8.
- 18 Camille Clifford (*Camilla Antoinette Clifford*) (1888–1970), Actress, National Portrait Gallery, <<http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/person/mp50754/camille-clifford-camilla-antoinette-clifford>>.
- 19 Bailey, *The Passion for Fashion*, 92.

20 Kendra Van Cleave, "A Style All Her Own": Fashion, Clothing Practices, and Female Community at Smith College, 1920–1929," *Dress* 32, no. 1 (2005): 61.

21 "What Are Gender Roles and Stereotypes?," Planned Parenthood, <<https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/sexual-orientation-gender/gender-gender-identity/what-are-gender-roles-and-stereotypes>>.

22 *Mr. and Mrs. I. N. Phelps Stokes*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, <<http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/12140>>.

23 "Gender in Nineteenth-Century Art," Art History Teaching Resources, <<http://arthistory-teachingresources.org/lessons/gender-in-nineteenth-century-art>>.

FIGURE 2 Photographs of Edith Garfield Chesebrough from her scrapbook, ca. 1905. Garfield Chesebrough Scrapbook, #37-5-3792, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library. Chesebrough's shirtwaist with high collar and bishop sleeves is worn with a full skirt.



Van Cleave described turn-of-the-century clothing practices at Smith College, stating that with "popular 'New Woman' styles, college women generally tried to project a serious yet feminine image."²⁰ Chesebrough dressed in this manner; her smart, conservative ensemble conveyed a professional and studious but also feminine image. She communicated femininity of the early twentieth century through the incorporation of a full-length skirt, lace, and bow, which acted as physical representations of the passive, naive, soft, graceful, and nurturing qualities that typified traditional femininity.²¹ Although Chesebrough dressed in a fashionable manner that reflected the Gibson Girl aesthetic, she also pursued an education at Cornell College. In some ways, the Gibson Girl changed the idea that higher education was unfeminine.

Gibson's portrayal of his version of the New Woman as more powerful and independent is perhaps best articulated by a 1903 illustration by Gibson titled *The Weaker Sex*, which portrayed three Gibson Girls in a position of power, looming over a comparably smaller man; one of them

examined him with a magnifying glass and appeared to consider poking him with a hat pin. This illustration was so iconic that in 1948 *Vogue* recreated it as a photograph during the 1947–48 Gibson Girl-look revival (FIGURE 3).

The image of the Gibson Girl was so prevalent at the turn of the century that it influenced personal style as documented in photography of the period as well as the portraiture of artists such as John Singer Sargent. His 1897 portrait of Mr. and Mrs. Isaac Newton Phelps Stokes was originally intended to feature Mrs. Stokes with a Great Dane by her side, but when the dog was unavailable, her husband stepped in (FIGURE 4).²² The result featured Mrs. Stokes in the foreground with Mr. Stokes positioned in the back (and in shadow). As the "divide between the spheres for men and women remained an important social doctrine throughout the nineteenth century," portraiture traditionally featured husbands in the dominant stance or position.²³ In the Sargent portrait, one could say that Mrs. Stokes had both literally and conceptually stepped forward.

FIGURE 3 Illustration (left), “The Weaker Sex,” *Collier’s Weekly* 31 (1903), 12–13. Photograph (right), “Belles of the Gibson Girl Ball,” *Vogue* 112, no. 10 (1948), 132–33. Horst P. Horst © Conde Nast.



FIGURE 4 John Singer Sargent, *Mr. and Mrs. I. N. Phelps Stokes*, 1897. Oil on canvas, 84¼ × 39¾ in. Bequest of Edith Minturn Phelps Stokes (Mrs. I. N.), 1938 (38.104). Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY.



Mrs. Stokes’ daywear ensemble of jacket, shirtwaist, bowtie, belt, skirt, and straw boater not only personify the Gibson Girl style but comprises an ensemble that easily functioned in the public sphere. As demonstrated in this painting, clothing helped to define the Gibson Girl and proved to be an integral part of a self-presentation that allowed for more of a public-sphere role in comparison to her Victorian predecessors.²⁴ According to Raina-Joy Jenifer Palso, “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.”²⁵ The most ubiquitous of the Gibson Girl outfits was her day look, as seen in Sargent’s painting. It was achieved through a skirt-shirtwaist combination that sometimes included a tailored jacket with accessories such as neckties and bowties, bar pins, cameos, boater hats, riding gloves, and ribbons tied round the neck.²⁶ The shirtwaist and skirt combination reflected an increased active and freer lifestyle.²⁷ Shirtwaists, an integral component of the Gibson Girl’s wardrobe, single-handedly doubled the output of the women’s apparel industry in the United States from 1890 to 1900.²⁸ Gibson Girls most often were seen in high-necked shirtwaists with varying degrees of surface

- 24 Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Every Day Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959).
- 25 Raina-Joy Jenifer Palso, *Faces of Feminism: The Gibson Girl and the Held Flapper in Early Twentieth-Century Mass Culture* (Flint: University of Michigan, 2001), 42, <<https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/117731/Palso.pdf>>.
- 26 Daniel James Cole and Nancy Deihl, *The History of Modern Fashion* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2015), 210.
- 27 Jennifer Craik, *The Face of Fashion: Cultural Studies in Fashion* (London: Routledge, 1994), 13.
- 28 Jean L. Parsons, “The Shirtwaist: Changing the Commerce of Fashion,” *Fashion, Style & Popular Culture* 5, no. 1 (2018): 11.

- 29 Jean L. Parsons, "No Longer a 'Frowsy Drudge' Women's Wardrobe Management: 1880-1930," *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 20, no. 1 (2002): 33.
- 30 Rory Dicker, *A History of U.S. Feminisms* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2016), 11.
- 31 Ann Heilmann, *New Woman Strategies: Sarah Grand, Olive Schreiner, Mona Caird* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).
- 32 Kate Nelson Best, *The History of Fashion Journalism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 64.
- 33 Dicker, *A History of U.S. Feminisms*, 10.
- 34 Nikki Mandell, "A Hotel of Her Own: Building by and for the New Woman, 1900-1930," *Journal of Urban History* 45, no. 3 (2018): 517.
- 35 Einav Rabinovitch-Fox, "[Re]Fashioning the New Woman: Women's Dress, the Oriental Style, and the Construction of American Feminist Imagery in the 1910s," *Journal of Women's History* 27, no. 2 (2015): 14.
- 36 Dicker, *A History of U.S. Feminisms*.
- 37 Marlene LeGates, *In Their Time: A History of Feminism in Western Society* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 199, 201.
- 38 Martha H. Patterson, *Beyond the Gibson Girl: Reimagining the American New Woman, 1895-1915* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 31.
- 39 Buszek, *Pin-Up Grrrrls*, 97.
- 40 See Charles Dana Gibson, *Everyday People* (New York: Scribner, 1904); and *The Social Ladder* (New York: R. H. Russell/John Lane, 1902).
- 41 Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation Between Women and Men* (Boston: Small, Maynard and Co., 1898; Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1994), 148-49.
- 42 Patterson, *Beyond Gibson Girl*.
- 43 Christopher Beward, *Fashion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 163.
- 44 Best, *Fashion Journalism*, 63.
- 45 Patterson, *Beyond Gibson Girl*, 33.

