

## The 1900s + 1910s: Female Emancipation

### The Scene

In the wake of the Industrial Revolution, some women emerged from the brambles and dust of farms and domestic life to enter the workforce, earn an education, and gain some personal freedoms—in the United States, the right to own land, file for divorce, and control their own money among them. The institute of marriage was still alive and well, but finding a partner wasn't the only path through life; and that, in and of itself, was a liberating concept.

### The Influences

Without so many social hang-ups to contend with, women approached life differently. Hemlines changed and petticoats became less overwhelming so women could lounge on the beach or ride a bicycle. Artists and writers found a new heroine to depict in their works: the British-American novelist Henry James called her the “New Woman,” a term that would define the self-assured feminine ideal of the generation—an ideal that also sparked the imagination of American illustrator Charles Dana Gibson.

Having established himself as a keen observer of upper-middle-class life, Gibson produced a steady output of satirical illustrations for magazines such as *Life* and *Collier's Weekly* in the late 1800s. But his “Gibson Girl” really skyrocketed him to fame. In 1890, he began sketching a series of pen-and-ink illustrations that portrayed this new breed of turn-of-the-century women: tall, slim-waisted, intellectually curious. Polished, but free spirited. Amused by men, but not beholden to them.

It was a radical departure from the Victorian era's static portraits of women as delicate, fainting creatures. Instead, Gibson Girls wore their hair loosely piled up on their heads, freshly windswept from outdoor pursuits, and they hardly had time to recline on a settee all day. Instead, they pursued higher education, the arts, and leisure sports—tennis, golf, horseback riding, swimming. Gibson promoted the idea of the liberated woman as fashionable and socially acceptable. His muses included friends, family, and those in his orbit. The actor Camille Clifford sat for him, as did model and chorus girl Evelyn Nesbit. Still, Gibson said the archetype he created never represented one person, but an amalgam of women he observed in daily life. “I saw her on the streets, I saw her at the theaters, I saw her in the churches. I saw her everywhere and doing everything,” he said.

Thanks to Gibson's prolific output, his illustrations appeared in a steady stream of periodicals, advertisements, and even as a motif for wallpaper, mirroring the way women (white, upper-middle-class women, that is) should dress,

stand, sit, and interact with others. Romance and courtship featured prominently in his pieces, but Gibson playfully parodied gender roles. In *The Weaker Sex II*, one of his well-known drawings, he depicted a miniaturized “Gibson Man,” on his knees, begging to be noticed by the woman who towers above him, not at all enthralled with his pleas.

Of course, not all gender stereotypes vanished. Women were still expected to be radiantly beautiful, naturally endowed with clear skin, bright eyes, and pink, flush lips. Women did not wake up like that (then or any time in history). Such perfection required effort. Cosmetic companies, however, helped solved the problem, seizing the opportunity to whip women's complexions into shape. One entrepreneur in particular helped promote the idea that you didn't inherit good looks—you earned them.

The eldest of eight sisters, Helena Rubinstein was born in Krakow, Poland, in 1872. Her mother famously applied a homespun cream to her daughters' faces to keep their skin soft in the harsh winter. Rubinstein left home



**LEFT**  
Pen-and-ink drawing of a golf-playing Gibson Girl in an advertisement for Bovril circa 1910 by illustrator Charles Dana Gibson.

**RIGHT**  
An icon of her age, model Evelyn Nesbit was immortalized as a Gibson Girl, a free-spirited and beautiful representation of a new breed of turn-of-the-century women.

