Charles Dana Gibson

by Robert Bridges

This article first appeared in COLLIER'S Weekly Magazien for October 15, 1904.

The idea which the public itself creates of the personality of an artisit or writer is a curious composite. The pictures he draws or the books he writes evolve a certain hazy conception of their maker; then the ever-present newspaper portrait gives a black-and-white outline to a man; and finally the stray items about him which run around the press, often at the ingenious publisher's instigation, give him a sort of literary personality. The way in which these burrs stick to the mental impage of the man is surprising. Dickens and his splendid waistcoats, Lamb and his stutter, Dr. Johnson and his tea, Washington and his hatchet, Byron and his club foot --- these are inseparable in our pictures of the men. Something accidental which has benn well told becomes an essential part of the author or artist. As time intervenes two or three of these anecdotes survive --- and there is the image of the man, ticketed for all time. When the man is a contemporary, and a popular one at that, this pervasive mental portrait that everybody seems to agree upon is most curiously elusive. The personal prejudices of the age play an important part in it, and these are partly formed by stray gossip and paragraphs. Things are in the air, and people seem to like or dislike a certain thing in waves.

Mr. Gibson has lived a long time in the heart of New York, where he has been easy to photography and write about, and for mnay years his drawings and looks have been seen of all men. If the mental image which great public has of him could be projected on a screen it would no doubt fill the souls of his friends with laughter. It would be something like this: A man of extreme height and slenderness, clad as the lilies of the field, in the latest London clothes, devoting his mornings to outdoor recreation in immaculate flannels, his afternoons to receptions where he is adored by many admirers in beautiful gowns, which he studies carefully for effects in the next drawings, and his evenings to dinners and dances, with late suppers to end the arduous day. This is probably pretty nearly the Gibson of the matinee girl, and the college undergraduate who plasters his rooms with Gibson pictures. They would not recognize the broad-shouldered, loose-jointed, husky-looking man in a blue serge suit who swings in Thirty-first Street every morning at 9:30, with the look of energy and determination which betokens a hard day's work.

And Mr. Gibson does it; day after day, as regular as clockwork, he is in his studio and works with pertinacity and skill. A Gibson drawing does not grow of itself. it is hammered out till the artist himself realizes something of his conception.

He draws from real peole, and his choice of a model for a given character is made with great care and discernment. A street Arab may bring a dozen of his friends from whom the artist may choose one minor figure in a group. A good many ball matches are attened to get the faces which express “Two Strikes and the Bases Full”.

Natural talent, keen observation, and the capacity and inclination for combined work are the other things needed to explain Gibson. Instead of having his head turned by early success, he was made simply more industrious and more determined to do better work than ever. He has a very clear idea of what he wants to do, and of just how far his medium can be used. He likes his work, and he a thorough artist in spirit, but never an artist in pose. There is nothing artificial about him. His abounding humor would drive him to derisive laughter at himself if he attempted a pose of any kind. With every temptation to the successful artist, he remains just a good fellow. Manly, straightforward men of talent in all professions are his friends because he is that kind of man himself. There never was an artist with a healthier mind --- clean, honest, appreciative. With that permanent equipment it is no wonder that he has gone ahead in his art, and is bound to continue to grow. Life with its amusing contrasts and vicissiturds never grows stale to a nature like his. But a man’s fame frequently stands in the way of his widest recognition. This has been often said about humorists. The fact that Mark Twain is a great humorist has prevented the full recognition of his wonderful skill as a serious literary artist. There are chapters in his books which have not a gleam of humor in them, but which as serious descriptive writing are almost unequaled in American prose. It has been oftern noted that a speaker in Congress who gets a reputation as a wit will seldom be listened to in elaborate, statesmanlike efforts.

It was Mr. Gibson’s undoubted good fortune to win fame almost fifteen years ago as a portrayer of beautiful women and clean-cut young men, all of them gifted with social graces and wonderful clothes. The “Gibson Girl” has passed into the language, and is embodied in allusions in many books as the expression of a well-defined type of American womanhood. We have become so accustomed to her that it is difficult to realize what a tremendous impression has been made by a series of black-and-white drawings. We find the Girl burnt on leather, printed on plates, stenciled on hardwood easels, woven in silk handkerchiefs,

exploited in the cast of vaudeville shows, and giving her name to a variety of shirtwaist, a pompadour, and a riding stock.

The result of all this has been the men and women he depicts, who are for the most part young, impressionable, and more or less thoughtless, are accustomed to say in the frivolity of their conversation --- if they ever do converse --- that Mr. Gibson draws one girl and one man, and shuffles them around in divers positions. This is mere talk, but it is another indication of the way in which a very big fame sometimes dwarfs the finest achievement. Now, as a matter of fact, the people who follow art, and whose opinions are worth something, know that Mr. Gibson's achievement has far outrun his early fame. The nine volumes in which he has collected his drawings show a wonderful progress, not only in his craftsmanship as an artist, but in his grasp of the important things in the life of this country.