ornamentation and complexity that featured lace, ruffles, pin-tucks, and bows. The rise of manufactured apparel such as the shirtwaist in the late nineteenth century made consumer products readily available on a mass scale and made the beauty ideal of the period somewhat more achievable.²⁹

The New Woman, the Gibson Girl, and Feminism

The Gibson Girl came upon the scene at nearly the same time as the New Woman "who became a type in the 1890s and remained popular until the advent of World War I."³⁰ The New Woman emerged as more women pursued independence through work, education, and other life options outside of marriage. The term "New Woman" often is attributed to writer and feminist Sarah Grand who wrote both fiction and non-fiction centered around New Woman ideals such as the avoidance of marriage at an early age.³¹ The archetype further developed in response to "increasing demands for female emancipation."³² In popular culture, the New Woman took many forms, such as suffragette, college student, activist, feminist, and consumer of material goods. They "increasingly lived on their own in urban settings, had college educations, and worked in professional or semi-professional jobs."³³ Multi-family and bachelor apartment living had been well established in cities like New York by the early twentieth century. However, increasing demand for independent living for women led to the development "of apartment hotels built for single middle- and upper-class women during the early decades of the twentieth century."³⁴

"Many New Women did not see fashion as opposing feminist ideas, but as a way to advance them."³⁵ While some New Women feminists of the early twentieth century dressed in conventional attire of the period, others chose silhouettes and fabrics inspired by orientalism or bohemianism. Perhaps "the most famous image of the New Woman

was . . . Gibson's . . . Gibson Girl."³⁶ Gibson's interpretation of the New Woman was stylized, privileged, and white. "The issues generally associated with first-wave feminism reflect the importance of property and status" and in general were advanced by women "raised in some degree of material comfort."³⁷ Gibson depicted women smoking, participating in athletic activities, having the upper hand in relationships with men, and even as jurors. "His images almost invariably promoted a measure of women's personal independence, self-actualization, and sexual assertiveness."³⁸ Gibson as an illustrator took "advantage of the situation to comment positively on the increasingly public lives of women."³⁹ The Gibson Girl was somewhat political as she was shown in illustrations that questioned child-labor practices as well as sanitation issues.⁴⁰ Some feminists of the period such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman referred to the Gibson Girl as personification of the New Woman. According to Gilman, the Gibson Girl was representative of "new women; and they represent a noble type indeed. . . . Women are growing honester, braver, stronger, more healthful and skillful and able and free, more human in all ways."⁴¹ Although some feminists referred to her as a representation of the New Woman, almost from the start she was controversial.⁴² While the image of the Gibson Girl was somewhat progressive, she was overtly anti-suffrage. She was defined by her beauty and her "lithe" body, "fashioned through diet, exercise, and the appropriate costume," which became for many an unrealistic symbol of femininity of the period.⁴³

In her time, the Gibson Girl became "the most powerful fashion icon to emerge in America."⁴⁴ Her image appeared in a variety of media of the period including magazines and illustrated books but also on an array of consumer goods such as "calendars, decorator plates, postcards, pyrographic glove boxes and plaques, dresser sets, brooches, flasks, and cigarette cases," to name a few.⁴⁵ She was "reproduced on

china . . . as well as silverware, pillow covers, chairs, tabletops, match-boxes, ashtrays, scarves and wallpaper; she appeared on the covers of sheet music and advertising posters for songs and plays that were written about her; her figure and garb inspired the manufacture and sale of Gibson Girl shirtwaists, skirts, corsets, shoes, and hats.”⁴⁶ In a way, Gibson’s illustrations made the image of the New Woman palatable and consumable by the masses. From the start, the Gibson Girl was progressive *and* manufactured *and* developed from a male gaze.

The Gibson Girl represented different things to different people. As an interpretation of the New Woman, she was somewhat progressive. However, as an object to be emulated, manufactured, and sold, she defined femininity through fashion and consumerism and was not aligned with first-wave feminism’s focus on suffrage. Her impact on society is complicated and not easily defined. Clearly, her sartorial style was extremely popular and in many ways “enabled the rising classes to imitate upper-class style in their own appearances . . . and on tangible ownable objects, her image enabled them to import that style into their homes.”⁴⁷ Although Gibson did not depict women of color as Gibson Girls, some evidence indicates that women of color, particularly those who sought higher education, attempted to address “intersectional invisibility” in part through dressing in an adaptation of the Gibson Girl style.⁴⁸ One example is Emma Norman-Todd, the earliest documented African American to attend Central Normal School (now Central Michigan University). In 1907, she achieved certification that allowed “her to teach in high school, grade school, and one-room schoolhouses” (FIGURE 5).⁴⁹

The Revived Gibson Girl Look

Over time, the Gibson Girl style fell out of fashion.⁵⁰ The 1920s ushered in a different version of the New Woman who

FIGURE 5 Emma Norman-Todd (1887–1973), ca. 1907. Image courtesy of the Old Settlers Collection, Museum of Cultural and Natural History, Central Michigan University. Norman-Todd in a shirtwaist with hair piled high in the style of the Gibson Girl.



wore “short skirts, unrestricted clothes and make-up,” leaving Charles Dana Gibson’s images behind.⁵¹ The flapper represented a dramatically new ideal of femininity related to sexuality and women’s roles in society. Craik explains that “techniques of femininity are acquired and displayed through clothes, looks and gestures.”⁵² As fashion rapidly changed throughout the twentieth century, it helped both to construct and to reflect varying ideas of femininity. For the New Woman/Gibson Girl, it was shirtwaists and long skirts; for the flapper, it was something entirely different. By the 1960s and 1970s, second-wave feminists dressed in a different variety of ways and also were referred to as New Women of their time.

During World War II, fashion changed less frequently. Following the austerity of wartime, focus shifted back to more traditional ideals of feminine dress and beauty and the interpretation

46 Kitch, *The Girl on the Magazine Cover*, 39.

47 Kitch, *The Girl on the Magazine Cover*, 41.

48 See Valerie Purdie-Vaughns and Richard P. Eibach, “Intersectional Invisibility: The Distinctive Advantages and Disadvantages of Multiple Subordinate-Group Identities,” *Sex Roles* 59 (2008): 377–91; and Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant, “The New Howard Woman: Dean Lucy Diggs Slowe and the Education of a Modern Black Femininity,” *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 17, no. 1 (2018): 25–48.

