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“I could Paint Still Life as well as any one on Earth”: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the World of Art

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Abstract

Notes

[1]Over the course of her long life, Gilman not only rose out of the poverty and obscurity into which she was born and emerged as an internationally recognized activist on behalf of women, but she amassed an extraordinary body of work. Her oeuvre consists of three utopian romances, seven novels, seven nonfiction books, some 200 short stories, approximately 500 poems, a handful of plays, hundreds of essays and articles, and an autobiography.

[2]While there is little doubt that Gilman's love of art was, in part, a product of Stowe's influence, she seems also to have inherited artistic talent from her father, Frederic Perkins. Perkins was himself a gifted artist, and several of his sketches and drawings of cottages, landscapes, wildlife, and human figures survive in the collection of Gilman Papers at the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe Institute.

[3]One of the experiences that emerged as a result of her attendance at the Rhode Island School of Design was a 2-week stint in late 1878, when Gilman was employed by a marble works company to assist in the design of marble monuments. She also taught drawing in a small private school and provided private art lessons, which became a way to generate revenue over the course of many years.

[4]Caroline Hazard (1856–1945), was a philanthropist, educator, and author. Educated by private tutors at Mary A. Shaw's School in Providence, and later, through private study in Europe, Hazard assumed the presidency of Wellesley College in 1899.

[5]The exaggerated racial features in the Columbia and Universal Family and in the two Black Princess in French Crate cards are also consistent with the artistic patterns found in the original sketches at Radcliffe Institute of the Lady and the Clothesline. For additional information on Gilman's racism, see my article, “Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Shadow of Racism.” See also Susan Lanser's article, “Feminist Criticism, ‘The Yellow Wallpaper,’ and the Politics of Color in America.”

[6]While we have virtually conclusive evidence that Gilman designed at least three of the cards—the Leader Soap Horse card, the Lady and Clothesline, and the Lady Archer Hits Dirt, we can speculate about other cards that she may have designed, based on similarities in image, theme, style, and color. Several of the cards, for example, contain a strong conceptual unity when compared with those that we can positively identify as Gilman's. The figure of the lady archer has a disproportionately large head and short arms, a pattern that repeats in Cheadle and Lee's Star Climber, Young Sailor Dreams of Home, Young Woman at Mountains, Columbia and Universal Family, French Maid Washes Rock (which is also stylistically reminiscent of Lady and Clothesline), Wizard, Stars and Moon, Train and Daydreaming Dude, and Dusting Bric-a-Brac. Also contained in the Gilman Papers at the Schlesinger Library are sketches and drawings by Gilman of numerous wizards that would figure in several other cards, including one identified by Cheadle and Lee as the “Wizard, Stars and Moon” card.Gilman's diary entry of May 27, 1881 also alludes to drawing a set of 12 cards “& another similar set later” is likely

evidence of her artistry of the 14 cards (some with variants) that appear on pages 16–18 of Cheadle and Lee's Soapine Did It!, in which large-headed, short-limbed figures are once again featured. These cards include Fisherman at Dew Drop Inn, Stump Flirtations, Farmers' Picnic on French Crate, Yellow Arch—Wash Girl Holds Box, Animated Soap Bars—Clothesline, Man in Pillory—Spider, Black Princess in French Crate, Kids Play Telephone on French Crates, Ironing Day—Kids on French Crate, Watering Plants in Soap Boxes, Sponge Battle—Wash Tubs—Home Soap Crate, Splashing Rain Barrel, Soapine Ship Flag, and Soapine Telegraph. Many of the cards also contain subtle humor—a trademark in many of the non-Soapine drawings that remain in the collection of Gilman papers. Indeed, a number of humorous or whimsical figures that Gilman drew survive in the archives. As Cheadle and Lee point out, other “common threads seem to tie these designs into a single grouping,” such as the appearance of soap crates in the cards.

[7]For example, the word “Soapine” is spelled out by swallows in the Soapine “telegraph” card, by stars in the wizard card, by clothing in the “clothesline,” and by mantel objects in the “dusting knick-knack” cards.

[8]One of Gilman's favorite pasttimes, for example, was producing what she referred to as “double drawings,” an amusing exercise that yielded some surprising results. As she described in her autobiography, the activity required two people and a sheet of paper, which was folded in half horizontally. The first person would draw a head and a body down to the waist on the top half of the paper, “leaving the sides indicated; and then the other [person] finished the legs, not knowing in the least what the [top half] was like” (Living 87). Several of the double drawings that Gilman created survive in the Gilman Papers at the Schlesinger Library.

[9]Virtually every major scholar who has published biographical work on Charlotte Perkins Gilman, myself included, has identified her 1893 edition of poetry, In This Our World, as her first published book. While it is true that In This Our World was the first book that Gilman authored in its entirety, her illustrated edition, Gems of Art for the Home and Fireside, was first published some 5 years earlier, in 1888, by Reid Publishers in Providence, Rhode Island, and republished in 1890 by Hurst & Co. in New York. To his credit, Gary Scharnhorst, editor of the 1985 edition Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Bibliography, correctly identified and included Gems of Art in his list of Gilman's nonfiction publications for 1888. In addition, Charles C. Eldredge made a passing reference to Charlotte Stetson's Gems of Art in his book, Charles Walter Stetson: Color and Fantasy, an exhibition catalogue of paintings by Gilman's first husband. Aside from

these two brief references, however, contemporary scholars of Gilman have made no reference to her first book.

[10]Stetson married Charlotte Anna Perkins [Gilman] on May 2, 1884, and Grace Ellery Channing in the spring of 1894, shortly after his divorce from Gilman. Grace Ellery Channing Stetson is sometimes erroneously credited as the author and editor of Gems of Art. To complicate matters further, the Library of Congress's on-line catalogue incorrectly identifies the Mrs. Stetson who edited Gems of Art as Grace Ellery Channing Stetson. Thus, the second Mrs. Stetson, herself an editor and author of stories and poems, is today credited with publishing a book that was actually edited and compiled by Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. Letters to Katharine Beecher Stetson Chamberlin. 28 April 1921; 6 June 1933; 11 March 1934. Gilman Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Cambridge, MA

Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution. Boston: Small, Maynard & Co., 1898. Reprint, with an introduction by Carl N. Degler. New York: Harper & Row, 1966

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