Mr. Gibson has drawn not a few types, but a great many individuals; not the social butterflies alone, but the significant people in all grades of like; not only beautiful women in gorgeous raiment, but all types of women in all classes. As the readers of COLLIER'S know, this has been increasingly true in the past two years. They will recall that marvelous study of commercial New York entitled "Some Ticket Faces," in which the speculative craze is wonderfully depicted in the half-dozen faces, ranging from extreme youth to avaricious old age. They also have in mind that recent cartton "Goin to Work," where a score or more typical working men and women are pictured most vividly, and individualized to a remarkable degree. Then there is "The Villian Dies" (to be published in the autumn), a view of the gallery in the last act of a melodrama, where every face is not only technically a clever study, but humanly expressive and self-revealing.

A look through Mr. Gibson's altest volume, appropriately called "Everyday People," in which the best of his COLLIER'S and "Life" work for the past year is preserved, will, in short, show that, instead of repeating himself, Mr. Gibson has grown in appreciation of the ironies of life in all classes. He does not produce types so much as individuals. The student of types is apt to gather into one portrait the eccentricities of a dozen faces belonging to the speicies. The result is an unmistable type, but it is not always a possible individual, and right here is the border line between caricature and portraiture. The careful observer of Mr. Gibson's work will easily be convinced that his men and women are real portraits, and one hundred years from now the industrious student of antiquities will be able to say, "Here, at least, are men and women of every class as they actually lived in American at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth centuries."

If one may venture on that dangerous thing, a literary analogy, it would be that Gibson is the Thackeray of black-and-white drawing and Phil May is the Dickens. This means, of course, that Mr. Gibson is more of a satirist than a humorist. While he draws real faces of real people, he puts them in positions which suggest the contrasts and ironies of life. This removes him from the category of merely clever draughtsmen into that field of social satire and philosophical observation wheres the great artists in black-and-whtie from Hogarth to the present have always exhibited their genius; and it should be said emphatically that Mr. Gibson has never used his satire to make fun of what is worthy and ideal, but has that it has been directed against sham, hypocrisy, and self-deceit. If he has, to an appreciable extent, formed the taste of young men and young women in dress, he has also cast his weight in favor of what is straight, honorable, genuine, and gentle in conduct.

Of his technical side the present writer can not speak with the authority of an artist, but he knows that men of artistic accomplishment, who judge a drawing with full knowledge of how it is done, have increasing admiration for Mr. Gibson's skill in the manipulation of pure line. They know that there is no more exacting medium of expression than pure line. As it is drawn it stands, and there are none of the accidental effects of colors blending into each other which sometimes surprise the painter himself and are beyond his best ability. When the line which you draw is to be reproduced autographically on a plate, you cannot 'fake' it, to use the slang of the studio. It is hard-and-fast and irrevocable. Whatever else may be said of Gibson's drawings, they are at any rate honest, not softened by half-tone plates, or given the glamour of color reproduction --- although he has recently shown that he can draw most effectively in pastel. He draws from life as best he knows how, and the line which depicts life as he sees it is reproduced exactly as he drew it, so that the art critic, if he disapproves of Gibson, has the exact document from which to judge him. You can not read any ulterior purpose into these veracious drawings. There is no smudge of color or breadth of crayon line into which you can put your own idea of the drawing. There is no room whatever to doubt exactly what he meant to express; whether he always accomplished it technically, the practical artist can best judge.

This marvelous skill and simplicity in the use of line is shown to its best advantage in the faces which Gibson draws. The way in which he expresses emotion and varied feelings, some of them the most fleeting, by a few simple strokes of the pen, is the admiration of all good craftsmn. Whether it is a gleam of humor, a touch of despair, a bit of coquetry, or the direst tragedy --- a few firm lines tell the whole story, and tell it subtly, but unmistakably. No artist can express the varied emotions and the depth of emotion which Gibson depicts without himself being a man with a grasp of human nature. It is therefore entirely natural and logical that another side of Mr. Gibson is distinctly literary. He has given literary reality to "Mr. Pipp," "the Widow and Her Friends" nd "Mr. Tagg." these characters with their circle of friends have reached the same sort fo currency in the imagination as the characters created by a novelist; in fact, it has been seriously proposed to dramatize Mr. Pipp, as though he were the latest creation of a popular romancer. That is the kind of thing that very few artists have accomplished. Hogarth did it, and so did du Maurier and Charles Keene. He is, in these things, as has been said, the same sort of satirist as Thackerary; and while satire is his prevailing weapon in a literary way, there are frequent touches of the best kind of sentiment, which never degenerates into sentimentality. The drawing which is reproduced in this number of a very old man whose grandson is telling his fortune announces, "You are going on a long journey," is a bit of the inevitable pathos of youth and old age. These are the qualities among those who understand what is best in literature and art.