49 “Emma Norman-Todd Teacher of Isabella County,” Museum of Cultural and Natural History, Central Michigan University.

50 “Fashion Cycle,” Monash University, <<https://business.monash.edu/marketing/marketing-dictionary/ff/fashion-cycle>>.

51 “1920’s Fashion for Women,” American-Historama, <<http://www.american-historama.org/1913-1928-ww1-prohibition-era/1920s-fashion.htm>>.

52 Craik, *The Face of Fashion*.

- 53 Cole and Deihl, *History of Modern Fashion*, 210.
- 54 Valerie Steele, *Paris Fashion a Cultural History* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 242.
- 55 Oriole Cullen and Connie Karol Burks, *Christian Dior* (London: V&A Publishing, 2019).
- 56 Ulrich Lehmann, *Tigersprung Fashion in Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 205.
- 57 Anne Edwards, "The Longer-Skirt Dictator Nips Into London—and Out Again," *Daily Express*, August 27, 1947, 2.
- 58 "Main Floor Accessories: Scarfs, Belts Ruled 1947 Accessories: Wasp Waist Fashions Called for Belts," *Women's Wear Daily* 75, no. 125 (1947), 25.
- 59 "Shirtwaist-and-Skirt: Town Meeting," *Vogue* 109, no. 7 (1947), 176–77.
- 60 R. Turner Wilcox, *The Dictionary of Costume* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), 318, 324–25.
- 61 Wilcox, *The Dictionary of Costume*.
- 62 "Big Spring for Gibson Girl Blouses," *Women's Wear Daily* 76, no. 28 (1948): 60.
- 63 "Gibson Girl Styles Add to Lace Demand," *Women's Wear Daily* 75, no. 115 (1947), 34.
- 64 See "Gibson Girl Tops with Teens in L.A.," *Women's Wear Daily* 75, no. 95 (1947), 35; "Gibson Girl Separates Pull," *Women's Wear Daily* 75, no. 83 (1947), 14; "Gibson Girl Blouses, Petticoat Skirts Lead in L.A. Market Styles," *Women's Wear Daily* 75, no. 80 (1947), 20; "The Gibson Girl Is the Girl for the Teens!," *Women's Wear Daily* 75, no. 80 (1947), 12.
- 65 "Dallas: Gibson Girl and Hipped 2-Piecers Make Spring News," *Women's Wear Daily* 75, no. 95 (1947), 21. A shirtwaist dress is a single garment with matching or contrasting coloration/patterning on the bodice and skirt that retained the same silhouette as a separate shirtwaist/skirt ensemble.

of an idealistic past, achieved in fashion with an hourglass silhouette and exuberant use of material that "evoked a world of elegant fantasy that had been suppressed during the war."⁵³ This is perhaps most widely recognized in the work of Christian Dior, who "from 1947 . . . was the most famous and financially successful designer in France . . . repeatedly hailed as the savior of Paris fashion."⁵⁴ His 1947 collection, which coincided with the 1947–48 Gibson Girl look revival, gained worldwide fame in part due to the flurry created by the North American press, which dubbed it the "New Look." This new style was defined by a rounded shoulder line, small waist, and extremely voluminous skirts, one of which from the 1947 collection was comprised of eighty yards of fabric.⁵⁵ While Dior is famous for this silhouette, as is often the case in fashion, he did not originate the style; instead he looked to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for inspiration. Other designers of the late 1940s also looked to the past for inspiration, and in doing so, they came upon the Gibson Girl. However, the reinterpretation of the turn-of-the-century woman was romanticized and focused primarily on an idealistic femininity achieved with fashion that referenced the Gibson Girl look but left socio-political progressivism related to the New Woman behind. At both the turn of the twentieth century and post-World War II, the Gibson Girl look was a product widely merchandised and consumed. However, after the war, the style was nostalgic and harkened toward a "traditional" femininity that was not new or progressive in the same way it had been during the original Gibson Girl heyday.

A strong consumer appetite for nostalgia and a prevailing postwar mentality defined fashion for at least a decade, if not longer. According to art professor Ulrich Lehmann, clothing has "the power to fashion a new look for history . . . by reshaping the silhouette of historical structures, by altering the way one perceives the succession of past epochs and the relation of the present

to them."⁵⁶ Historicism is a powerful design tool. Like a Proustian character dipping a madeleine into a cup of tea, the use of history or historical silhouettes as inspiration unlocks limitless fashion memories and opportunities for interpretations that may not be so *new*. Perhaps Dior summed it up best himself in simpler terms. "I am giving women the dresses they want . . . they're fed up with war restrictions . . . my full skirts are a release."⁵⁷ This research has revealed that the popularity of Dior's romanticized femininity might have opened the door for a Gibson Girl-look revival that often was compared to the Dior New Look aesthetic.

Summarized here are several key elements that were relatively consistent in the creation of the revived Gibson Girl look of 1947–48. An important component that paid homage to turn-of-the-century fashion was the wearing of two separate garments; "the 'Gibson Girl' reign in fashions calls for blouses and skirts connected with a belt."⁵⁸ In keeping with the historic theme, Gibson Girl-inspired blouses of the late 1940s often were referred to as shirtwaists.⁵⁹ Originally, shirtwaists were "the feminine adaption of the masculine shirt at the turn of the century."⁶⁰ Gibson frequently featured shirtwaists in his illustrations.⁶¹ Because of this association, postwar versions frequently were dubbed "Gibson Girl shirtwaists." One decorative element utilized was "tucked bib yokes added to tailored blouses [as] a style point."⁶² Demand for Gibson Girl trimmings, such as ruffles, piping, and lace, reportedly increased.⁶³ Many publications from 1947 depicted shirtwaists as white, black, pink, or kelly green in color with "petticoat," "swirling," and "whirlaway" skirts in light and dark blue, black, gray, and royal, as well as plaids.⁶⁴ Manufacturers produced two-piece matching blouse and skirt sets as well as one-piece shirtwaist-inspired dresses.⁶⁵

Another vital element of the look was achieved with sleeve designs that referenced late nineteenth/early twentieth-century shirtwaist silhouettes. Generally,

this was executed in two ways: modified leg-o-mutton and bishop sleeves. The leg-o-mutton sleeves appear prominently in several of Gibson’s illustrations.⁶⁶ The revived Gibson Girl styles often featured sleeves at both full and three-quarter length, described as “long, tight, with puff-top shoulder treatment,” an effective description of the classic leg-o-mutton sleeve.⁶⁷ Bishop sleeves were very fashionable during the first decade of the twentieth century and also were featured in several of Gibson’s illustrations.⁶⁸

The revived Gibson Girl look also was achieved with accessories. In 1947, *Women’s Wear Daily* reported on store windows that “feature modern Gibson Girl fashions along with old-time accessories.”⁶⁹ A variety of ribbons, ascots, and scarves tied around collars appear in advertisements for Gibson Girl-look shirtdresses and ensembles from 1947–48. These were held in place by cameos as well as bar pins “that grandma used to wear,” which came in a variety of designs adorned with rhinestones.⁷⁰ Women wore wide-brimmed straw hats (some in boater style), featuring embellishments like ribbons and mesh veils.⁷¹ Mesh veiling created a high collar wrapped around the neck and held in place by a choker.⁷² Belts and cummerbunds were an integral element of the revived Gibson Girl look; *Women’s Wear Daily* reported that they “minimize the waistline and are boned for a further slenderizing feature.”⁷³

The pinnacle of the Gibson Girl-look revival of 1947–48 was the Gibson Girl ball held on December 20, 1948. The ball was given “in honor of Mrs. Charles Dana Gibson . . . [for] the Child Placing and Adoption Committee. . . . The feminine guests are asked to wear gowns in the current style, influenced by the Gibson Girl fashions at the turn of the century.”⁷⁴ Indeed, this suggestion was followed; several women arrived in “portrait gowns,” which were full, draped dresses, pale in color, with low necklines.⁷⁵ Many of the gowns worn by planning committee members and wealthy society women were designed by

Mainbocher and featured strong turn-of-the-century influence. According to Mrs. Gibson, her gown was “very much like a dress I had around 1910.”⁷⁶ Gibson Girl influence was evident through leg-o-mutton sleeves, long evening gloves, hair worn in swept-up arrangements, trains, and ruffled underpinnings to help increase volume. A unique accessory some wore at the ball was “sleeve-mitts,” long gloves that featured a puffed end so that, when fully pulled up the arm to the shoulder, the illusion of leg-o-mutton sleeves was created.⁷⁷

Pervasive Influence of the Gibson Girl Look

The revived Gibson Girl look of 1947–48 could be seen in many different categories of dress. Suits for daytime were influenced by Gibson Girl styling with details such as decorative piping, longer skirt lengths, convertible collars on the jackets, and exaggerated hourglass silhouettes.⁷⁸ *Women’s Wear Daily* reported that “Gibson Girl blouses and ballerina skirts . . . make it so easy, so exciting to enjoy the ‘New Look.’”⁷⁹ This more accessible version of Dior’s New Look might have provided an option for women interested in a functional, practical, and somewhat more casual approach to the latest fashion. This was reinforced in a 1947 *Life* article about a young woman who was able to achieve the New Look on a shopping trip that cost less than a hundred dollars.⁸⁰ Her purchases included a “Gibson Girl blouse which, with her new suit skirt, provide Catherine with the season’s widely accepted blouse-and-skirt combination” (FIGURE 6).⁸¹

Clothing inspired by the Gibson Girl also was advertised for toddlers, girls, teenagers, and college-aged women. *Women’s Wear Daily* reported on dresses for toddlers that “feature unusual sleeve interest . . . with the full puffed and frilled Gibson Girl . . . [and] Gibson Girl bows and collars complete the effect.”⁸² Garments included “skirts and blouses for little girls [that were] the theme of a

- 66 Wilcox, *The Dictionary of Costume*.
- 67 “Fashion: Necklines and Sleeves,” *Chatelaine* 19, no. 9 (1946), 31.
- 68 Wilcox, *The Dictionary of Costume*, 318, 324–25.
- 69 “Gibson Girl Promotion Pulls,” *Women’s Wear Daily* 75, no. 75 (1947), 34.
- 70 See “Jewelry: White and Pastel Pearls, Beads, Gibson Girl Jewelry Featured: Cameos, Pearls, Stickpins Add to Gibson Girl Look,” *Women’s Wear Daily* 76, no. 1 (1948), 27; and “Bar Pins Complete ‘Gibson Girl’ Look,” *Women’s Wear Daily* 75, no. 43 (1947), 12. Descendants of Anna Simon Kochberg, pictured in Figure 1, possess a rhinestone-encrusted bar pin worn by her in the early part of the twentieth century that featured her initials in capital letters: A. S. K.
- 71 See *Hat*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1973.235.1; and *Women’s Hat with Three Hat Pins*, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1995-88-9a-d.
- 72 “New Veilings . . . New Ways with Veilings,” *Vogue* 109, no. 11 (1947), 5.
- 73 “Fabric Belts Have Style, Price Appeal,” *Women’s Wear Daily* 76, no. 16 (1948), 11.
- 74 “Gibson Girl Ball Dec. 20: Fete Honoring Mrs. C. D. Gibson Will Aid Adoption Committee,” *New York Times*, October 23, 1948.
- 75 “Intricately Draped Grand Ball Gowns Favorite Type at Gibson Girl Ball, Debutante Cotillion,” *Women’s Wear Daily* 77, no. 121 (1948), 3.
- 76 “Intricately Draped Grand Ball Gowns.”
- 77 “Intricately Draped Grand Ball Gowns.”
- 78 “Gibson Girl Gives Her Good Name to Many Types,” *Women’s Wear Daily* 75, no. 85 (1947), 29.
- 79 “More Power to the Gibson Girl in Impressive Retail Ads,” *Women’s Wear Daily* 75, no. 85 (1947), 29.
- 80 “The New Look for \$100: Shopping Trip Proves It Can Be Done,” *Life* (1947), 83–84.
- 81 “The New Look for \$100.”
- 82 “Gibson Girl Look,” *Women’s Wear Daily* 96, no. 124 (1958), 34.

83 "Altman Album Frames Gibson Girl Success," *Women's Wear Daily* 75, no. 90 (1947), 22.

84 See "Big Sleeves, Wide Skirts Animate Teen Gibson Girls," *Women's Wear Daily* 75, no. 90 (1947), 21; "The Gibson Girl Is the Girl for the Teens!," 12.

85 "Minnesota: Long, Full Skirts and Gibson Girl Blouses Lead College Shop Sales," *Women's Wear Daily* 75, no. 64 (1947), 53.

86 Virginia Pope, "Jubilee Fashions in Huge Pageant from Gibson Girl Era to Present: Jubilee Fashions Seen in Rehearsal," *New York Times*, August 21, 1948. Also featured in the show were actresses cast in a revival of *Florodora* (the same musical that Evelyn Nesbit was once a part of), modeling 1948 interpretations of turn-of-the-century dress.

87 "Paris Collections," *Vogue* 109, no. 7 (1947), 143.

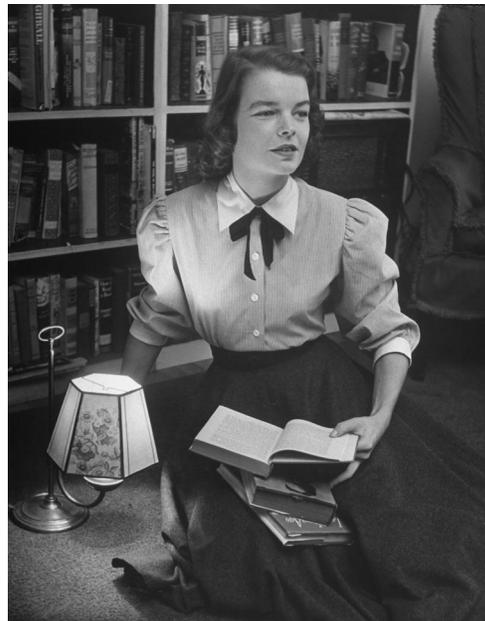
88 See *Lady in Black* ensemble by Maurice Rentner at the Museum of the City of New York, 2013.5.10A-F.

89 See "The Gibson Girl Is the Girl for the Teens!," 12; "Dallas: Gibson Girl and Hipped 2-Piecers Make Spring News," 21; and "Bar Pins Complete 'Gibson Girl' Look," 12.

90 "Gibson Girl Clothes: They Accent Hips and Sweetness," *Life* 23, no. 8 (1947), 22, 113-14, 116.

91 "Gibson Girl Clothes."

FIGURE 6 "The New Look for \$100: Shopping Trip Proves It Can Be Done," *Life* (1947), 83-84. © Nina Leen/The LIFE Picture Collection/Getty Images.



recent promotion in the Gibson Girl mood.⁸³ Additional design elements that surfaced in children's wear included the use of plaid fabrications, bishop and leg-o-mutton sleeves, contrast between a dark skirt and a white or light blouse (often referred to as a shirtwaist), convertible and high collars, and Gibson Girl-inspired accessories and trimmings such as ascots, scarves, or ribbons tied around the collar with lace detailing. Fashion for teens featured elements seen in children's wear with the exception of longer and fuller skirts (FIGURE 7).⁸⁴ College-aged young women were offered the revived Gibson Girl look in its full form with long, voluminous skirts, and cummerbunds to achieve an hourglass, corseted look along with ruffles, convertible collars, ribbons tied at the neck, and cameos.⁸⁵

The Gibson Girl look also influenced high-end fashion. For example, an elaborate Traina-Norell gown presented in a fashion show celebrating New York City's golden jubilee of 1948 featured "upward pointed puffed sleeves and a little train" that created a silhouette

typical of the 1890s.⁸⁶ A "boned chin-high, Gibson Girl shirtwaist with flat, boned cummerbund" by Elsa Schiaparelli was featured in *Vogue* in 1947 (FIGURE 8).⁸⁷ The influence of the Gibson Girl also can be seen in an afternoon dress by Maurice Rentner featured in *Vogue* in 1947 with "Edwardian drapery . . . circa 1910 . . . the black tie a gentle reminder of the Gibson Girl." The Gibson Girl look in this ensemble is further emphasized with a straw boater similar to the one carried by Mrs. Stokes in her portrait by Sargent and sleeves that are slightly puffed at the shoulder. An example of this ensemble entitled "Lady in Black" was part of a Costume Institute exhibit sponsored by Bloomingdale's entitled "Woman of Fashion 1947," held in honor of the store's seventy-fifth anniversary; the outfit now is held by the Museum of the City of New York (FIGURE 9).⁸⁸

Further down the fashion ladder, numerous examples of illustrations depicted retailers' ready-to-wear Gibson Girl-style ensembles in *Women's Wear Daily*.⁸⁹ Seemingly at every level of fashion, the Gibson Girl and her look were influential from 1947 to 1948.

Another prominent portrayal of the Gibson Girl look was presented in an issue of *Life* published in 1947. The cover featured a photo of a "girl in [a] ruffled blouse peering through [an] ornate glass door" who "might well be a belle of the 1890s."⁹⁰ The Victorian setting used for the photo shoot added to the 1890s theme. Models posed in a doorway, on an entryway bench (with a mirror behind them), and in a parlor with period-appropriate furnishings. The combination of period architecture and furnishings with Gibson Girl-inspired fashions by Toni Owen, Ceil Chapman, and Claire McCardell created an old-fashioned feeling aimed at "carry[ing] an air of mystery" that would "indicate ladylike submissiveness."⁹¹ The objective was made clear in this post-war revival: "to put the girls back on the pedestal they occupied in the 1890s when . . . [the] Gibson Girl [was] the stimulus for every male heartbeat and the toast of

FIGURE 7 “The Gibson Girl is the Girl for the Teens!” *Women’s Wear Daily* 75, no. 80 (1947), 12. Image © Shutterstock/WWD.

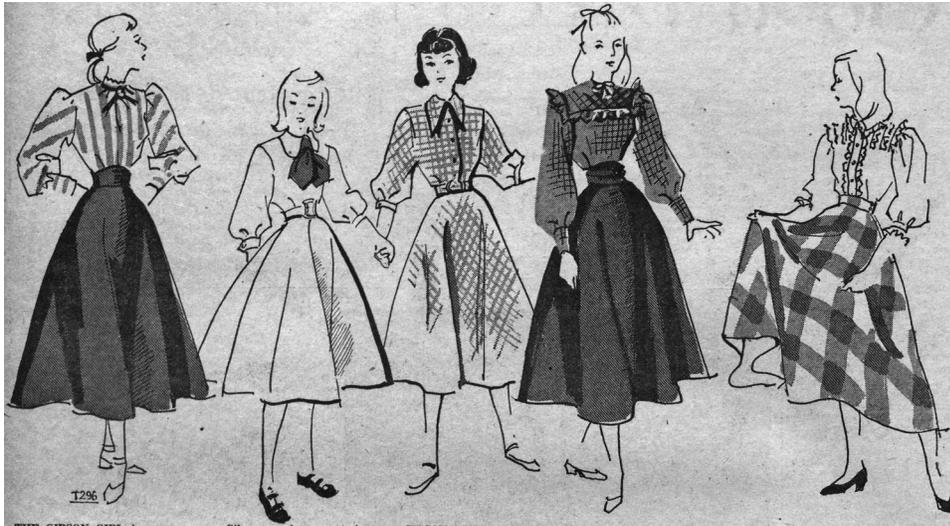
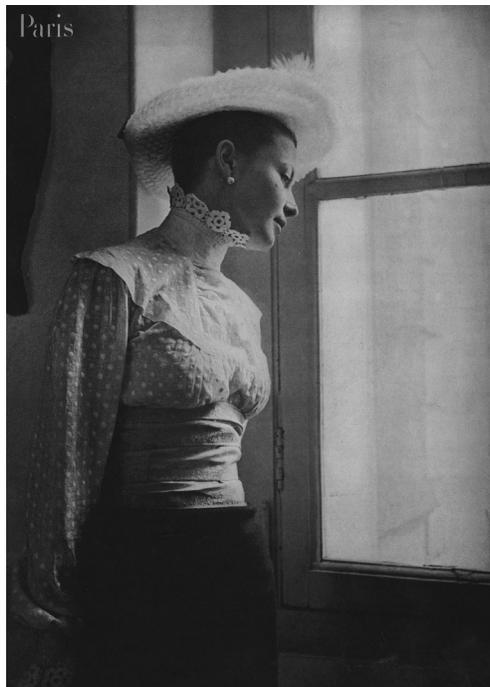


FIGURE 8 “Eyelet blouse and horsehair hat” by Elsa Schiaparelli. “Paris Collections,” *Vogue* 109, no. 7 (1947), 143. Serge Belkin © Condé Nast.



every college town.”⁹² In contrast to this blatant objectification, the same photo spread ironically also featured models in a biology lab at Skidmore College (FIGURE 10).

As an alternative to purchasing garments, home-sewing patterns allowed

consumers to make their own Gibson Girl-inspired looks. In our survey of home-sewing patterns, we found references to the Gibson Girl ranging from 1942 to 1975 by companies such as Butterick, Barbara Bell, Advance, Hollywood, Simplicity, McCall, and Vogue.⁹³ A unique example of this was a Simplicity home-sewing pattern that depicted the pairing of a shirtwaist with trousers, creating an informal look well before trousers for women were considered socially acceptable.⁹⁴ Patterns for blouses, dresses, and skirts referenced the Gibson Girl look and included stylistic details such as tucks, lace, and embroidery (FIGURE 11).⁹⁵ Pattern manufacturers also made Gibson Girl-inspired patterns available for children’s wear. One such example was the ca. 1945 Butterick 4565, a “one-piece dress in the Gibson Girl fashion” with puffy sleeves, a circular skirt, and bow at the neck (FIGURE 12).⁹⁶

Though the revived Gibson Girl look enjoyed its greatest popularity from 1947 to 1948, this research identified another notable recurrence during 1951–52. Fashions such as blouses, skirts, and dresses for toddlers, children, and adult women during this resurgence were similar to those of 1947–48.⁹⁷ Similar stylistic elements were observed,

92 “Gibson Girl Clothes.”

93 See “Butterick 4433” (1948), 1948.147.URI, Commercial Pattern Archive/Distinctive Collections/University of Rhode Island Library; Barbara Bell 1720 (ca. 1940s); Advance 7001 (ca. 1955); Hollywood 901 (ca. 1942); Simplicity 3913 A (ca. 1952); McCall 1405 (ca. 1949); and “Vogue 1314” (1975), 1975.738.URI, Commercial Pattern Archive/Distinctive Collections/University of Rhode Island Library.

94 “Fashion Shorts: . . . A Preview of Trends,” *Chatelaine* 20, no. 8 (1947), 8–9.

95 Advance 7001 (ca. 1955); Butterick 4433; Barbara Bell 1720 (ca. 1940s); McCall 1405 (ca. 1949); Simplicity 3913 A (ca. 1952).

96 See Butterick 4565 and Butterick 6243 B (ca. 1950s).

97 See “Gibson Girl,” *Women’s Wear Daily* 85, no. 26 (1952), 48; “Advertisement: Gibson Girl,” *Women’s Wear Daily* 84, no. 6 (1952), 51; “The Gibson Girl Sailor—Tilted for Spring,” *Women’s Wear Daily* 83, no. 100 (1951), 49; and “Harper’s Junior Bazaar May 1952,” *Harper’s Bazaar* 85, no. 2886 (1952), 142–43.

98 "American Resort Idea—The Gibson Girl Dress," *Vogue* 118, no. 9 (1951), 128–29.

99 "American Resort Idea."

100 "Mr. Gibson's Girls," *Harper's Bazaar* 85, no. 2884 (1952), 195.

FIGURE 9 Photograph (left), "Soft Answers in Hard Fabrics: Edwardian Drapery in Suiting," *Vogue* 109, no. 5 (1947), 227. Frances McLaughlin-Gill © Condé Nast. Right: Maurice Rentner, "Lady in Black" afternoon ensemble. Newton Elkin Shoe Co. and Bloomingdale's, Museum of the City of New York. 2013.5.10A-F.



including separate shirtwaist and skirt ensembles, plaid- or gingham-patterned fabrications, and leg-o-mutton or bishop sleeves. In 1951, *Vogue* described the Gibson Girl look as "more a figure than a fashion—starchy in outline, with a tiny waist, a bustled skirt."⁹⁸ The editorial also claimed the garments were reinterpretations of the turn-of-the-century dress: "the end-of-the-day dress is . . . the 1952 image of the Gibson girl's evening dress."⁹⁹

From 1951 to 1952, the Gibson Girl look again was presented in fashion editorials with period-appropriate architecture and furnishings. One example is an article from a 1952 issue of *Harper's Junior Bazaar* titled "Mr. Gibson's Girls," which described "one of the prettiest girls ever—back with her ballooning sleeves, [and] her almost invisible

waist. . . . The pretty look of fifty years ago pretty again this year . . . follows the lissome lines of Mr. Gibson's pen-and-ink drawings" (FIGURE 13).¹⁰⁰ The editorial featured dresses and separate shirtwaists and skirts designed by Lotte of Drewyn, Anne Fogarty, Marjie Joy, and Mary Muffet. The model, dressed in a Gibson Girl-inspired shirtwaist/skirt combination, posed with an artist's easel. The easel might have connected the image with Gibson's profession as an illustrator and perhaps indicated that the woman presented was in a way created by Gibson himself. This mid-twentieth-century emphasis on the Gibson Girl style occurs far past the development of first-wave feminism but not quite in time for the second wave of the 1960s and 1970s. Similar to the 1947–48 revival, it was not linked in any way to

FIGURE 10 “Gibson Girl Clothes: They Accent Hips and Sweetness,” *Life* 23, no. 8 (1947), 114. © Arnold Newman Collection/Getty Images.



FIGURE 11 “Butterick 4433 (1948.147.UR1),” 1948. Commercial Pattern Archive/Distinctive Collections/University of Rhode Island Library.

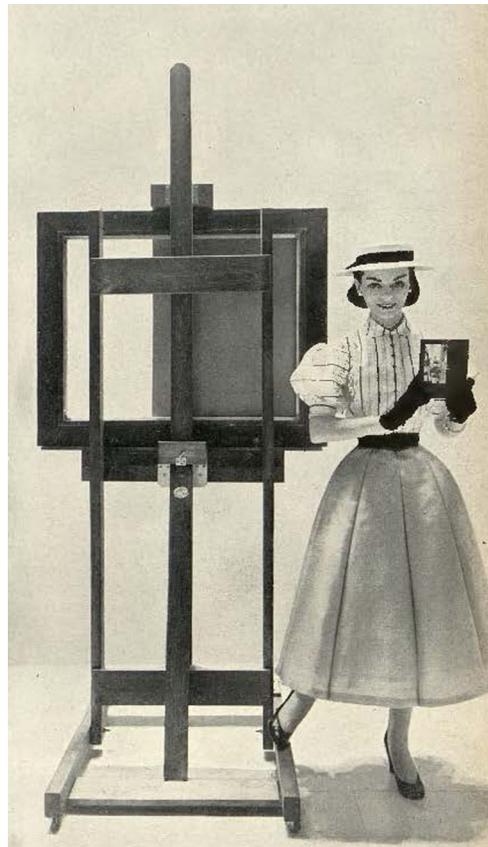


FIGURE 12 Butterick 4565, ca. 1945. Image retrieved from the Vintage Patterns Wiki.



- 101 See "The House Dresses and Uniforms," *Women's Wear Daily* 106, no. 73 (1963), 15; and Samuel Feinberg, "Dior's Gibson Girl," *Women's Wear Daily* 115, no. 226 (1967), 14.
- 102 See Patrick Lichfield, "Vogue's Own Boutique of Suggestions, Finds, and Observations," *Vogue* 150, no. 2 (1967), 128; Francesco Scavullo, "The Pied Piper Plaids," *Harper's Bazaar* 103, no. 3100 (1970), 198; "Boutique Eye: The Sexy Sell," *Women's Wear Daily* 125, no. 84 (1972), 15; "Fall Shirts & Blouses: Shirt Circuit," *Women's Wear Daily* 116, no. 76 (1968), 56; "Summer Headliners," *Women's Wear Daily* 120, no. 3 (1970), 16; and "More of the Best from the New York Collections," *Vogue* 156, no. 4 (1970), 410–11.
- 103 "Home Sewing," *Women's Wear Daily* 128, no. 30 (1974), 20.
- 104 Janet Beer, Pamela Knights, and Elizabeth Nolan, *Edith Wharton's The House of Mirth* (London: Routledge, 2007), 86.
- 105 Mark Lawson, "Life with Father: The Long-Lost Daddy of Broadway," *The Guardian*, October 31, 2014, <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/oct/31/life-with-father-clarence-day-longest-running-non-musical-broadway>>.
- 106 Lawson, "Life with Father."
- 107 "Life with Mother," Internet Broadway Database, <<https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-production/life-with-mother-2032>>.

FIGURE 13 "Mr. Gibson's Girls," *Harper's Junior Bazaar* 85, no. 2884 (March 1952), 207. Gleb Derujinsky, printed with permission of Hearst Magazine Media, Inc.



feminism. The Gibson Girl and her look became just a commodity by the mid-twentieth century, a way to sell the current fashion trend.

This research also revealed some later twentieth-century references to the Gibson Girl in publications such as *Women's Wear Daily*, *Vogue*, and *Harper's Bazaar*. During the 1960s, two examples of dresses include one from 1963 by Donna Gay, whose "Gibson Girl . . . men's wear . . . bodice" featured blue and white stripes on the shirtdress and another from 1967 by Dior in a collection by Philippe Guibourge that featured a "tight rounded bodice emphasizing the bust, cinched waist, marked hips [that] carry . . . back to the turn of the century. Leg-o-mutton sleeves . . . deep ruffled hems, pussycat bows, lots of buttons."¹⁰¹ Besides these dresses, the Gibson Girl style was

FIGURE 14 Ameritex's "Elegance" fabric. *Women's Wear Daily* 128, no. 30 (1974), 20. Image © Shutterstock/WWD.



represented or referenced mostly in the marketing of blouses. Examples found from 1967–72 featured ruffles, leg-o-mutton, demi-gigot, and bishop sleeves, and plaid patterning.¹⁰² In 1974, Ameritex created a Gibson Girl fabric in acetate satin that featured female faces with quintessential upswept hair in black and ivory on a lilac ground titled "Elegance" (FIGURE 14).¹⁰³ During the original Gibson Girl heyday, a similar arrangement of illustrated faces was printed onto wallpaper advertised as "suitable for a bachelor's apartments."¹⁰⁴

Popular Culture, Merchandising, and the Gibson Girl

The Gibson Girl look was popularized in theater and film, most notably in *Life with Father*. The play, adapted from a book, was set in the late nineteenth century and ran on Broadway from 1939 to 1947.¹⁰⁵ With 3,224 performances during this time, it became (and remains to this day) the longest-running nonmusical play in Broadway history (FIGURE 15).¹⁰⁶ The follow-up publication *Life with Mother* also was turned into a play that enjoyed a less successful run than its predecessor from 1948 to 1949 with 262 performances.¹⁰⁷

FIGURE 15 Scene from the national tour of “Life with Father.” Photo by Vandamm Studio. © The New York Library for the Performing Arts. Merchandisers developed product tie-ins with the show to sell Gibson Girl-inspired fashions.



Life with Father also was developed as a film that starred William Powell, Irene Dunne, and Elizabeth Taylor and was released in 1947, the same year as Dior’s New Look and the Gibson Girl look revival of 1947–48. Several retailers capitalized on the success of the period film and promoted apparel designed in the Gibson Girl style. For example, Adler’s—a Missouri-based clothing store—promoted the style with cotton shirts for \$8.95, as well as skirts, resulting in “an over-all 260 per cent increase in the department’s volume for the day.”¹⁰⁸ These tie-in merchandising strategies were presumably successful and “increased sales of Gibson Girl fashions [were] reported from . . . ‘Life With Father’ promotion[s].”¹⁰⁹

The Gibson Girl look also influenced visual merchandisers during the 1947–48 revival. A Lord & Taylor window referenced Charles Dana Gibson with blowups of his original illustrations

behind mannequins dressed in Gibson Girl-inspired fashions.¹¹⁰ G. Fox & Co. interpreted the trend more literally and displayed a mannequin in historic dress from the turn of the century in its hosiery department to draw attention to Gibson Girl-style product offerings (FIGURE 16).¹¹¹ The display was seemingly successful; it was “a traffic stopper and [was] reported to have stimulated hosiery business.”¹¹² Window displays linked the style to its portrayal in popular culture. Saks Fifth Avenue devoted a window to promoting Gibson Girl-influenced neckwear in conjunction with the Broadway play *Life with Mother* and placed photographs from the show throughout the display.¹¹³

Fashioning Mixed Messages

Feminist theory posits that western society is a patriarchal hierarchy, valuing

108 “Gibson Girl is Retailers’ Heroine: Gibson Girl Blouses Sell Fast in ‘Life with Father’ Promotion,” *Women’s Wear Daily* 75, no. 68 (1947), 34.

109 “Gibson Girl is Retailers’ Heroine.”

110 “Gibson Girl in New Windows,” *Women’s Wear Daily* 83, no. 107 (1951), 3.

111 “Gibson Girl Stops Traffic,” *Women’s Wear Daily* 83, no. 21 (1951), 43.

112 “Gibson Girl Stops Traffic.”

113 “News and Ideas of Display,” *Women’s Wear Daily* 77, no. 91 (1948), 59.

- 114 Our consideration of feminist theory and Gibson Girl fashion is primarily informed by a review of: Keila E. Tyner and Jennifer Paff Ogle, "Feminist Theory of the Dressed Female Body: A Comparative Analysis and Applications for Textiles and Clothing Scholarship," *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 27, no. 2 (2009): 98–121; Annemarie Elizabeth Strassel, "Redressing Women: Feminism in Fashion and the Creation of American Style, 1930–1960" (PhD diss., Yale, 2008); Angela McRobbie, "Bridging the Gap: Feminism, Fashion, and Consumption," *Feminist Review* 55 (Spring 1997): 73–89; and Annemarie Strassel, "Designing Women: Feminist Methodologies in American Fashion," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 1/2 (2013): 35–59.
- 115 "The Gibson Girl's America: Drawings by Charles Dana Gibson," Library of Congress, <<https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/gibson-girls-america/social-relations-between-the-sexes.html>>.
- 116 Charles Dana Gibson, *The Social Ladder: Drawings by Charles Dana Gibson* (New York: R. H. Russell; London: John Lane, 1902), 13, 41, 43.
- 117 Diane Ponterotto, "Resisting the Male Gaze: Feminist Response to the 'Normalization' of the Female Body in Western Culture," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 17, no. 1 (January 2016): 133–51.
- 118 Susan B. Kaiser, *Fashion and Cultural Studies* (New York: Berg, 2012), 2.

FIGURE 16 "Gibson Girl Stops Traffic," *Women's Wear Daily* 83, no. 21 (1951), 43. Image © Shutterstock/WWD. Signage at bottom right describes merchandise as "Nostalgic Elegance."



traits or ideas characterized as masculine versus those that may be considered feminine. Feminist scholars have outlined ways in which this patriarchal approach to a gendered society disenfranchises women and anyone else who falls outside traditional gender norms.¹¹⁴ This theory explains how Gibson, a man, created a female fantasy that became the standard of beauty for an entire generation and beyond. Despite the obvious problems with Gibson's positionality as male in a patriarchal society, his turn-of-the-century images often depicted women in public-sphere roles that for the time were considered revolutionary.¹¹⁵ This is not to say that Gibson always hit the mark; his work portrayed women in both progressive and traditional settings. This mix of messages was apparent in Gibson's book *The Social Ladder*. One illustration featured a man seated across from the Gibson Girl, who appeared uninterested in him, her head turned the other way. In the caption, which voiced the words (or thoughts) of the two characters, the Gibson Girl claimed that the man did

not know what it was to love. The man then described all of the actions he had taken to show his affection toward her, which included reading popular novels, going into debt, and even having his appendix removed.¹¹⁶ These words could be read as the Gibson Girl exercising control over the situation and utilizing her beauty as a means of enacting power. However, as it relates to the male gaze, this use of female corporeity as a means to exert power over the man is problematic. The ideal form of the female body is considered by some as "having been constructed and developed through a gender ideology at the service of the institutions of patriarchy."¹¹⁷ Another illustration in the book, titled "*His Christmas Gift*," featured Santa Claus presenting the Gibson Girl to a man as a gift, which reduced her status to that of an object (FIGURE 17). Perhaps this contradiction of a somewhat powerful woman in one image and a woman as a pure object to be given away in another is best defined by Kaiser, who said "studying fashion is a both/and, rather than an either/or activity. . . . Fashion thrives on contradiction . . . and ambivalence . . . [which are] both/and ways of knowing and feeling."¹¹⁸ Whether exerting power over a man or being presented as a gift, the Gibson Girl was contrived from Gibson's male gaze. Gibson's images and subsequent impact on fashion were perhaps *both* empowering *and* problematic as they traversed content from progressivism to blatant objectification.

Gibson at the turn of the century, as well as Dior in the mid-twentieth century, created standards of beauty that either indirectly (Gibson) or directly (Dior) shaped fashion for decades to come. Each in their own way defined what was attractive from perspectives of progressivism to nostalgia. In a way, this created a visual push-pull between ideas of what was considered pretty from a male perspective and what the reality of life was for women in the first half of the twentieth century. Women were expected to continuously interpret and respond to mixed messages regarding

FIGURE 17 Charles Dana Gibson, *The Social Ladder: His Christmas Gift* (New York: R. H. Russell, 1902).



119 Cheryl Buckley and Hazel Clark, *Fashion and Everyday Life: London and New York* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 48.

120 Sumi Cho, Kimberle Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall, “Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis,” *Signs of the Times*, 38, no. 4 (Summer 2013), 785–810.

their physical and social identities while attempting to capture the gaze of others, raise the perfect family, and claim their space in the public sphere.

Conclusion

The standard of beauty embodied by the Gibson Girl affected so many for decades. It developed from a perspective of white privilege presenting hair, skin color, body type, and socioeconomic status that inherently disenfranchised women of color, poor women, larger women, and anyone who did not fit the mold of Gibson’s creation. Among the immigrants who poured into the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, “most women arriving from Eastern Europe found they were overweight by American standards and could not mould [sic] their figures into the curvaceous Gibson Girl fashionable hourglass silhouette.”¹¹⁹ The impact of the Gibson Girl on women’s presentation of self through an intersectional lens reveals how the ideal of beauty influenced different women of

variable social identity and race.¹²⁰

Future research may use other source material to further consider how the Gibson Girl look was interpreted and adopted by other socioeconomic or ethnic groups over time or if instead she stood fast as a reminder of what separated white women of privilege from everyone else.

This research summarized the original style and impact of the Gibson Girl on fashion at the turn of the century and the revival of the style post-World War II. The nostalgia at the core of Dior’s New Look and the pervasive Gibson Girl revival focused on a traditional form of femininity that was not progressive. Popular culture encouraged women who had stepped into pants and public-sphere roles during the war to put on leg-o-mutton sleeves and cummerbunds when the men in their lives returned home. The Gibson Girl look also might have continued the delivery of mixed messages to women regarding their appearance and how that related to their identities and aspirations in the latter half of the twentieth century.